



## OLDER WOMEN'S NETWORK, EUROPE

### 1st October 2022 UNIDOP 2022 “The Resilience and Contributions of Older Women”

OWN Europe members warmly welcome the UNIDOP 2022 focus on the resilience and contributions of older women, especially since this year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Madrid Action Plan on Ageing. Celebrating the roles older women fulfil in their families and communities is highly relevant but should not obscure the difficulties and inequalities faced by older women, particularly the very old.

In the last two decades **the resilience of older women** has been challenged by a succession of economic, public health, environmental and geopolitical crises exacerbated by the rapid ageing of the population across Europe. During the covid 19 crisis, older women were very motivated to continue with their family care duties or take new volunteer roles to help alleviate the burden on health and care professionals but, due to the high risk identified for the older age groups, they were denied access to their grand-children and voluntary activities. Overnight they were labelled ‘vulnerable persons to be protected through social distancing’; this was undoubtedly a very hard experience especially for the many who had already been actively engaged in informal care and voluntary work. Luckily, vaccination campaigns helped break the social isolation they endured for too long, but many now feel that their **contributions** to their families and communities have changed and that they have fewer opportunities to contribute. Society has evolved quickly in recent years and seems increasingly to consider population ageing as a burden to social protection systems rather than to value older persons as assets for their communities.

By 2100 the proportion of people aged 65+ is expected to reach one third of the total population, and people aged 80 years or above in the EU’s population are projected to have a two and a half fold increase between 2021 and 2100, from 6.0 % to 14.6 %<sup>1</sup> with two thirds being older women. Given the magnitude of the 21st century demographic changes, **policy makers need better comparable gender disaggregated data about the old and oldest-old groups** to design policies that are fit for purpose to respond to their populations’ needs and expectations. Regular data collection should include access to health and long term care, housing, living conditions, disposable income as well as involvement in life-long-learning, social participation and informal contributions to community.

To pay justice to the resilience and contributions of older women in Europe and worldwide, OWN Europe members **call on policy makers** in member states, UN entities, UN Women, and civil society to pay due attention to older women, including the oldest old in all relevant policies, ensuring gender equality as described in the Secretary-General’s report of September 2021<sup>2</sup> which established the UN objectives for the next 25 years. More specifically, OWN Europe calls on policy makers at all levels to:

- Facilitate older women’s involvement in defending their rights at international, national and local levels, including for the oldest old.

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<sup>1</sup> [Population structure and ageing - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Our Common Agenda | United Nations](#)



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- Seriously tackle all forms of compounded ageism and sexism at institutional, social and cultural levels by developing knowledge and understanding among policy makers and service providers at all levels, about what age and gender mainstreaming means.
- Take the necessary legal and social initiatives to eradicate elder abuse in all its forms as recommended by the UN in June 2022 in their Guide about dealing with the growing problem of elder abuse<sup>3</sup>.
- Design and implement health and care policies which focus on prevention and rehabilitation: women live longer but can spend longer years with health problems and lower access to services that promote autonomous living. Yet only a few can afford residential care.
- Implement pension reforms which will adequately tackle the gender gap in pensions for both current and future generations and will ensure a decent old age income for older women with limited employment related pensions that result from past informal caring duties and gender discrimination in the labour market. Special attention must be paid to widows left with very low old age income and survival pensions.
- Encourage local public authorities to provide safe, accessible and affordable transportation including for the oldest old, paying attention to the specific accessibility needs of older women (bus routes, timetables, help with boarding, safety onboard, etc.).
- Promote free (or cheap) local programmes for educational and leisure activities which mix age/gender groups including the oldest old, as an effective health promotion initiative.
- Boost older people's and in particular oldest old women's participation, in relevant volunteering activities, to strengthen their social inclusion.

### **Concluding recommendation to United Nations entities and member states**

To ensure that progress is achieved soon at grassroots levels, with direct positive impact on older women's lives, OWN Europe members strongly recommend that UN entities and member states pay much needed attention to compounded and intersectional ageism and sexism when setting the foundation of their renewed social contract, anchored in human rights<sup>4</sup>, as defined in their Common Agenda.

To conclude: OWN Europe members would like to remind UN member states that a UN Convention on the rights of older persons has been under discussion for more than ten years now. Such an instrument is needed more than ever to promote older women's rights, foster their resilience and ensure their contributions to society are recognised and duly valued.

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<sup>3</sup> [New UN guide aims to tackle growing problem of elder abuse | UN News](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Common Agenda Report English.pdf \(un.org\)](#)