

# Protection concerns of older women in Jordan

*Policy brief*



## Introduction

The humanitarian sector has made significant progress at the global policy level to recognise the inclusion of different groups who face specific and additional risks. This is key to delivering impartial and accountable assistance<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals make an explicit commitment to gender equality and to the inclusion and participation of older people. To ensure the successful implementation of these global commitments, the rights of women and men at all stages of their lives must be considered and realised.

Although women's empowerment, the protection of groups with specific and enhanced risks, and the rights of older people are being explicitly addressed in both the Jordanian Government policies and the Humanitarian Response Plan for the Syria Crisis, neither the diverse experiences, nor the concerns of older women, have been fully taken into account.

This invisibility of older women's rights, experiences and needs, and the lack of specific frameworks to protect them may well impede the implementation of both national policies and the humanitarian commitments made at national, regional and global levels.

This policy brief analyses how older women's protection concerns remain invisible in the humanitarian response to the Syria Crisis and the wider policy framework in Jordan, and offers recommendations on how to ensure their meaningful inclusion in both.

## Key protection concerns of older women

Although there is a growing commitment among Jordanian policy makers<sup>2</sup> and humanitarian stakeholders<sup>3</sup> to address the protection concerns of the groups facing specific and additional risks (both refugee and host communities), the experiences of older women remain largely invisible despite often facing both gender and age-based discrimination. One of the reasons for this is the lack of consistent gender, age and disability disaggregated data which consequently may hide the underlying structural discrimination based on these intersecting characteristics. As a result, the voices of older women, especially older women with disabilities, are rarely considered in formulating new, and ensuring better, inclusion in the existing, humanitarian interventions and national policy frameworks.

Efforts to ensure protection of those most at risk can only be realised if they are underpinned by evidence – through gender, age and disability disaggregated data – which would allow for better understanding of the diverse experiences of women and men at all stages of their lives, improve humanitarian programming and strengthen the accountability of the government and other stakeholders to its population.



### a. Intersectionality and discrimination

The intersection of gender inequalities with other characteristics, such as disability, poverty or marital status can accumulate over a lifetime and be exacerbated in older age.

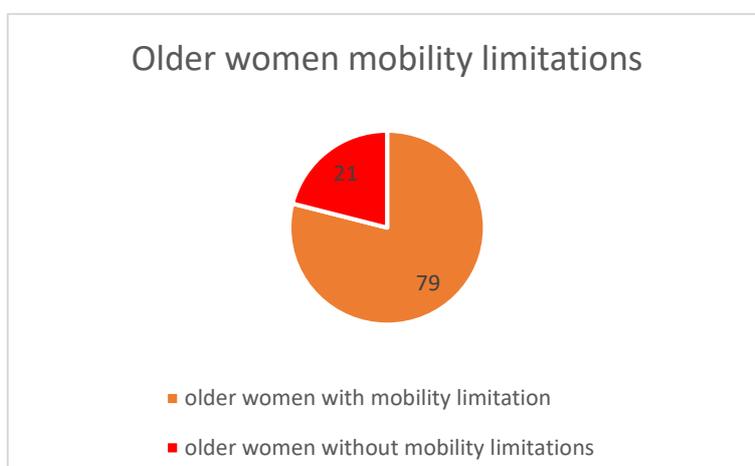
To ensure meaningful inclusion, it is crucial to go beyond the siloed 'vulnerable groups' approach. Policies and programmes focusing on older people often fail to acknowledge gender dimensions of ageing. On the other hand, interventions aimed at promoting and protecting women's rights rarely take into account how gender-based discrimination can be accumulated and manifested throughout older age. Lack of analysis of how age, gender, disability and other factors interact with each other to create specific protection concerns risks leaving older women invisible to the policy makers.

## b. Multiple barriers of access

Older women often face barriers that prevent them from seeking, accessing and benefiting from the available services. HelpAge's survey<sup>4</sup> revealed that these barriers are multiple and include communication, attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers.

- 79% of older women reported mobility limitations which may impede their physical access to services

The majority of older women may have difficulty to physically access the needed services, especially when located far away from their homes, in inaccessible buildings and without appropriate public transportation available. Although these gaps have been recognised in the National Strategy for Senior Citizens, the implementation plan should also include temporary measures to facilitate immediate access and ensure holistic accessibility that goes beyond addressing only the physical barriers.



