

Ageism in the Commonwealth

How COVID-19 has exposed the urgent need for further recognition and protection of the rights of older people in Commonwealth countries

This paper examines how the wellbeing, dignity and voice of older persons have been impacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Commonwealth countries; and how those countries can ensure older people's rights are respected in a more age-friendly Commonwealth that leaves no one behind.

A Commonwealth for people of all ages

“Coronavirus brings home to us afresh and with alarming clarity the sad truth that those who are keepers of wisdom and experience, our innovators, our teachers, our story-tellers, our architects, our parents, grandparents and great-great grandparents are too often condemned to face the greatest social disadvantage.”¹ Baroness Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary General

The Commonwealth Charter² commits its members to core principles of mutual respect and inclusiveness and states that the Commonwealth is “implacably opposed to all forms of discrimination.” It recalls “that respect for the dignity of all human beings is critical to promoting peace and prosperity” and accepts that “diversity and understanding the richness of our multiple identities are fundamental to the Commonwealth’s principles and approach.” It recognises “the necessity of access to affordable health care, education, clean drinking water, sanitation and housing for all citizens” and emphasises “the importance of promoting health and well-being in combating communicable and non-communicable diseases.” These core values and principles apply to people of all ages in the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland has highlighted that “the Commonwealth has a special responsibility to show the way and to take a lead in upholding the importance attending to the needs and concerns of older people, particularly where they live in countries or communities which lack human, financial and technical resources – and especially at a time such as this of unprecedented global crisis.”³

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health, economic, social and humanitarian crisis of unprecedented scale. While it has affected everyone around the world, evidence shows that people in older age are among those most at risk of complications from the disease⁴, with fatality rates for those over 80 years of age five times the global average⁵. It is also clear that at risk groups, including older people, are disproportionately affected by medium- and long-term consequences of the crisis, such as increased inequalities and poverty rates⁶.

As countries across the Commonwealth face the challenges from this crisis and the implications it may have in the longer term, we have a chance to address the systems that failed so many older

¹ <http://www.commage.org/2020-commonwealth-elders-forum/>

² <https://thecommonwealth.org/about-us/charter>

³ <https://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/commonwealth-concern-needs-older-people>

⁴ Jordan R et al., ‘COVID-19: risk factors for severe disease and death’, The BMJ, 2020

⁵ <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Policy-Brief-The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Older-Persons.pdf>

⁶ Sachs, J., Schmidt-Traub, G., Kroll, C., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Woelm, F. 2020. ‘The Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19’. *Sustainable Development Report 2020*, Cambridge University Press

people across the globe and build a better world for everyone. A more inclusive Commonwealth where everyone's human rights are protected, whatever their age.

All countries in the Commonwealth share one important common trend: the older population is set to grow more quickly than the total population⁷. There were over 231 million older people in Commonwealth nations in 2019, a number that is projected to increase to 559 million by 2050 – an increase of over 142%⁸. Everywhere in the Commonwealth, health, care and social protection systems have to adapt to an ageing population. Everywhere in the Commonwealth, the rights and dignity of older women and men must be protected equally with others. It is vital for Commonwealth countries to listen to older people's voices, support older people's agency and the multiple roles they can play in society, both in the context of a global pandemic and beyond.

The Commonwealth Secretary General has acknowledged the Commonwealth's responsibility to mitigate and reduce the disproportionate consequences which our elders bear during the pandemic and has called on the Commonwealth to harness its power to “generate dialogue and accelerate progress within and amongst our nations on strategies to build a Commonwealth for all ages, in which men and women can live in dignity for the entire span of their lives' course”. Efforts to include older people in the Commonwealth's plans and strategies have never been more urgent and needed.

Impact of COVID-19 on older persons

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the rights and needs of older persons. They may face a higher risk of complications from the virus, but it has been the failure to protect older people's rights in the response to the pandemic that has led to unnecessary deaths, unmet health and care needs, increased isolation, discrimination and stigma.

“We might die of hunger before coronavirus, so how are we meant to stay alive?”

Zafor Alam, 62, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh⁹

The United Nations Secretary General drew the world's attention to the ‘untold fear and suffering for older people’ in his [policy paper](#) highlighting the impacts of COVID-19 on older persons. He flagged his concerns around broader effects of the crisis, such as “the health care denied for conditions unrelated to COVID-19; neglect and abuse in institutions and care facilities; an increase in poverty and unemployment; the dramatic impact on well-being and mental health; and the trauma of stigma and discrimination.” The UN Secretary General also called for recognition of the contributions of older persons to the crisis response, including as health workers and caregivers, and urged all to ‘step up our effort to support older persons’ and to preserve their rights and dignity at all times.

