



It's about rights



Practical toolkit

Finding opportunities to make a case for older people's rights and a UN convention during COVID-19

HelpAge
International

Introduction

COVID-19 has affected older people disproportionately. Responses to the pandemic have led to unnecessary deaths, increased poverty and discrimination. This crisis has shown how important it is to protect our rights when we're older so that we can have equal opportunities to survive, to live with dignity and to contribute to our communities.

As we redesign our societies, we should aim for a fair world where everyone, no matter their age, is respected and treated with dignity. A UN convention on the rights of older people can help us build a solid foundation from which effective national laws can emerge, rather than continue to operate on shaky ground. It can help improve access to services, and change attitudes and behaviours. How can we communicate this message to people who make decisions?

This toolkit will help you:

1. Identify new opportunities to talk about older people's rights in the context of COVID-19
2. Build your case so you can communicate effectively about a UN convention on the rights of older people

Identify opportunities

Step 1: Find hot topics

Older people might not be on the public agenda but we can create opportunities in current discussions to raise the issues we face in older age and our rights.

'Hot topics' are the issues that are getting the most attention. Here are some ways to find out what is 'hot' at the moment:

- follow the news and discussions on social media
- listen to political talk shows on the radio
- ask your contacts in government or NGOs what topics are being discussed in their circles
- listen to what people in your community are talking about

Step 2: Find links to older people's issues

Once you've identified what is 'hot' right now, ask yourself: How can we use this topic to raise older people's issues?

Older people may be the 'hot topic' themselves, for example, in debates about deaths of older people in care homes or disruptions to pension payments.

If older people's issues are not on the agenda, we have to find a way to connect them to the public debate. For example, in debates about:

- the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls: what is the impact on older women?
- the pressure on the health system: do older people have access to the healthcare they need?
- getting the economy going: how has older people's economic security and activity been affected?

Step 3: Connect to older people's rights

Once you have identified the 'hot topic' and how you can use it to talk about older people's issues, you then need to work out if older people's rights have been affected. We can look at two things:

1. Have older people been discriminated against?
2. Have older people been denied any of their rights?

1. Age discrimination

To work out if older people have been discriminated against because of their age use the table below:

| Question 1: Is a decision or action (or the lack of it) based on age? | Question 2: Does this decision or action (or the lack of it) have a negative impact on the older person's rights compared to younger people? | Outcome |
|--|---|-----------------------------|
| Yes | Yes | Age discrimination |
| No | Yes | Indirect age discrimination |
| Yes | No | No age discrimination |

See examples

| Examples of decisions or actions | Question 1: Is the decision or action (or lack of it) based on age? | Question 2: Does this decision or action (or the lack of it) have a negative impact on the older person's rights compared to younger people? | Outcome |
|--|--|---|--|
| Health: Age limits are being used to restrict access to healthcare because there are limited medical resources, such as ventilators or hospital beds | Yes | Yes | Age discrimination which denies older people's right to healthcare |
| Women: Domestic violence prevention and support services do not have an age criteria but are designed in a way that exclude older women | No | Yes | Indirect age discrimination which denies older women's right to freedom from violence, abuse and neglect |
| Economy: Pension payments are temporarily increased to cover the rise in food prices during lockdown | Yes | No | No discrimination |

2. Other ways our rights are denied

Older people's rights can be denied for reasons other than age discrimination.

To work out if older people have been denied their rights, we can ask whether the services or entitlements guaranteed as part of our rights are:

- Accessible
- Available
- Appropriate
- Of good quality

Examples

Accessible: The right to health

- Has the response to the pandemic meant that older people cannot access the healthcare and medicines they need?

Available: The right to care and support

- Has the lockdown meant that care and support services have been stopped and are no longer available to older people in the places where they live?

Appropriate: The right to autonomy and independence

- Do older people have access to appropriate information so they can exercise their own judgement about the risks they face and make informed decisions about the healthcare they might need?

