

7 April 2020

A statement in response to the COVID-19 crisis by the Steering Group of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP)

‘The human rights of older persons must be fully protected in the COVID-19 response’

In the global response to COVID-19, it is essential that States protect the rights of older persons on an equal basis with others without discrimination and without exception and in line with international standards.

Older persons already face particular challenges claiming their human rights globally due to widespread age discrimination and ageism. The gaps in the protection of the rights of older persons within the international human rights system are well-documented, particularly through the work of the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing since 2010ⁱ.

Older persons are at higher risk of mortality and serious illness from COVID-19ⁱⁱ. The public health, economic and social emergency triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is being intensified by ageism and discrimination against older people globallyⁱⁱⁱ. We see daily reports of alarming cruel and ageist commentaries in relation to this crisis that can cause further harm to older persons at a time when they are already facing significant risks, isolation and stress.

Efforts to address COVID-19 may exacerbate ongoing threats to the rights of older persons, for example isolation and social exclusion, and the challenges of accessing information, health and social care, and social protection. Stay-at-home and no-visitor policies to contain the spread of the virus are putting some older persons at greater risk of violence, abuse and neglect. Other older persons may be affected disproportionately due to their care and support needs, or underlying health conditions. We are concerned that this pandemic has the potential to exacerbate the entrenched inequalities and disadvantages that older persons experience daily^{iv}.

It is essential that States and other actors involved in the COVID-19 response put in place measures to ensure that older persons’ human rights are protected on an equal basis with others, without discrimination and without exception. Any decisions to restrict rights and freedoms during this public health emergency must be lawful, necessary and proportionate in line with international standards^v. Arbitrary or discriminatory approaches or decisions on the basis of age are unacceptable. We are also witnessing alarming cases of neglect of older persons living in institutions and the failure to provide them with necessary health, social and palliative care. These practices risk undermining older persons’ right to life and, by implication, rank their lives as being of lesser value than others’.

Decisions about the allocation and prioritisation of scarce medical resources must be made on the basis of medical and scientific evidence and not on non-medical grounds such as age or disability^{vi}. This will support an ethical and more efficient public health response for all affected by this disease.

The views and experiences of older persons themselves must be heard and taken into account in the planning and implementation of responses to COVID-19 that affect them.

Ageism cannot and must not be tolerated.

The impact of COVID-19 and the measures taken in response on older persons’ human rights is proof that a new UN convention is urgently needed to provide the legal clarity and guarantees necessary to fully protect the rights of older persons worldwide.

About GAROP

The Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) is a network of over 350 civil society organisations from 80 countries working together so that all older people can live free from discrimination and are able to fully enjoy their rights. We believe a UN convention on the rights of older persons is essential for older people to fully enjoy their rights.

ⁱ <https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/>; <https://social.un.org/ageing-working-group/documents/OHCHRAAnalyticalOutcomePaperonOldePersonsAugust2012.doc>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.helpage.org/newsroom/latest-news/studies-confirm-risks-to-older-people-from-coronavirus/>; <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/statements/statement-older-people-are-at-highest-risk-from-covid-19,-but-all-must-act-to-prevent-community-spread>

ⁱⁱⁱ [GAROP 'In Our Own Words' report](#)

^{iv} <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25748&LangID=E>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/19/human-rights-dimensions-covid-19-response>

^v <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/1984/07/Siracusa-principles-ICCPR-legal-submission-1985-eng.pdf>; <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fd1f.html>; <https://www.refworld.org/docid/45139c394.html>.

^{vi} <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25748&LangID=E>