His call was heard by 146 governments, including 39 Commonwealth nations, who in a shared statement¹⁰ have expressed “deep concern over the escalation of ageism, including age discrimination and stigmatization of older persons, which aggravate their vulnerabilities”, highlighted the need for solidarity between generations and have pledged to “fully promote and respect the dignity and rights of older people and to mitigate the negative impacts during and after the COVID-19 pandemic on their health, lives, rights and wellbeing.” These governments also

⁷ The only exceptions are Lesotho and Mozambique. Please see CommonAge, *Ageing in the Commonwealth*, 2018, <http://www.commage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CommonAge-Research-Report-Final.pdf>

⁸ UNDESA Population Division, ‘World Population Prospects 2019, Volume II: Demographic Profiles’ (ST/ESA/SER.A/427), https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Volume-II-Demographic-Profiles.pdf

⁹ <https://news.trust.org/item/20200511102348-9pf06>

¹⁰ ‘Statement of Support to the UN Secretary General's Policy Brief on The Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons’, 2020, https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/ENG_final_-with-countries.pdf

committed to working with partners to “foster more inclusive, equitable, resilient and age-friendly societies.”

Older people’s rights across the Commonwealth

“Our response to COVID-19 must respect the rights and dignity of older people¹¹”

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General

COVID-19 has exposed the global nature of ageism and the systematic and persistent denial of older people’s human rights, including in many Commonwealth countries. In this respect, we welcome The Commonwealth joint Statement of 16 July on the COVID pandemic¹² and its commitment to “continue to fight against hate speech, targeting of vulnerable groups and all forms of discrimination”, including when based on age and to ensure actions respect human rights. We were also pleased to see a commitment to “ensure equitable access to quality essential health services and safe, effective, quality and affordable medicines and vaccines for all, particularly the most vulnerable and high-risk populations such as older persons, people with disabilities, and others who are more likely to have a pre-existing health condition”. These commitments provide an opportunity for all Commonwealth countries to ensure that older people are not left behind.

Unfortunately, much work remains to be done to fulfil these commitments, as older people have continued to be neglected in COVID-19 responses. Part of the problem has been the failure of the Commonwealth to value and make visible the intergenerational contributions of older people, and to articulate clearly how Commonwealth nations will work together to include older people as part of achieving the Commonwealth’s aspirations.

Below we outline a range of ways in which older person’s rights have been undermined during this pandemic, from their right to life, to health, to autonomy and independence, to non-discrimination, freedom from violence, abuse and neglect and beyond. For further analysis on how the rights of older people have been denied in responses to the pandemic around the world, please see the paper [‘Time for a UN convention on the rights of older persons: How the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need to protect our rights in older age’](#).¹³

Equality and non-discrimination

Ageism

Ageism has been evident in many forms throughout the pandemic. This includes the use of dehumanizing language, where the media frames the pandemic as an opportunity to remove older people¹⁴ or for ‘culling elderly dependents’¹⁵. The rhetoric from some decision makers and influential people has also been ageist¹⁶ and treats older people as a homogenous group that is frail and disposable¹⁷, rather than with dignity as equal members of society.

¹¹ UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief: ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons’, 1 May 2020, www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/news/2020/05/covid-19-older-persons/

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/commonwealth-stands-together-on-the-global-response-to-coronavirus>

¹³ Some of the analysis on how older people’s rights have been denied in the response to the pandemic was adapted from the paper ‘Time for a UN convention on the rights of older persons’

by Sleaf et al., <https://www.helpage.org/download/5f314d4161bbd/>

¹⁴ <https://www.newsweek.com/boomer-remover-meme-trends-virus-coronavirus-social-media-covid-19-baby-boomers-1492190>

¹⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/03/03/does-fed-know-something-rest-us-do-not-panicked-interest-rate/>

¹⁶ See for example [Kenya](#)

¹⁷ See for example [Australia](#) or [UK](#)

An analysis of social media around the pandemic shows a significant proportion of tweets have ‘negative implications of ageing or are downright offensive’ and that ‘Ageist messages can also be found in print and television advertisements, television programs, politics, and even from healthcare professionals who may harbor misconceptions that older patients are demented, frail, and somehow unsalvageable.’¹⁸

In some instances, the narrative around the pandemic has pitted one generation against another, claiming that responses are harming the young in order to save the old, when we know anyone is at risk of catching COVID¹⁹. On other occasions, older people have been stigmatised and assaulted²⁰. The prevalent use of negative stereotypes to describe older people can increase intergenerational tensions and reinforce negative views of later life²¹.

