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ROUNDTABLE SERIES

MAINSTREAMING KNOWLEDGE ON AGEING

Bridging Paths Towards Strengthening Protection and Participation

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Political and Civic Security for Older Persons

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2026 Series for Mainstreaming Knowledge on Ageing

Third Event Takeaways

This document has been prepared by the Division for People and Social Development at UNITAR, Ms. Analucía Jácome, Specialist in Human Rights and Good Governance, and Ms. Sara Louedi, SDP Team.

We hope you enjoy it!



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Focus: Civil and Political Rights and Participation of Older Persons



Dr. Chitralekha Marie Massey
Chief of Section, Rights of Older Persons,
Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

"For me, dignity encompasses almost everything. It's about how well informed you are, how much your voice is heard, whether you have access to all fundamental human rights."

1. The world is ageing. The most rapid acceleration is expected between the 2020s and 2060. The next four decades will be a critical period for us, because this is the period where the 60-plus population will be exponentially increased, but what's going to be even more critical is that the share of persons 80-plus in the world is going to be very, very significant.

2. Despite the agreement that age does not equal decline, our discussions often remain very much on health, care support systems, medical facilities, infrastructure, legal autonomy, and violence, abuse, and neglect. But it is very rare to hear a discussion on civil and political participation. This gap, this invisibility that we see of older persons and their ability to apply their rights, is very much grounded in this particular area.

3. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information, followed by articles on peaceful assembly, freedom of association, participation in public affairs, the ability to stand for public office, non-discrimination and equal protection. These are all of the things that we see have been challenged in the case of older persons. Is access to information only about language? Is it about where the information is available? How the information is available? What efforts are being made to ensure that people are actually getting the relevant information in an easy, comprehensible way?

4. The CRPD has been attempting to meet the gap, with Article 9 and Article 13 on accessibility and access to justice, and the recognition of legal personhood. The question for us to explore further is: if someone has dementia, does that take away their legal capacity? How does the State ensure an older person's right to take an informed decision about themselves based on the information they have?

Highlights on the OHCHR

OHCHR strives to ensure that older persons are given space and weight in the human rights agenda. OHCHR supports the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Human Rights of Older Persons, the mandate of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, and the work of UN human rights mechanisms and national human rights institutions to monitor and provide guidance for the promotion and protection of human rights of older persons. This includes ensuring that older persons can fully participate in all spheres of social life.



5. Very often we see older people no longer get engaged in the political process. If you're not even there in the decision-making, then how do you ensure that your city is age-friendly, human rights-friendly? What is the enabling environment for them to participate in the voting process, to stand for election, or be part of the decision-making and policy-making? And what does co-design mean in reality? Does it mean that we should just be filling in a survey?

6. Age is generally not referred to and is covered under the other status, and because of that, there has been very limited action and good practice established for addressing age-based discrimination. Older people continue to be invisible or absent completely from data and from algorithms. Ageism is also self-directed: very often, it's not so much about legal capacity as it is about the stereotype that exists, and what people say about themselves: I'm too old.

7. How well trained are our security services, our medical services, to recognize violence experienced by older persons? Older women are not even asked the question when they come in with signs of violence, because the stereotype is that this is an older woman, and therefore she is safe from sexual violence. We also need to ensure access to justice: families sometimes discourage older people from going for justice, while an increasing number of courts are giving judgments that protect the rights of older persons when it comes to their property rights, their assets and their pensions.

8. In the digital sphere, it's about choice. You should have the right as an older person to choose whether you want to go down the digital path or have a human interface. Participation can only be meaningful if older people are recognized as having their own agency and decision-making power over their lives. The right to personal liberty is a core human right for all people, and there's deprivation of liberty occurring even in care institutions and hospitals. The expectation is that the new legally binding instrument will ensure a very comprehensive approach and really make this a lived reality for people.



Important

In April 2025, the Human Rights Council decided to establish an open-ended intergovernmental working group with the mandate of elaborating and submitting to the Council a draft international legally binding instrument on the human rights of older persons.



Food for Thought

Women live longer than men, but do not necessarily live happier or healthier lives. Very often, women have given up careers, taken time out, or are working more in the informal sector or the caregiving sector. You could look at it from the life course impact, or from the gender perspective: the negative impact on the lives of older women is far more significant.