- 72% of older women surveyed by HelpAge cannot read or write (compared to 35% of older men)
- 72% of older women reported at least some difficulty seeing, even if wearing glasses
- 48% of older women reported at least some difficulty hearing, even if using a hearing aid

Furthermore, Department of Statistics records for 2015 show that 52% of older women are illiterate (compared to 17% of older men). Low literacy rates seriously limit older women's ability to obtain readable information, including information about the available services, and to participate in social, economic and political activities. For those older women with differing communication needs that manage to access services, the lack of appropriate and accessible communication methods and materials inevitably further impact their ability to use and benefit from the required assistance.

In fact, 61% of Syrian older women reported not being able to receive humanitarian assistance. Both Syrian and Jordanian older women also faced attitudinal barriers and the majority did not feel empowered to provide feedback and demand adequate support:

- 69% of Syrian older women and 48% of Jordanian older women do not know how to give feedback to service providers
- 85% of Syrian older women and 83% of Jordanian older women do not give feedback to service providers

- 72% of Syrian older women and 70% of Jordanian older women did not feel listened to by the service providers

Humanitarian interventions and social services must go a step further in recognising the specific barriers faced by older women to ensure their meaningful access, understood not only as the ability to reach services but also the ability to obtain and benefit from them on an equal basis with others.

Although the Government is taking positive steps in addressing accessibility issues, their accessibility plans as laid out in the National Strategy for Senior Citizens should be amended to include addressing communications, attitudinal and structural barriers, in addition to the physical ones. Efforts should also be made to provide information about available services in formats accessible to older women with disabilities. Simultaneously, humanitarian response plans and interventions need to facilitate an immediate access to assistance for older women by improving their outreach, transportation and targeting of older women who are otherwise unable to reach the services.

### **c. Violence, abuse and neglect**

It is estimated that less than 3% of women survivors of violence in Jordan report the violence they experience<sup>5</sup>. The additional taboo and stigma that often surrounds violence faced by older women is likely to lead to further under-reporting. Indeed, the WHO estimates that only 1 in 24 cases of elder abuse is reported globally<sup>6</sup>. The lack of data and knowledge on the types, drivers and perpetrators of violence experienced by older women, may lead to a lack of appropriate prevention and response strategies.

A UN Women report in Jordan found that factors that reduce the likelihood of legal service providers to support a GBV case include a belief that making a complaint opposes local values<sup>7</sup>. This is significant in a culture where there is a prevailing belief in respect for older people and, consequently, a belief that they are usually protected at family and community level. In addition, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) for Jordan found that factors that increase the likelihood of exposure to violence among women include poverty, low levels of education and non-employment<sup>8</sup>. In HelpAge's survey 72% of older women reported not being able to read or write with 80% not previously employed, which plausibly puts them at an increased risk of violence and abuse. In addition, 53% of older women reported being widowed (compared to 7% of older men) which might further increase their risk of financial abuse, neglect and non-intimate partner violence.

Lack of support from the family and community, lack of knowledge about the available services and the right to safety and protection among women may lead to violence lasting over many years, including in older age. Older women often experience violence and abuse (driven by either age or gender discrimination, or the intersection of the two) in silence, unaware not only of their rights, but also of the available support services.

Although the Protection against Family Violence Law<sup>9</sup> implicitly includes older women and men by focusing on domestic violence in general, there are no specific provisions that would facilitate older survivors' access to justice. Such provisions are included within the National Strategy for Senior Citizens, but they are limited in that they do not acknowledge gender dimensions of elder abuse. While the Jordan Response Plan (JRP) includes outcomes on addressing gender-based violence, a gap analysis conducted by the SGBV Working Group recognised older survivors as one of the under-served groups by the current services<sup>10</sup>. Older women that did access GBV support services in 2018 reported different types of violence and abuse with psychological/emotional abuse (73%) and physical assault (22%) being most common. The perpetrators most often included current or former intimate partner (64%) and other family members

(21%)<sup>11</sup>. This data illustrates that older women experience different types of violence and abuse, and that this violence often happens at home.

