



Rights Have No Expiry Date: The Case for Action on Violence Against Older Women

Photo: UNFPA Honduras

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Background

Older women are among the most overlooked groups in global efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls (VAWG). They are often left in an institutional vacuum – absent from data, absent from policy, and unable to access essential services. This Spotlight Initiative brief makes the case for urgent, targeted action to address these gaps, while elevating older women as important agents of community change.

The challenge: invisible, structural, and growing

Violence against older women is a structural, persistent, and largely invisibilised human rights violation. It is rooted in ageism and sexism – two forms of discrimination that can compound and reinforce each other across a woman’s life course. This intersection can produce cumulative disadvantages and discriminations that can increase risks of exposure to violence, as well as economic insecurity, exclusion from decision-making, and barriers to [justice in older age](#). For many older women, violence is not a new experience: it is one that they have faced for decades.

Global demographics are undergoing a historically unprecedented transformation. Adults aged 60 and over outnumber children under five for the first time in history, and are projected to outnumber all youth by 2050! Yet institutional responses have failed to keep pace and meet specific needs of aging populations: older women – the fastest-growing demographic globally – are one of the least protected from gender-based violence (GBV). In the absence of [adequate protection systems, prevention policies, and care infrastructures](#), this demographic shift risks translating directly into a violence, neglect, and exploitation at even [larger scales](#).

Existing evidence, while limited, points to a serious and underestimated problem. Global estimates suggest that 1 in 3⁵ women experience violence in their lifetime – yet for older women, this figure remains largely unknown. Many national surveys exclude older women from their samples, and not all initiatives systematically collect comprehensive age-disaggregated data. WHO (2025) reports that altogether this translates to fewer data points on women aged 60 years and older.⁴ This means for many, their stories are not simply untold – they are uncared for.

Studies that have attempted to measure violence across the life course, including older age groups, represent valuable efforts to surface what the data currently hides. Available data on abuse and neglect against older persons occurring specifically at older age suggest a past-year prevalence of at least 14%, equivalent to approximately one in seven older women. Psychological abuse constitutes the most frequently reported form, followed by neglect, financial abuse, and physical abuse.⁵

Table 1: Older Women and Gender-Based Violence: Key Global Figures and Estimates⁶

Indicator	Figure
Women as share of global population aged 60	54%
Women as share of global population aged 80	62%
Lifetime prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV - including physical and sexual) estimated among ever-married/ partnered women aged 65+	20.5% (1 in 5)

These figures, however, are better understood as a reflection of data infrastructure failures rather than a full indication of the prevalence of violence against older women. This institutional invisibility is compounded by individual-level barriers which prevent older women from disclosing incidents of violence or seeking help: Older women frequently do not identify their experiences as abuse; they may be dependent on perpetrators which makes reporting high risk; and they face shame, stigma, and risk of not being believed particularly where violence occurs within family or formal care settings.

Moreover, older women may experience different forms of violence which do not fit in narrow or [stereotyped understandings](#) of [VAWG](#). For example, economic violence, property or land grabbing, neglect, and abuse perpetrated by family members or caregivers. Abuse frequently involves the control, appropriation, or manipulation of pensions, inheritance rights, savings, and other resources, limiting older women’s autonomy and reinforcing [conditions of dependency](#).

¹ WHO (2020). UN Decade of Healthy Ageing: Plan of Action 2021–2030. World Health Organization, Geneva.

² Sardinha, L. et al. (2022). Global, regional, and national prevalence estimates of physical or sexual, or both, intimate partner violence against women in 2018. *The Lancet*, 399(10327), 805–813.

³ WHO (2025). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2023: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women. World Health Organization, Geneva. ISBN: 978-92-4-011696-2. Published 19 November 2025.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ All data from: WHO (2025). Violence against women prevalence estimates, 2023: Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and non-partner sexual violence against women. World Health Organization, Geneva. ISBN: 978-92-4-011696-2. Published 19 November 2025.

Who is affected?

Despite being the majority of the world's older population, older women can face compounded disadvantages rooted in a lifetime of structural inequalities. They are more likely to live in poverty, more likely to live alone ([16% of older women live alone, compared to 9% of men](#)) and more likely to carry unpaid [caregiving burdens](#) with no institutional support from the state or any other actors. For many older women, ageing does not seem to be [the culmination of a life](#) – it is the accumulation of its [inequalities](#). The idea that for many older women ageing is not the culmination of a life, but the accumulation of its inequalities, is grounded in [life-course theories of cumulative disadvantage](#), which show how gendered inequalities accumulate over time through differential access to education, paid work, income, and care responsibilities. These cumulative processes are particularly pronounced for women, who are more likely to experience interrupted labour force participation, informal employment, and unpaid caregiving roles [across the life course](#), resulting in lower income security and [higher poverty risks](#) in later life. In this sense, ageing reflects not only biological processes but the long-term sedimentation of structural inequalities that shape women's life trajectories and material conditions [in old age](#).