Useful Sources

- OHCHR, Older persons | Link
- 1st session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the human rights of Older Persons (13–17 July 2026) | Link
- Human Rights Council Concludes Fifty-Eighth Regular Session after Adopting 32 Resolutions | Link

Focus: From Formal Rights to Real Participation



Mr. Fabrice Fifonsi

Executive Director, African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC)

"Meaningful participation requires what we call rights, plus access, plus a voice, and influence."

1. There's a saying in Africa: when an old man dies, a library burns down. It is a famous proverb attributed to Amadou Hampâté Bâ. If you know that it's a repository of wisdom and knowledge, then you have to create an enabling environment so that older persons can contribute to the democratic process with their knowledge, background and experiences.

2. Across Africa, I would say even West Africa, or even in Ghana, 60 plus is already an elder person. This group of our society is becoming a larger part of our demographic reality. And yet, their needs and perspectives can remain underrepresented in policy, planning, public debate, and policy-making.

3. Social change is reshaping traditional systems of care and support. The shift to nuclear households weakens traditional and intergenerational support, and migration, from rural to urban and international, can leave older persons increasingly on their own. Without adequate income security, this can directly affect living standards and create financial anxiety. The first group at stake is women, because of the informal condition of work.

4. The very first barrier is literacy, call it digital literacy, call it any form of literacy: low formal literacy can make the electoral and civic system harder to navigate. Other barriers are identification, buildings that are not accessible, and basic infrastructure, such as seating and shelters. They may have the will, the zeal to do it, but it may create a challenge to go and sit under the sun before you cast your vote.

5. Do they really have a say? Are they represented in the decisions that affect their lives? Are social protection, healthcare and housing policies developed with them? In some jurisdictions, councils of elders and senates, groups of elected or appointed people, can also do that kind of advocacy to make sure that no one is left behind.

Highlights on APNAC

The African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC) is an organization which aims to coordinate, involve and strengthen the capacities of African parliamentarians to fight corruption and promote good governance. Since its formation in 1999 in Kampala, Uganda, APNAC has promoted accountability, transparency, and public participation in the processes of government, as the best ways to control corruption. As the elected representatives of the people, MPs play an essential leadership role in combating corruption throughout the legislative process, and in their oversight and representative functions.

APNAC's mandate is promoted by its presence throughout the Eastern, Southern, and Western regions of Africa, via its National Chapters, and working with other anti-corruption bodies in Africa and around the world.



6. Moving forward, we are looking from formal rights to real participation. This may be in a book, this may be in a law, but how do we implement it? Meaningful participation requires what we call rights, plus access, plus a voice, and influence. This means electoral and civic infrastructure accessible to them, electoral information in accessible formats and channels, stronger pension and social schemes, affordable and quality healthcare, and reliable data collected together with them.

7. Civic security is connected to social security. These conditions, income, healthcare, infrastructure and mobility, shape a person's ability to participate confidently in civic life and to feel an important part of the system. Ageing is a demographic reality that our institutions, policies, and democratic systems must be prepared to embrace.



Remember

Sometimes we are faced with the language barrier. Some of these instruments are available just in the major languages internationally recognized. The efforts now may be to bring it down to the real people, using not only books, but also other tools to make the information available and accessible.

Food for Thought

When you look at the system in place, you feel like the older person is not having the same treatment. And for us, the question is: before you even get there, you have been in the system. How best have you yourself got involved in setting the tone, in putting the system together, so that when you grow older, you benefit from it?

Useful Sources

- African Union, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa (2016) | Link
- Learn more about the African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC) | Link

Focus: Overcoming Legal and Practical Barriers for Participation



Dr. Carlos López

Professor of Human Rights, International University of La Rioja (UNIR)

"We need to recognize that older persons are not only social actors, but also political agents."

1. Civic and political participation, as a way for older people to keep active and socially involved, and to have their voices heard and represented in political arenas, is widely recognized. At the political level, it includes voting, contacting political representatives, signing petitions, writing emails, boycotting, and political consumption. Attention to volunteering and charities has dominated the discussions many times, but other forms of participation are neglected. Older people are not only social actors, but also political agents.

2. International Human Rights Law recognizes participation in public affairs, freedom of expression and association, equality, and non-discrimination as rights. The Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons requires States to promote the full inclusion and participation of older people, and explicitly recognizes participation, autonomy, equality, and non-discrimination as principles. But it has to be taken always as the starting point, and not a final objective.

3. The first condition to overcoming these barriers is protection from discrimination and intimidation. Older people's participation should be free from discrimination, but also from the fear of intimidation, coercion or pressure of any form. This means not only a legislative framework, but also mechanisms where older people can bring complaints, and institutions capable of responding when their participation is obstructed.