Tackling violence, abuse and neglect of older women requires a multi-disciplinary, integrated approach that includes, as a minimum, strengthened legal frameworks, adequate support services and increased awareness among older women of their rights. Current government efforts would be even more effective by taking steps to ensure that the implementation plan for tackling elder abuse under the National Strategy for Senior Citizens includes gender analysis and outlines strategies for protection of older women. These efforts should go in parallel with the amendments to the Protection against Family Violence Law to include provisions specific to older women and men.

The Humanitarian Response Plan should also adopt a life-course approach to GBV. The services for older survivors should be strengthened to include targeted interventions and ensure that the existing services are accessible to older women. This may include communication and outreach materials that feature older women, mobile services for women who are unable to access centralised services, and age-appropriate women's safe spaces.

Given the multiple barriers that older women face – shame, stigma, normalisation of violence, lack of awareness of services – there is an urgent need to design services that are accessible to girls and women across the entirety of their lives, including to those that face compound levels of exclusion on the basis of their age, marital status, disability, literacy levels, etc.

#### **d. Participation and community life**

Despite a general perception of a respectful attitude towards older people in Jordan<sup>12</sup>, for many older women (and men) the experience of ageing also means isolation, a lack of decision making power and autonomy, and diminishing roles and participation within the community.

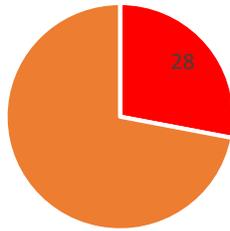
In the survey conducted by HelpAge, 41% of interviewed family members thought that there was no role for older women in the community. This is confirmed by the perception of older women themselves who reported limited communication and participation in family and social activities.

- 69% of Syrian and 41% of Jordanian older women said that they do not participate in social activities
- 56% of Syrian and 36% of Jordanian older women reported limited communication with family and community
- 63% of Syrian and 48% of Jordanian older women reported feeling lonely

The changes in social roles can also be observed at family level where a significant proportion of older women feel they are being deprived of their autonomy and independence. The data was similar for both older women and men, indicating that age, rather than gender, is a likely determining factor in the loss of independence and autonomy in later life.

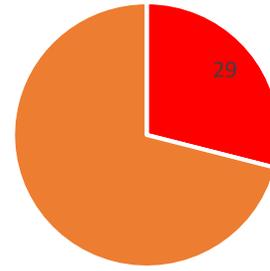
- 29% of older women do not make independent decisions about their finance
- 28% of older women do not make independent decisions about leaving the house

### Decision - making about leaving the house



Older women don't make independent decision about leaving the house

### Decision - making about finance



Older women don't make independent decision about their finance

The changing family and community roles, especially in the face of the Syria crisis and additional pressures that many households face, combined with lifelong gender inequalities, may also increase the burden of unpaid care that older women provide. Indeed, globally older women continue to do more than twice the amount of unpaid care as men, while often at the same time depending on others for support.

- 25% of older women (both Syrian and Jordanian) said they depend on others for support <sup>13</sup>

The changing caring roles (both as givers and recipients of care) can be a significant barrier to participation in community life and might impede older women's ability to fully realise and claim their rights.

There is a need for a dedicated strategy to engage humanitarian actors, service providers and municipalities with older women in order to increase their participation and role in the community life. Inter-generational initiatives are also needed in order to reduce older women's isolation and raise awareness of their rights among family members and a wider community. These interventions must run in parallel with improvements to the policy framework to ensure a sustainable inclusion of older women.

## The visibility of older women's rights in key Jordanian policy frameworks

The Syrian refugee crisis has brought a set of new challenges to an already stretched Jordanian welfare system. Although Jordan's social protection system is well-developed, challenges existed even before the crisis, including high rates of poverty, violence against women and insufficient services for older people and people with disabilities<sup>14</sup>.



The Government has since made positive steps towards ensuring the inclusion of different groups facing enhanced risks, including specific objectives under key policy frameworks outlined below and the use of sex and age disaggregated data by the Department of Statistics, but the older women's rights are not consistently reflected across these different initiatives. The explicit inclusion of older women (and men) is also important given Jordan's ageing population. According to the 2015 census, older people (60+) make up 5.4% of the total population (out of which 49% are older women)<sup>15</sup>, and their proportion is projected to increase to 15.8% by 2050<sup>16</sup>.