Good quality: The right to work

- Are older people being forced to look for low-paid, insecure work with unsafe working conditions in order to survive?

Ask these types of questions for the rights to:

- Health
- Care and support
- Autonomy and independence
- Social security and social protection
- Freedom from violence, abuse and neglect
- Work
- Access to justice
- Participation in society
- Information
- Lifelong-learning and skills-building



Try to find evidence to support your case, for example: official figures, media articles or older people testimonials.

Identify who to talk to

To have a strong impact with your advocacy you need to target the right person.

Look at who is talking about the 'hot topics' you've identified. Who are the influential people involved? These could be religious leaders, media

outlets or particular journalists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), public figures, members of parliament, government representatives, community leaders and any others who are contributing to the debate.

Examples

Key people: Religious leaders

Topic: Society

If an influential religious leader or a faith-based organisation is talking about the need to build societies that are based on trust and solidarity, contact them about ending the ageism which divides generations and drives age discrimination.

Key people: The media

Topic: Care and support

If the debate in the media is about the challenges informal care workers are facing because of the lockdown, contact a journalist who is reporting on this issue or is already known to you to point out that care and support is a right and relying too much on informal providers often leaves older people without the support services they are entitled to.

Key people: Members of parliament (MPs)

Topic: Economy

If MPs are discussing the impact of the lockdown on the economy and going back to work, ask your MP to raise older people's right to go back to work in the debate.

Build your case for a UN convention

Now you have identified the 'hot topic', connected it to older people's issues and their rights, and know who to talk to.

The next step is to make the link to a UN convention on the rights of older people and find the most effective way to communicate about it.

Frame and adapt your messages

Frames are choices we make on how we talk about a specific topic.

Below are some frames and tips that will help you be more effective when talking about a UN convention in the context of COVID-19. You can adapt the example messages provided to the 'hot topics' and rights issues that you have identified in your country.

Solid ground for a fair society

As societies focus on building a better world, we can use this energy to position a UN convention as the solid ground for effective national laws and behaviour to emerge.

Example:

As we redesign our societies, we should think about the type of world we want. If we want a society that is fair and respectful, we should honour this.

[Give examples of the rights-based issues you have identified and the consequences they are having on your country. For example: *Ageist attitudes and the lack of protection of older people's rights are harming our dignity and wellbeing in older age. This is causing unnecessary deaths of older family members and friends in our society.*]

Every step we take should move towards a world where our rights are respected at all ages. A world where we don't lose our humanity as we get older.

A UN convention on the rights of older people can help us build a solid foundation from which effective national laws and behaviour can emerge, rather than continue to operate on shaky ground and hope for the best.



We tend to make decisions that are primarily based on beliefs, how we feel and values, rather than facts. Avoid relying on facts alone and use shared values and aspirations as well.



We are more likely to respond positively when we identify ourselves as part of a group. Avoid 'us' versus 'them' narratives and connect older age issues with the rest of society.

Empowering guide

As decision-makers, the private sector and others have responded to the pandemic, they have not found any guidance or legal protection when it comes to older people's rights. A UN convention would clearly define older people's rights and provide specific guidance on how to respect these rights.

Example: Our main priority now should be meeting everyone's needs and preventing further harm. But we are all likely to face discrimination when we are older, and older people's rights are invisible in the law. For example, access to care and support services are not guaranteed as a right under the law.

This means that as we get older, we can be left behind. Decision-makers have no place to go to when they need guidance and support to ensure older people's rights are respected.

[Give examples of consequences this has had in your country based on the 'hot topics' you have identified. For example: *As a result, the pandemic has pushed older people even farther to economic hardship*].

It doesn't have to be this way. As we rebuild our societies we can choose to do so from a place of equality and dignity. A UN convention on the rights of older people would provide the specific answers that governments and others need to make the right decisions and build the society we want.



