

Older Women

The world population is growing older and the majority of older people are women. Globally, women live longer than men. In 2013, the global sex ratio was 85 men per 100 women in the age group 60 years or over and only 62 men per 100 women in the age group 80 years or over ([United Nations, 2013](#)).

Women tend to live longer and they often experience a number of specific circumstances related to old age and gender. Older women are more likely than men to be widowed, to live alone, to live more years in poor health & with disabilities, to deal with financial problems or live in poverty, and they are usually more vulnerable to discrimination.

Widowhood is more frequent in women and many of them live alone, especially in developed countries. Almost half of women living independently live alone ([United Nations, 2013](#)) while only a minority of older men do it. However, older women tend to have stronger social networks than men ([UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012](#)). Many older women live with family members, like grandchildren or sick relatives, caring for them. They play an essential role as caregivers, and it is sometimes involves living in a greater risk of mental and physical illness and financial pressures.

A higher incidence of poverty is found in older women. They often did not have access to the formal labour market in their working age years or did not contribute to a pension scheme because of gender discrimination and providing caring roles. As a result they are more likely to live in poverty in later life. In 2007, WHO found, for example, that particular groups of older women were more at risk of poverty in all countries, including those who are widowed, divorced or with disabilities, and those caring for grandchildren and children orphaned by AIDS ([UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012](#)). Also, older women are less likely to have land or assets, and access to credit is usually very difficult for them.

Older women face both age and gender discrimination. Women's low status and vulnerability starts from childhood and increases as they go through the ageing process ([HelpAge International, 2010](#)). Many older women, for example, have very low level of education as a consequence of denied access to school in childhood or having to drop out prematurely. Often, they have poor access to jobs and little or no experience in the formal labour market. In fact most older women's work is unpaid and unrecognised. Sometimes, especially when they do not get a pension, older women have a triple workload – doing paid work, carrying out time-consuming domestic responsibilities in the home, and looking after other family members ([HelpAge International, 2010](#)). In some developing countries older women suffer direct discrimination such as denial of the right to own and inherit property, or the extreme case of witchcraft allegations in some African countries.

In terms of health, older women have different health and morbidity patterns than men. Despite the fact of living longer than men, they live more years with chronic health problems and have higher levels of disability. Multiple pregnancies and inadequate support in childbirth, as well as inequalities earlier in life, such as poor access to health care, and lower educational and income levels, contribute to health problems in older age ([UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012](#)).

Apart from discrimination, inequality or poverty, it is important to highlight the very positive contribution older women make to society. "Far from being a social or economic burden... older women should be viewed as a potential resource for society... Older women play key roles in their families and communities... Keeping older women healthy fit and active not only benefits the individual but also makes sound economic and social sense..." ([WHO, 2009](#)).

Find out more about older women on the HelpAge International [website](#)