4. Secondly, accessibility is a condition for exercising civil and political rights. It includes the location of polling stations, transportation, entrances, and voting booths; readability of electoral materials; websites and online registration systems; and assistance where it is requested by the voter.

Highlights on Dr. Carlos López

Dr. Carlos López is a senior international legal and policy expert with over 25 years of experience working in human rights and rule of law at the multilateral level, including at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and as senior legal advisor at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva. He lectures on human rights and has supported trainings at UNITAR.



5. Third, there can be no meaningful participation without adequate information. Older people need access to information about the candidates, the laws and policies, and consultation modalities and opportunities, and this information has to be usable, considering readability, language, digital accessibility, communication needs and diversity among older people.

6. Fourth, participation must reflect the older person's own will, and age should not automatically lead to assumptions that someone cannot make political or civic decisions. We need to support participation, not replace the person's own decisions. Fifth, participation in political matters is not just voting: are consultations accessible and meaningful? Are older people represented in relevant advisory and decision-making structures? Are their views considered before decisions are made?

7. Lots of the information on social media and digital platforms is many times manipulated, even to cheat, and there are many forms of cybercriminality going on. Not only courts and constitutional bodies, but also ombuds institutions, national human rights institutions, non-discrimination commissions and other oversight mechanisms at the national level have a role to play. In the future treaty on the rights of older persons, this should be addressed in full.



Important

The Inter-American Convention calls for mechanisms that include the opinions, contributions, and demands of older people. Articles 8, 27, 28, and 29 of the Inter-American Convention could be consulted in this regard.

Useful Source

- OAS, Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons | Link

To Bear in Mind

At the individual level, civic participation can include altruistic behaviours, donations, in-kind support to charities and NGOs. At the collective level, it can also include volunteering in community and charitable organizations. Many of these forms of participation have a very strong civic and political content, so all of them need to be addressed.

Focus: Inclusion Requires More than Opening the Door



Ms. Raquel Pereira
Co-founder, ELEDA

"Whenever we create a formal space for participation, we should not only look at who is in the room, but also ask who is missing."

1. Political and civic participation is fundamental to how individuals remain connected to the societies in which they live. Mainstreaming knowledge on ageing is not only about generating more knowledge about older persons, but also about ensuring that their knowledge, experiences, and perspectives become part of how our institutions understand ageing, develop policies, and make decisions.

2. The Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing, the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing have all emphasized the participation of older persons in decision-making. Older persons are not merely recipients of policies. They are rights holders and active members of society. Yet recognizing a right does not automatically guarantee that it is exercised.

3. By 2050, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 65 or over. But numbers alone do not create inclusion. Formal rights and formal spaces for participation are essential, but we also need to promote a culture of inclusion. An inclusive culture is not simply about opening formal spaces to everyone. It is about creating the conditions for everyone to participate, contribute, and be heard on an equal basis.

4. Barriers may include inaccessible polling stations and transportation, limited access to timely and reliable information, digital exclusion, social isolation, and institutional practices that do not sufficiently take their perspectives into account. Older persons are not a homogeneous group: gender, disability, socio-economic circumstances, migration background, and access to technology, among other factors, can shape opportunities for participation.

Highlights on Ms. Raquel Pereira and ELEDA

Ms. Raquel Pereira has over 15 years of experience working on human rights, including at the Permanent Mission of Paraguay to the United Nations in Geneva, as a delegate to the UN Human Rights Council and the World Health Organization. She is co-founder of ELEDA, which supports organizations in their sustainable and inclusive transformation and has collaborated with the State of Geneva in citizen consultations.



6. Through ELEDA, we have collaborated with the State of Geneva in citizen consultations. These consultations are open to everyone, but being open to everyone does not necessarily mean that everyone participates. In one consultation, a large majority of participants were older men, Swiss and homeowners. Where are the older women? Where are older persons with disabilities? Women may face inequalities and barriers throughout their life, and these do not simply disappear with age.

7. In one consultation, some older persons were concerned about plans to remove parking spaces. When we listened, we understood that those parking spaces made it easier for nurses and other care workers to reach their homes. At the same time, some younger participants raised a different concern: narrow pavements made their long journeys on foot more difficult and potentially less safe. The same urban space can be experienced very differently by different generations.