Age-based measures

Given the heightened risk older people face from COVID-19, age-based measures to restrict their movement have been considered or introduced in a number of Commonwealth countries. These include strict restrictions to older people’s movement regardless of their health status²², restrictions on going back to work²³, or on participating in religious activities²⁴.

Emergency measures that governments introduce to slow down or contain the spread of the virus must be based on scientific and medical evidence and not discriminate based on age or other characteristics, such as gender or disability. They must also be temporary, proportionate, and not create overbearing restrictions on people’s rights.

When age-based measures have a negative impact on an older person’s rights, compared to someone of a different age, this is discrimination on the basis of age²⁵. Measures solely based on a person’s age ignore the diversity of older people’s experience and disproportionately restricts their freedom. It also prevents older people from exercising their autonomy in assessing risks and making their own choices.

These measures fail to take into account the negative impact long periods of isolation have on older people’s physical, mental and cognitive well-being.^{26 27} Policies promoting isolation leave many older people unable to access the medical or care and support services they need, their pensions, work, food or other means to support themselves.²⁸

¹⁸ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/jgs.16508>

¹⁹ See for example [UK](#), [Canada](#) and [Canada](#)

²⁰ https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/mar/23/three-teenagers-held-for-allegedly-coughing-at-elderly-couple-hertfordshire?CMP=share_btn_link

²¹ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/news/uks-damaging-views-ageing-revealed-new-report-analysing-language-used-across-society>

²² See for example [England](#), [Ireland](#), [Jamaica](#), [Malta](#), [Samoa](#) and [South Africa](#)

²³ See for example [England](#) and [Bahamas](#)

²⁴ See for example [Pakistan](#)

²⁵ See more on <https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/covid19agebased-measures-coming-out-of-lockdown.pdf>

²⁶ British Society of Gerontology [Statement on COVID-19](#), 20 March 2020, point 6

²⁷ Pfeffer Baum B, North CS, ‘Mental health and the Covid-19 pandemic’, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2020.

²⁸ UN Secretary-General’s Policy Brief: ‘The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons’, 1 May 2020,

www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/news/2020/05/covid-19-older-persons/, page 3; See also <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2020/05/sounding-the-alarm-about-the-rising-risk-of-malnutrition-among-older-people-during-lock-down/>

Singling out all people over a certain age also stigmatises²⁹ them and reinforces stereotypes that all older people are weak and vulnerable. Older people play multiple roles in society and can help countries recover from the pandemic³⁰.

Age-based isolation measures may not even be efficient in reducing older people's risk of contracting the virus, particularly given the fact that co-residence in extended or multi-generational households is the most common living arrangement for older people in low-income Commonwealth countries³¹. Caregiving of grandchildren, a key role often undertaken by older people, can augment the risk of COVID-19 as older people are not able to self-quarantine.³²

Rights to life and to health

The lower value given to older people's lives was evident in the neglect of care homes³³ in many countries, from the lack of PPE supply³⁴ to the fact that care home deaths were not even considered in official statistics³⁵, demonstrating that the deaths of thousands of older people literally do not count.

Older people's right to life, health and autonomy have also been denied in cases where 'Do Not Resuscitate' orders have been placed on care plans without their consent³⁶, or in the requests for care home patients to forego their right to hospital treatment in case of COVID-19³⁷. Elsewhere, the bodies of older people have been abandoned by their families due to stigma and misinformation³⁸.

The use of upper age limits to exclude people from accessing scarce medical resources and in COVID-19 triage protocols³⁹ have also denied older people their right to life and to equitable access to healthcare. The use of age to determine the value of life is unethical and discriminatory.