For many older women, work never ends. Across low- and middle-income countries, older women continue to sustain households and families through unpaid care work and informal labour – responsibilities that are structurally invisibilised and seldom protected. In many low- and middle-income countries, older women are significantly more likely than older men to head skip-generation households, caring for grandchildren in the wake of HIV/AIDS-related mortality, displacement, or migration⁷ – arrangements frequently associated with poverty and vulnerability. In rural areas, the pooled prevalence⁸ of elder [abuse and neglect](#) can reach as high as 33%.⁹

Older women affected by conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crises face additional and often overlooked risks. Mobility limitations, loss of family support networks, disruptions in access to healthcare and social protection can heighten vulnerabilities. Older women are frequently overlooked in both [humanitarian and GBV responses](#).

Economic insecurity compounds these vulnerabilities. Nearly half of all older persons worldwide receive no pension; where coverage gaps exist, they [fall disproportionately on women](#), reflecting a lifetime of interrupted employment, unpaid caregiving, and exclusion from contributory schemes.^{10 11}

Evidence from some regions suggests that when women do gain access to social protection, male partners may use violence as a tool to control these newly acquired resources – complicating straightforward assumptions about [economic autonomy as a protective factor](#).¹² Inheritance inequalities leave many widows vulnerable to eviction¹³ and [financial exploitation](#).

Risks are heightened through persistent inequalities in land, property, and inheritance rights. Women hold less than one-fifth of land ownership rights globally, and in many countries equal inheritance rights remain unrealised in law or practice. For older women – particularly widows – these gaps translate into risk of dispossession, economic abuse, and GBV, as relatives or community members seek to appropriate their assets. Addressing economic security in older age therefore requires not only social protection measures, but broader law and policy shifts which ensure their equal rights to property, inheritance, and productive resources.¹⁴

Indigenous women, women living with disabilities, LGBTQI+ older women, migrants, and those in rural or remote areas face layered forms of discrimination that deepen their risk of exposure to violence and reduce their access to protection.¹⁵

The invisibility problem: data, law and policy

The 2030 Agenda requires data that is disaggregated, where relevant, by age, gender, income, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability and geographic location. Yet, older women are systematically excluded from the research, surveys, and institutional agendas that could help to realise this commitment. While important progress has been made around VAWG data globally, many data systems and tools exclude older people. For example, [Demographic and Health Surveys \(DHS\)](#), which are among the most widely used sources of GBV data in low- and middle-income countries, tend to primarily focus on women between the ages of 15 and 49.

The [normative landscape](#) has advanced substantially and a dedicated global convention on the rights of older persons is [currently under negotiation](#). The Beijing Declaration, the 2030 Agenda, and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing define the rights and specific vulnerabilities of older women and set [global standards and baselines](#) for national policymaking. These global frameworks are complemented by regional advances, including the Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons (2015), the African Union's Draft Protocol on the Rights of Older Persons, and the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2014)2. Together these constitute important standards that Member States, practitioners, and civil society can seek to implement at country level.

⁷ UN DESA Policy Brief No. 186 – Gender Matters in an Ageing World (February 2026). The term 'skip-generation household' refers to households where grandparents care for grandchildren in the absence of the middle generation, often due to HIV/AIDS-related mortality or migration.

⁸ Pooled prevalence refers to a prevalence estimate obtained by statistically combining the results of multiple studies included in a meta-analysis. In this case, the reported prevalence of 33% refers to the overall older population included in the studies (women and men combined).

⁹ Meyer, S.R., Lasater, M.E., & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2020). Violence against older women: A systematic review of qualitative literature. PLOS ONE, 15(9), e0239560.

¹⁰ International Labour Organization (ILO). (2014). Social Protection for Older Persons: Key Policy Trends and Statistics. Social Protection Policy Paper No. 11. Geneva: ILO.

¹¹ Globally, 77.2% of women above statutory retirement age receive an old-age pension, compared with 82.6% of men – meaning approximately one in five older women has no pension income. Women also contribute to pension systems at significantly lower rates during their working lives (29.1% compared to 40.9% of men), and are more likely to depend on non-contributory or social pensions. These gaps reflect inequalities accumulated across the life course, including interrupted employment and unpaid caregiving responsibilities. UN Women, World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2024. New York: UN Women, 2024.

¹² Inter-American Development Bank. Social Pensions and Intimate Partner Violence against Older Women. Drawing on a Mexican pension reform and a difference-in-differences methodology, the study finds that women's eligibility for a non-contributory social pension is associated with increased exposure to economic, psychological, and physical intimate partner violence.

