

Hidden workforce:

The unique contributions of older women to the global economy

Introduction

Older women form an integral part of the global economy, but their work often goes unpaid, unrecorded and unrecognised - they are a hidden workforce. As they reach older age, the gendered inequalities that women have faced throughout their life course are compounded. Better access to social protection would reduce poverty and inequalities, build resilience, and strengthen intergenerational support networks.

Objectives

To formulate recommendations on the unique contributions of older women, drawing from Age International policy and research insights.

Methodology

Drawing from two main sources:

'Older women: the hidden workforce' (2021)

- ▶ A literature review of global evidence and data on older women's labour force participation, care work, and access to social protection.
- ▶ A qualitative study of older women in Ethiopia and Malawi, focusing on their access to decent work and economic rights.

'Age inclusive social protection in fragile settings' (2025)

- ▶ A literature review of global evidence and data on adaptive and shock-responsive social protection (ASRSP).
- ▶ Examples from HelpAge partners, including Ukraine and Tanzania.

Almaz, 62, Ethiopia, manages her own small business and volunteers with other older people in the community as well as taking care of her family and their home.

Key findings

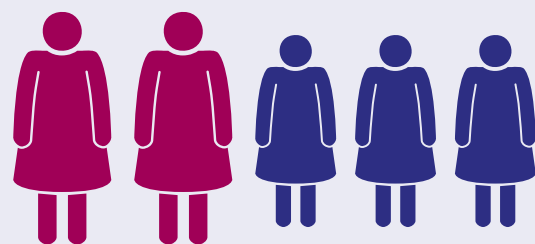


The unpaid care work of older women

The unpaid care work of women is essential to healthy economies, but is often not included in economic measures. Older women's contributions, in particular, are entirely overlooked.

Data on the care economy focuses on older women as people that need care. This obscures the diversity and complexity of older women's lives and the contributions they make.

Pre-COVID-19, older women globally were doing 4.3 hours per day unpaid care and domestic work on average (men of all ages average one hour 23 minutes).



Older women in the workforce and the informal economy

In low and middle-income countries, pre-COVID-19, around one in seven women aged 65+ were in the labour force, and in Sub Saharan Africa, two in five older women.

The proportion of older women in the labour force globally has increased since 1990, but has reduced for older men.

Globally, the youngest and the oldest workers are more likely than other age groups to be in informal employment. In the poorest contexts, women are more likely than men to be informal workers.



Older women's exclusion from financial and social protection systems

Around 20 per cent of older people in low-income countries have access to a pension - and older women are less likely to have access to pensions than men.

Access to contributory pensions is usually tied to formal employment and contribution histories, and women are disproportionately excluded from these systems. HelpAge research in Ukraine found that women's pensions are around 30% lower than men's.

Lessons learned

Older women have multiple roles in their communities - as street sellers, craft makers, farmers, counsellors, brick breakers, community health workers, cleaners, community volunteers, educators, and as grandmothers and carers. They form an integral part of the global economy, and carry a disproportionate burden of care work.

The support older women receive for their multiple roles is falling short, leaving large numbers of older women in poverty, especially widows. They need to be better recognised, supported and protected in their formal and informal work, community, and caring roles.

Social pensions can help to tackle the cumulative impacts of a lifetime of gendered inequalities for women.

"The support older women receive for their multiple roles is falling short."

Policy recommendations

Under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), governments have committed to achieving gender equality (SDG5) and promoting decent work (SDG8) by 2030.

To achieve this, and leave no one behind, governments and other stakeholders should:



1. Recognise and measure the contributions that older women make to the economy

Ensure that national legislation protects against age and sex discrimination in the workplace, and that it recognises and supports the role of carers.

Ensure that older women's roles are better captured by data. Use this data to better represent the contributions older women make.

2. Promote universal, gender-responsive social protection throughout the life course

Social pensions can support older women in the crucial roles they play, and help to address gendered inequalities in older age.

Social protection systems must be age-inclusive, shock-responsive, gender transformative and developed in collaboration with older women to respond to their needs.

3. Enable older women's equal participation in decision-making and the labour force

Women's greater access to, and equal pay for, formal sector jobs will increase older women's lifetime incomes.

Older women's equal participation in public life, from community to national levels, challenges the gender norms that marginalise their contributions.