In many cases older people were unable to access the treatment they needed for COVID-19 and other conditions⁴⁰, and were sometimes turned away from health centres without being treated.⁴¹

Freedom from violence, abuse and neglect

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the abuse and neglect that many older people often face⁴². This includes physical, financial⁴³, psychological, verbal and sexual abuse, as well as neglect⁴⁴. There has been an increase in violence, abuse and neglect in the community⁴⁵ and an increase in

²⁹ See for example [Kenya](#)

³⁰ See for example [England](#)

³¹ <http://www.commage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CommonAge-Research-Report-Final.pdf>, p.9

³² UNFPA Global Technical Brief, 'Implications of COVID-19 for Older Persons: Responding to the Pandemic', 2020, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Older_Persons_and_COVID19_final.pdf, p.9

³³ See for example [Canada](#), [Canada and others](#), [Scotland, UK](#)

³⁴ See for example [UK](#) and [Australia](#)

³⁵ See for example [UK](#)

³⁶ See for example [England](#) and [Wales](#)

³⁷ See for example [England](#)

³⁸ See for example [Pakistan](#)

³⁹ See for example [NICE](#) (UK)

⁴⁰ See for example [UK](#) and [Cameroon](#)

⁴¹ <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/press-room/press-releases/if-coronavirus-spreads-in-coxs-bazar-it-will-spiral-out-of-control-and-be-catastrophic/>

⁴² <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/neglect-and-abuse-of-older-people-around-the-world-intensified-by-covid19/>

⁴³ See for example [UK](#)

⁴⁴ See for example [Australia](#), [Canada](#), [UK](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [India](#), [South Africa](#)

⁴⁵ See for example [Canada](#)

calls by older people to violence and abuse helplines⁴⁶. Those at higher risk include older women, people with disabilities, and those with support needs.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that economic stresses caused by the COVID-19 crisis are increasing the incidence of economic abuse of older people. In Mauritius for example, Dis-Moi, a human rights network in the Indian Ocean region, reported that two women aged 85 and 87 had been assaulted for their pensions. The 85-year-old was assaulted by three men and the 87-year-old by her own son⁴⁷.

Right to an adequate standard of living and social security

Older people have also had their income and standards of living impacted by the crisis, due to insufficient provisions during lockdown⁴⁸, disruptions to social pensions payments, lack of access to cash transfers⁴⁹ or food⁵⁰. Many older people in low and middle-income Commonwealth countries rely on the informal economy to survive and lockdowns have meant losing their source of income⁵¹.

Social protection schemes can provide a safety net, but with less than 20% of older persons of retirement age receiving a pension⁵², many will face income insecurity and poverty due to unemployment and the longer-term economic impacts of the crisis. While some countries have expanded their social protection systems to respond to COVID-19, only a small proportion of those have expanded old age social protection measures.⁵³ Kenya and South Africa, for example, do guarantee pensions for all older people and have paid out additional sums to support them through the COVID-19 crisis. Cameroon has adopted a welcome 20 per cent increase in old age pensions. Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have also expanded their pension coverage during the crisis⁵⁴.

How an international convention on the rights of older people would help

The challenges outlined above have been exacerbated during the COVID pandemic but they reflect longstanding barriers to the inclusion of older people and the realisation of their rights. The absence of an international legally binding human rights instrument for older people contributes to this problem.

A new UN convention on the rights of older people would provide a solid foundation for all Commonwealth countries to ensure their national laws, policies and service delivery respect people's rights, whatever their age. It would help the world to recognise that a person's rights and value in society does not diminish with age.

The widespread use and acceptance of age as the grounds to restrict people's movement has shown how widely tolerated age discrimination is compared to other forms of discrimination. A convention

⁴⁶ See for example [Australia](#)

⁴⁷ <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/neglect-and-abuse-of-older-people-around-the-world-intensified-by-covid19/>

⁴⁸ See for example [Malawi](#)

⁴⁹ See for example [Nigeria](#)

⁵⁰ See for example [UK](#)

⁵¹ See for example [India](#) and [Pakistan](#)

⁵² UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief: 'The Impact of COVID-19 on older persons', 1 May 2020, www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/news/2020/05/covid-19-older-persons/, p.6

⁵³ <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/we-might-die-of-hunger-before-coronavirus-so-how-are-we-meant-to-stay-alive/>

⁵⁴ https://www.socialprotection.org/sites/default/files/publications_files/Responding%20to%20COVID-19%20with%20improved%20social%20protection%20for%20older%20people%20%28June%2012th%202020%29_2.pdf

would elevate scrutiny of age discrimination or other age-based measures to be taken as seriously as other prohibited grounds for discrimination such as gender, disability and race, and would help older people enjoy their full range of human rights in all parts of the world.

A convention would also help to articulate how healthcare and support in Commonwealth countries should be more responsive to a person's rights and needs across their life course. It would make it unlawful for care providers to deny older people access to health care on the basis of their age.