¹³ United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. (2022). The differentiated impacts of desertification, land degradation and drought on women and men. UNCCD.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Meyer, S.R., Lasater, M.E., & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2020). Violence against older women: A systematic review of qualitative literature. PLOS ONE, 15(9), e0239560.

Who needs to change: entry points for action

Ending violence against older women requires action across multiple, interconnected dimensions. This Brief shares some examples of entry points and considerations for policies and programming to better meet the needs of older survivors, as well as older women more generally. They are structured in line with Spotlight Initiative's comprehensive model for ending VAWG. [Evidence shows](#) that working across these areas simultaneously is more effective at preventing VAWG than operating in a siloed approach.

Laws, policies, institutions and data

Governments should be supported to develop, enforce, and monitor evidence-based laws, policies, and programmes aligned with international human rights standards to end VAWG, including among older women. Examples of priority actions include:

- Member States fulfil their commitments under international, regional, and national legal and policy frameworks – translating these into concrete policies and programmes that explicitly protect older women from violence. Where relevant instruments have not yet been ratified, States should do so without delay. Civil society and women's rights organisations can advocate for ratification, as well as monitor and support domestication.
- Gender- and age-disaggregated data (disaggregated by five-year age groups where possible) and national survey instruments systematically capture experiences and forms of violence among older women, including economic abuse, neglect, and caregiver violence. Data related to femicides should also track deaths of older women. National Statistical Offices should be supported to collect, analyse and use this data.
- Economic costing studies which focus on violence against older women can be developed and used to strengthen the advocacy and budgetary case for scaled up government action.

Prevention and norm change

Gender equitable social norms, attitudes, and behaviours should be promoted and adopted to prevent violence against all women and girls, including older women. Examples of priority actions include:

- Design, implement or adapt VAWG prevention strategies (including behaviour change and masculinities programmes) to explicitly include diverse older women, older couples, family members and care workers. Deliver strategies which [challenge ageist and sexist stereotypes and challenge the acceptability of all forms of violence](#), including that perpetrated against older women.
- Strengthen opportunities for older women's community participation, social connection, lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and engagement in public life, recognising that isolation and digital divides can reduce women's [access to essential services](#).
- Support the economic autonomy and influence of older women through culturally appropriate economic empowerment, social protection, and livelihood programmes. Ensure strong safeguards are in place which minimise risks of economic exploitation or GBV by partners, and build support among [family members](#).

Response services

All women and girls who experience violence, including older women, should be able to access available, acceptable, inclusive and quality essential services, including long term recovery services, that are well coordinated across multiple sectors. This includes the health, justice, policing and social services sectors. Examples of priority actions include:

- Develop protocols for service providers – including health workers, social workers, and care staff – so that warning signs of violence against older women are identified and responded to early.
- Adapt services to be age appropriate, inclusive and accessible. This means, for example, ensuring that women living with disabilities, cognitive impairment or dementia, are not excluded from protection simply because they cannot easily self-identify or report abuse.
- Ensure [humanitarian response systems](#) proactively reach older women rather than relying on self-referral, adapting safe spaces, shelters, and cash assistance mechanisms so that resources reach older women directly and are not controlled by family members or caregivers, through community outreach strategies, home visits, mobile protection teams, and direct resource transfer mechanisms.

Women's movements and participation

Women's rights organisations, networks, or movements - including civil society organisations which represent older women - should be supported to expand their collective power to end VAWG in all forms. Older women are caregivers, community leaders, and agents of change - but they are frequently excluded in policy and programme design, as well as civil society organising. Approaches must recognise that older women constitute a heterogeneous group, with differentiated needs, skills, experiences and interests. Many are well positioned and interested to play a role in civil society or help inform the design of programmes. Priority actions include:

- Develop mechanisms to reach and include the oldest older women - including those in their eighties and beyond - who may face significant barriers to participation due to mobility, cognitive decline, or the simple absence of groups that adequately represent their specific situation.
- Resource organisations and movements representing marginalised groups - with particular attention to those working on and with older women - so they have the funding and means to participate in gender equality and EVAWG advocacy and programming, accompanied by tailored capacity building that responds to their priorities and need.
- Build intergenerational solidarity across women's movements, including by creating structured leadership and mentorship opportunities for older women. Build appreciation and relationships between youth-led movements and older women as equal rights holders with diverse expertise.

Conclusion

Despite growing international recognition of the rights of older persons, older women are often insufficiently visible in the statistics, the legislation, and the programmes that shape responses to GBV. Progress requires transforming not only institutional frameworks but the structural conditions that sustain risks of violence throughout their life course. It means strengthening data, adapting prevention strategies and ensuring the meaningful participation of older women in every step of this process.

The 2030 Agenda promises to leave no one behind. Fulfilling that commitment requires deliberate, sustained and coordinated action across multiple areas at once. It requires recognising older women, not only as in need of protection and support, but as rights-holders, leaders and partners in driving this change.

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