People tend to prioritise pressing needs and quick wins over big issues or delayed benefits. When talking about rebuilding societies and the benefits of a UN convention, talk about shared problems and solutions, and use clear examples. Try to connect the now with the future.



If you are communicating with decision-makers, avoid referring to a UN convention as an international mechanism that will monitor their behaviour. This is likely to cause resistance and a need to gain control. Instead use narratives that highlight practical benefits and a sense of ownership.

Better services for all

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light deficiencies in health and social support systems. The fact that people are living longer requires these systems to be adapted to new, growing needs. In this context, with a UN convention services would have to be designed to meet the standards that respect older people's rights.

Example: The COVID-19 pandemic has shown [Give examples of systems and consequences that relate to the 'hot topics' you have identified, for example: *community-based health and support systems are not ready for a world where we live longer. The impact of the pandemic on formal care and services where they exist, and on informal systems has left many older people without access to support.*]

We have seen that government policies and action can make all the difference to our health and wellbeing. As we rebuild our systems, we must make sure they are fit for purpose in a world where we live longer.

A UN convention would help governments, the private sector and others make sure these systems respect older people's rights. It would help us ensure that we all, as we get older, [Give examples of the positive consequences better systems would have in relation to your topic. *For example: have access to health treatments and are free to make our own decisions around our wellbeing.*]



When talking about the need for better services try to avoid messages about financial resources. Economic arguments can put people into unproductive, self-interested mindsets, and drive them away from shared values and aspirations.



When talking about ageing societies, avoid catastrophic narratives. People can become demotivated if they can't see a way to change the situation. Offer solutions and be specific about the role of the person you are talking to in the change.

Change catalyst

It is important to connect the UN convention with the direct benefit it can have on older people's lives and wider society. Be specific on how a UN convention would have positive knock-on effects on national laws, services and attitudes.

Example: Older people's rights have been denied during the pandemic, [give examples based on the 'hot topics' you have identified. *For example: policies on decisions around medical treatments have denied many older people equal access to healthcare.*]

We can't build a world that is fair and sustainable without laws that ensure equality at all ages. [Give examples of relevant goals that will not be achieved without a UN convention. *For example: We can't restart our economies if we are excluded from society as we get older and our contributions are underestimated.*]

If we act now, we can create a UN convention on the rights of older people to ensure age discrimination is prohibited in the law, services uphold older people's dignity, and attitudes and behaviours towards older people are more respectful.



People tend to react positively when they are reminded that if they don't act now, they might miss out on something important or lose something valuable.



Many people struggle to see the direct impact a UN convention could have on older people and society. This makes them dismiss the need for one. Bring the UN convention "down to earth" and give examples of how it works.

Take action

Once you have identified new opportunities and messages, it's time to bring them to life. Here are three simple and powerful actions you can take to make change happen:

1. Write a letter to government officials
2. Issue a joint position statement
3. Place an op-ed in the media

Use and adapt the following examples in line with the opportunities, audiences, and messages you have chosen.

1. Letter to government officials

Hot topic example: The leader of the opposition party has just made a speech about the impact of the lockdown on violence against women and girls, calling on the government to step up efforts to address this. It is all over the news and social media.

Who to influence: The government will have to respond to this challenge. The Minister of Gender is responsible for violence against women.

Why a letter to government officials: Letters to government representatives can trigger an official response or debate within government. Copying other parts of government into the letter can help to maximise the reach of your message. Making the letter open can increase visibility and put pressure on the government to respond.

Example

Your Excellency,

We, civil society organisations united in our work to ensure older people everywhere enjoy their rights, are writing in relation to the recent speech by the Leader of the Opposition Party on the impact of COVID-19 on violence against women and girls.

This attention to violence against women and girls is very welcome. Women and girls of all ages have been affected by the lockdown, but violence against older women often remains invisible. During the lockdown older women have been made to stay at home for longer and under stricter conditions than younger women. These long periods of isolation are increasing the risk of violence, abuse and neglect against many of them from family members who are spending more time than usual at home. The number of calls from older women to violence helplines has increased significantly since the start of the pandemic and older women have no access to violence support services or shelters.