8. Intergenerational dialogue should not be about deciding whose needs matter more, nor should we frame the interests of younger and older generations as necessarily competing. Many of the challenges we face, from social protection and care to digital transformation and climate change, may affect generations differently, but they require shared solutions. Political and civic participation can provide opportunities for people of all ages to contribute, learn from one another, and shape their common future.



Food for Thought

General Comment No. 7 of the CRPD emphasizes the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities through their representative organizations, in decision-making, and in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention. This is particularly relevant, as many older persons live with disabilities. Ensuring their participation means recognizing the intersection of age and disability.

Remember

As women, we know this very well. Making up half of the world population has not automatically guaranteed meaningful participation, equal representation, or access to positions of power. International agreements and laws have been essential steps forward, but they have not been sufficient on their own.

Useful Sources

- Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Comment No. 7 (2018) on the participation of persons with
- disabilities | Link
  UN DESA, Guide to the National Implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing | Link

Focus: Nothing About Us Without Us



Dr. Michael Ashley Stein

Co-founder and Executive Director, Harvard Law School Project on Disability (HPOD); Visiting Professor, Harvard Law School

"We cannot change society, we cannot engage in things such as feedback to governments, changes of law and policies, unless we are enabled to vote."

1. Older persons and persons with disabilities do overlap, but it's not the same. The CRPD is coming up to its 20th anniversary this December, and it was written at a time when information and communication technology and digital access were absolutely brand new. We did not know enough in 2006, or put enough in the treaty in 2006, to be sufficient in 2026.

2. As many citizens as possible should not only have the right to vote, but be encouraged and enabled to do so. We should have accommodations at the polls for people who need support in order to express their preference and choose their candidate. Older persons and people with disabilities should also be members of election committees, and they should actually monitor fair and democratic voting.

3. Another way, that's kind of sneakier, has to do with capacity. The same kind of stereotypes and tropes that are used to prevent certain people with disabilities from accessing the vote are and will be used against older persons. Alzheimer's is a very prominent reason for legal and policy preclusions, but Alzheimer's is only one of something like 32 different types of dementias.

4. The standard for voting is not the best vote. It's not even a rational vote. It is the expression of will and preference. Can an individual express their will and preference? If that's what they want to do, they are allowed to do it. Substituted voting and replacing voting go against pretty much everything I believe as a human rights lawyer.

5. Ultimately, it comes back to nothing about us without us. As Justin Dart used to say: vote as if your life depends on it, because it does. We cannot change society, we cannot engage in things such as feedback to governments, changes of law and policies, unless we are enabled to vote.

Highlights on the Harvard Law School Project on Disability

HPOD has demonstrated a steadfast dedication to empowering civil society and other actors by fostering knowledgeable and discerning advocacy for Human Rights. Their endeavors encompass a range of activities, including the provision of comprehensive human rights training and education, the facilitation of international law and policy development, the promotion of inclusive practices in development, the dissemination of technical assistance pertaining to strategic litigation, and the cultivation of innovative perspectives regarding the capabilities of persons with disabilities and their entitlement to human rights.



6. I would recommend that we interpret the right to information and the right to access information broadly. Beyond physical access under the Disability Treaty and the work on the Marrakesh Treaty, the affirmative obligation, perhaps, on States, to educate older persons when they so wish, is an enormous lever to pursue at Geneva with the developing treaty. Basic information, whether it's how to obtain your social benefits or how to go to the movies, is increasingly online. The digital world is increasingly the world.



The Case of Election Monitors in Armenia

About 15 years ago, in Armenia, people with disabilities were used as election monitors, but they were dismissed by the officials at 4 p.m. every day on the grounds that they're blind or wheelchair users, or they need to go home to rest. You won't see that in official policy, you won't see that in a law, but it's an example of stigma, prejudice, and bizarre notions that sometimes are used to exclude various populations from monitoring, which is really important.

To Bear in Mind

As far as candidates are concerned, we have the interesting backlash of age. On the one hand, age is used as a stereotype to push back against candidates: they're too old, they don't have new ideas, they're not in touch. And yet, candidates of the same age are voted into office. So, this stereotype is used both as a sword and as a shield.

Remember

Learning digital skills is not only for voting and participation, it's also for social participation. Obviously, older people must want to do this. But we do want our societies to be diverse and inclusive, and we do want the contributions of older people.

Useful Sources

- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) | Link
- WIPO, Marrakesh Treaty | Link
- Harvard Law School Project on Disability, Older Persons' Human Rights | Link



Decade of healthy ageing

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