**a. The Comprehensive National Plan for Human Rights 2016-2025** - The National Plan for Human Rights recognises the rights of older people and the rights of women under specific goals. However, the Plan adopts a vulnerable groups' approach which addresses the rights of women, older people and people with disabilities separately. This may result in other policies being designed for these 'vulnerable groups' in silos, without taking into account intersecting inequalities. Furthermore, the focus on either women or older people may lead to older women, who experience both gender- and age-based discrimination, slipping through the cracks of the system, not being able to access services tailored to their specific needs, nor to enjoy and fully realise their rights.

- The Comprehensive National Plan would be further strengthened by ensuring that the gender, age and disability disaggregated data is collected, and the intersectional analysis embedded in the implementation plan for each of the identified groups that face specific risks.

**b. Jordan's vision 2025** - Vision 2025 sets out specific social and developmental outcomes to increase the productivity, training and creation of jobs to meet the needs of the most marginalized groups, particularly women, youth and people with disabilities<sup>17</sup>. Although the Implementation Framework includes an objective on supporting the care for the elderly, the focus is on institutional care and does not take into account specific concerns of older women. Failure to explicitly include older women not only threatens the full realisation of women's rights at all stages of their lives, but also the achievement of the Vision given the ageing Jordanian population (projected to increase to 8.6% by 2030, and almost 16% by 2050)<sup>18</sup>.

- It is therefore imperative that the Vision 2025 reflects the ageing Jordanian population and explicitly targets older women, especially under its Society and Citizen Priority Initiatives.
- Furthermore, the relevant indicators tracking the implementation of the Vision should be disaggregated by gender, age and disability to be able to track how women and men of all abilities and at all stages of their lives benefit from these initiatives.

**c. The national strategy for senior citizens 2018-2022** - The National Strategy for Senior Citizens is a positive step towards ensuring the rights of older people, committing the Jordanian government to participation of older people in decision-making and civil society, supporting them to lead an active life and facilitating access to services. However, the lack of gender analysis is likely to impede its full implementation and the realisation of rights for older women. It does not take into account the specific barriers that older women face such as low levels of literacy, lack of autonomy over decision making at home, and reliance on humanitarian assistance as the main source of income, especially for older Syrian women. Finally, more needs to be done to raise awareness of older women and men, as well as the wider population, on the existence of the

National Strategy for Senior Citizens. Indeed, in the survey conducted by HelpAge only 6% of older people reported being aware of the Strategy, and the rights and entitlements laid out within it. This lack of knowledge means older women and men are unlikely to seek redress or challenge authorities to ensure the strategy is fully implemented.

- The National Council for Family Affairs<sup>19</sup> should therefore strengthen its efforts to raise awareness of the National Strategy among the Jordanian population (including the refugee population) and the specific provisions for older women and men outlined within it.
- Furthermore, the indicators tracking progress of the Strategy implementation should be disaggregated and analysed by gender, age and disability to ensure that older women and older women with disabilities are benefiting from the support on an equal basis with older men.

#### **d. Jordan response plan for the Syria crisis 2018-2020 -**

Although the Jordan Response Plan has a specific objective of responding to the needs and improving access to services for older people, it lacks gender analysis and an intentional focus on older women, including older women with disabilities. Vulnerability Assessments conducted as part of the JRP in 2015 and 2018 recognised that factors such as gender, age and disabilities have affected different refugees' ability to access assistance and services, but more needs to be done to ensure that older women's specific concerns are visible in the needs analysis and the response. Lack of data disaggregated by gender, age and disability can hide discrimination and is a major constraint to developing policies that respond to realities of women's entire lives.

- Future Response Plans would be significantly improved by having the disaggregated data embedded across the different sectors to ensure that both age and gender analysis informs the outcomes targeting older people and women.
- Humanitarian Inclusion Standards should be implemented to ensure the accessibility of services and be used as an accountability and decision making tool for funders

Legal frameworks, national policies and humanitarian interventions need to be strengthened and implemented to guarantee the protection of rights of older women, including older women facing intersecting inequalities, such as those with disabilities, widows, living in poverty or survivors of violence, abuse and neglect.