As one older woman from Townsville told us, "During quarantine, my son and daughter-in-law began to neglect my needs. They don't give me food and medicine on time. My daughter-in-law yells at me and my son has even started to hit me when I don't do what he wants."

1. Start by saying who you are and why you are writing.

2. Link the hot topic to older people.

3. Provide any evidence to back up your claims you might know from local organisations or the news.

4. Provide a short personal quote from an older woman.

Every woman and girl has the right to be free from violence, abuse and neglect. But older women are being discriminated against because they are older and because they are women. Their rights are invisible in the law. Decision-makers have no place to go to when they need guidance and support to ensure older women's rights are respected, like how to adapt violence prevention services to include older women or make sure support services are available to them.

It doesn't have to be this way. As we rebuild our societies we can choose to do so from a place of equality and dignity. A UN convention on the rights of older women and men would provide the specific answers that governments and others need to make the right decisions around policies and service delivery and build the society we want.

As civil society, we are ready to play our part through constructive dialogue around the solutions available and supporting older women's participation in the process. We look forward to enhancing our partnership with you to advance our common agenda and therefore request a meeting at a time of your convenience to discuss this further.

Sincerely

Copied to
Focal Point on Older Persons, Ministry of Social Affairs
Chief of UN and International Co-operation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Head of Violence Against Women Unit, Ministry of Gender
Senior Policy Adviser to the Minister of Gender, Ministry of Gender

5. Explain the need for a UN convention on the rights of older people, using narratives from the toolkit, and connect it with your hot topic.

6. End with your request.

7. Send a copy to the relevant people across the government.

Follow up actions: You could also issue a joint NGO statement and issue a press release on violence, abuse and neglect against older women. You might wait until you have (or have not) heard back from the Minister before doing this and include your reaction to the response. If this is an open letter, you could share it with the media, and post it on your website and social media.

2. Joint position statement

Hot topic example: A prominent public figure is talking about the need to reserve scarce healthcare resources for younger people. This is getting a lot of attention on social media.

Who to influence: The Ministry of Health as they are responsible for providing guidance on the use of healthcare resources in public health emergencies.

Why a joint position statement: Joint position statements can be powerful as they signal a collective voice among civil society. They can be posted on websites, shared with the media or via social media, and sent directly to decision-makers.

Example

Older people have the same right to be treated for COVID-19 as everyone else

As organisations of older people working for older people, we are concerned about recent calls in the media to prevent older people from accessing medical treatment for COVID-19.

Older people are hit particularly hard by the virus and death rates among those affected are high. Decisions on medical treatments based on age will deny many older people equal access to healthcare. We all have the same rights to life and health, regardless of our age. Denying these rights to older people is age discrimination. We want to live in a fair society where our rights are respected, no matter our age.

As one older woman from Townsville said, "I have chronic diseases and am very worried about my health. What if I get the virus and the hospital refuses to treat me? What if I don't survive COVID-19? I am constantly worrying about this and feel very anxious."

As we deal with the pandemic and rebuild our societies, we should think about the type of world we want. If we want a society that is fair and respectful, we should honour this.

1. Choose a title that captures the essence of your position.

2. Link the hot topic to older people.

3. Provide a short personal quote from an older person.

4. Explain the need for a UN convention on the rights of older people, using narratives from the toolkit, and connect it to your hot topic.

Age discrimination must be taken as seriously in the law and in real life as other forms of discrimination. Every step we take should move towards a world where our rights are respected at all ages. A world where we don't lose our humanity as we get older. A UN convention on the rights of older people can help us build a solid foundation from which effective national laws and behaviour can emerge, rather than continue to operate on shaky ground and hope for the best.