Recognising older people's right to be free from violence abuse and neglect in a new convention would help governments understand how to better protect them and increase the likelihood of such violence being identified, investigated, prosecuted and punished. A convention would also help ensure every older person has access to social protection and that these measures are enough to provide them with an adequate standard of living.

What the Commonwealth can do to help advance the rights of older people

The evidence is clear that people in older age face discrimination and abuses of their human rights on the basis of their age across the Commonwealth. In addition, older people are facing higher risks of complications from COVID-19 and increased socio-economic challenges exacerbated by age discrimination, denial of rights and inequalities just for being older. We can only suppress this virus and minimise its impacts if we work together across generations, communities and countries.

As recognised on the joint Commonwealth statement of 16 July⁵⁵, the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the importance of multilateral cooperation and building forward better requires all countries to realise the 2030 Agenda and the aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter. The inclusive nature of Commonwealth cooperation gives it a distinctive leadership role for strengthening partnerships among governments, agencies and civil society to realise the rights and address the needs of older people.

Commonwealth nations need to collectively respond to the Commonwealth's Secretary General's call to "recommit and regroup to make a firm stand against discrimination on age, gender or any other basis, ensuring that everyone is invited to make proposals and participate in planning how they want to see their countries and communities being built back better."

The challenges of the pandemic are also an opportunity for Commonwealth Member States to build a more age friendly Commonwealth, where we can all fully enjoy our rights, dignity and wellbeing as we get older.

Recommendations for Commonwealth institutions:

- Identify concrete steps by which the Commonwealth will implement the UN Secretary General's recommendation to build stronger legal frameworks to protect the human rights of older persons, including taking action to stop ageism and prohibit age-based discrimination.
- Give Commonwealth support for the full implementation of the WHO-initiated 'Decade of Healthy Ageing', including a global campaign to combat ageism.

⁵⁵ Commonwealth Statement on the COVID-19 pandemic, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/commonwealth-stands-together-on-the-global-response-to-coronavirus>

- Make clear and specific reference in the Commonwealth Secretariat's Strategic Plan of the need to work towards the full enjoyment of the rights of older people in an age-friendly Commonwealth in which all generations can live together in mutual support.
- In planning for CHOGM 2021, ensure that age-related discrimination, inequalities and denial of the human rights of older persons are recognized as key intergenerational cross-cutting issues and that specific time is allocated for Heads of Government to discuss it.
- Recognise older people as a stakeholder group in Commonwealth engagements with civil society
- Support the call for a Commonwealth Elders' Forum to be included in the formal arrangements for future CHOGMs.

Recommendations for Commonwealth member states:

- Recognise older people as a key risk group in the pandemic and integrate a focus on older people into COVID-19 response and recovery plan. Ensure older people's voices are heard and that they can participate in building forward better.
- Live up to the aspirations of the Commonwealth Charter by taking a stand against ageism and age discrimination.
- Ensure that public health measures adopted to respond to the pandemic are temporary, necessary, proportionate and do not discriminate based on age or any other characteristic, such as gender or disability.
- Foster social dialogue between generations to promote intergenerational contact, understanding, and solidarity to reduce ageist attitudes and stereotyping.
- Recognise older people's work and contributions to their families, communities and the economy, and ensure they are provided the support necessary to remain active and involved.
- Take concrete steps to respond to the UN Secretary General's call to accelerate efforts to strengthen national and international legal frameworks to protect the human rights of older persons.
- Ensure that health and care services, including NCD prevention, diagnosis and treatment, are accessible to older people and explicitly address their needs.
- Ensure all member states have adequate long-term care and support policies for older people in place.
- Include older people in Commonwealth plans to address violence, abuse and neglect during the pandemic and ensure prevention, response and support services for older survivors are categorized as essential.
- Address the structural causes that leave older people behind, including through investment in universal social pensions and universal health coverage.
- Ensure social safety nets to address income and food insecurity during the pandemic consider the particular needs of older people, with a specific focus on social pensions as the most effective way to provide income security for older people and their households.
- Ensure data gathering and analysis are inclusive of older people and disaggregate data by age, sex and disability at a minimum. An intersectional approach is necessary for effective policy making and to leave no one behind.
- Ensure information related to COVID-19 reaches older people and other left behind groups by using disability accessible communications mechanisms, as well as by improving the digital inclusion of older people and ensuring new digital platforms are accessible.

For further information, please visit <http://www.commage.org/>.