# Recommendations

## Humanitarian stakeholders:

- Gender, age and disability disaggregated data should be embedded across the different sectors of the Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis, and ensure that gender, age and disability analysis informs the outcomes targeting older people and women.
- Humanitarian Inclusion Standards should be implemented to ensure the comprehensive accessibility of humanitarian services and be used as an accountability and decision making tool for funders.
- The support for older survivors should be strengthened to include targeted interventions and ensure that the existing services are accessible to older women.
- Humanitarian Response Plans and interventions need to facilitate an immediate access to assistance for older women by improving their outreach, transportation and targeting of older women who are unable to reach the services.
- Inclusion and Protection advisers focusing on gender, disability and age (including older age) should be involved in the development of key humanitarian policies and response plans to ensure the experiences of older women are actively taken into account and not retrospectively added on to already existing interventions.

## Policy makers:

- The rights of older women should be explicitly addressed and protected in key policy frameworks, including the Comprehensive National Plan for Human Rights.
- Gender, age and disability disaggregated indicators should be embedded across all key policy frameworks to track and analyse how women and men of all abilities and at all stages of their lives, including in older age, benefit from these initiatives.
- The implementation plan for Jordan's Vision 2025 should reflect the ageing population and explicitly target older women, particularly under its Society and Citizen Priority Initiatives.
- The National Council for Family Affairs should strengthen its efforts to raise awareness of the National Strategy for Senior Citizens and the specific provisions for older women and men outlined within it.
- The government should take steps to ensure that the implementation plan for tackling elder abuse under the National Strategy for Senior Citizens includes gender analysis and outlines strategies for protection of older women.
- The Protection against Family Violence Law should be amended to include specific provisions for older women and men.
- The National Strategy for Senior Citizens should include a dedicated and costed plan for engaging humanitarian actors, service providers and municipalities with older women in order to increase their participation and role in the community life.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. World Humanitarian Summit, Inclusion Charter, the Global Compact on Refugees, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Principles of inclusion are e.g. embedded in the Comprehensive Plan for Human Rights 2016-2025, among other policy instruments.

<sup>3</sup> This includes, among others, UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity approach, ECHO's and UN OCHA's Gender and Age Markers, etc

<sup>4</sup> The data can be accessed following this link: <https://bit.ly/2zsTlal> (survey report forthcoming)

<sup>5</sup> Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2018-2020

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/elder-abuse>

<sup>7</sup> UN Women (2015), Strengthening the Jordanian Justice Sector's response to cases of Violence Against Women

<sup>8</sup> According to the DHS data from Jordan (2007 and 2012) as quoted in: UN Women (2015), Strengthening the Jordanian Justice Sector's response to cases of Violence Against Women

<sup>9</sup> Law no. 15/2017

<sup>10</sup> SGBV Sub Working Group Gap Analysis 2017/18

<sup>11</sup> The data shared is only from reported cases, and is in no way representative of the total incidence or prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Jordan. This consolidated statistical report is generated exclusively by SGBV service providers who use the GBV Information Management System for data collection in the implementation of SGBV response activities in a limited number of locations across Jordan that target the population affected by the Syria crisis, and with the consent of survivors. This information is confidential and cannot be reproduced without the authorization of the GBVIMS Task Force. For further information, contact GBV IMS Task force co-chairs: Emilie [Page\\_page@unhcr.org](mailto:Page_page@unhcr.org) and Pamela [Dicamillo\\_dicamillo@unfpa.org](mailto:Dicamillo_dicamillo@unfpa.org)

<sup>12</sup> National Strategy for Senior Citizens acknowledges the predominance of religious and moral attitudes towards older people in Jordan

<sup>13</sup> Age International (2018), Who cares? Why older women's economic empowerment matters for the Sustainable Development Goals

<sup>14</sup> Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2018-2020

<sup>15</sup> According to the 2015 Census conducted by Department of Statistics, as cited in: National Strategy for Senior Citizens 2018-2022

<sup>16</sup> HelpAge Global Age Watch Index, Jordan Country Profile

<sup>17</sup> The Jordanian National Commission for Women (2017), Jordanian National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2021

<sup>18</sup> HelpAge Global Age Watch Index, Jordan Country Profile

<sup>19</sup> The body responsible for the implementation of the National Strategy

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**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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