5. End with a summary of your position.

Any decisions on who gets treatment for COVID-19 must be made on individualised clinical assessments, and medical and scientific evidence. They should never be made on discriminatory, non-medical grounds such as age. A new UN convention on the rights of older people protecting older people's right to equality and non-discrimination would ensure this never happens again.

This position is supported by:

6. List the organisations who support the position.

Age Equality Now
Health For Everyone
Human Rights Monitor
Humanitarian Action for Older People
Intergenerational Partnerships
Older Women Count
The Association of Retired Civil Servants
The National Platform of Older People's Associations
The Older Farmers' Union
Women and Girls for Development

Additional actions: You might think a joint NGO letter to the Minister for Health would be useful here. You could also put your joint NGO position into a letter to the editor of a newspaper.

3. Op-ed

Hot topic example: Older people in care homes are dying of COVID-19 because of lack of medical treatment. This is getting a lot of attention on TV, newspapers, radio and social media.

Who to influence: Media outlets will be interested in news, facts and personal stories around topics that are of interest to the public.

Why an op-ed: Op-eds are an opportunity to express your opinion on a public issue, which works best when illustrated with examples.

Example

Older people neglected and dying in care homes

The shocking rate of death recorded in our care homes is a sad reflection on how we treat older people in our society today.

Even though the pandemic has peaked across the country, it is accelerating in care homes where deaths from COVID-19 are currently running at approximately 1000 a week.

Residents of care homes have been neglected and denied equal access to medical treatment. It is a dreadful reflection on our care systems that 47 per cent of deaths from COVID-19 are occurring in these homes.

These figures raise serious concerns about how the government has handled COVID-19 in care homes and what led to this situation. How was it possible that care and support services did not get the resources and assistance they need to deal with the pandemic?

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the inequality and discrimination that we face when we are older. We all have the right to health and to life wherever we live, including in care homes. But ageism in society and challenges to accessing services means we can be denied our right to health and to life when we are older.

As Nadia told us: "Because of the pandemic I haven't been able to see my husband who lives in a care home for four weeks. I used to visit him every day to make sure he ate and took his medicines. I'm so worried he won't be eating properly or taking his pills."

1. Choose a title that captures the essence of your news story.

2. Start with news or facts about the hot topic you have identified and how it relates to older people.

3. State your opinion about the topic.

4. Explain how this topic relates to rights.

5. Provide personal stories.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown care and support systems are not ready for a world where we live longer. Care homes have been insufficiently equipped and prepared to manage the impact of the virus, leaving many older people without access to medical treatment, and causing a high number of deaths.

We should all be able to live with dignity when we are older. We should not feel, as Robert, 72 told us, that "staff impose rules and regulations on us. They do not listen to us or know what we want or need. They simply decide for us and give orders."

Government policies and action are essential for maintaining dignity, health and wellbeing. The government must address the system's failures and ensure it is fit for purpose in a world where people live longer.

A UN convention on the rights of older people would have made a difference in this pandemic by guaranteeing their rights. Older people would not have been forced, due to lack of care and support services in their homes or communities, to live in institutional settings that put their lives at risk during an unexpected health crisis. A convention would have made sure that care and support services that treat them with dignity were available in the places they choose to live.

As we get older, we should all enjoy the same access to healthcare as everyone else. We have the right to be free to make our own decisions around our wellbeing and we should not be forced into the margins of society.

A UN convention on the rights of older people would help make this possible. It would guide governments, the private sector and others to make sure care and support systems respect older people's rights and save them from the neglect that has left them to die in under-resourced care homes.

Include a short biography of the author.

6. Provide more information and your opinion about the topic.

7. Explain the need for a UN convention on the rights of older people, using narratives from the toolkit, and connect it with your hot topic.

Additional actions: You could write a letter to the minister responsible for care and support, referring to the article if it gets picked up and used by the media. You could also issue a joint NGO statement in response to an article. And post your article on social media.



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