



Applying the UNHCR age, gender and diversity policy to **OLDER PERSONS**

An older Rohingya refugee watches over his great-granddaughter at Kutupalong refugee settlement, Bangladesh.

This tipsheet is one of a series of six aimed at applying the specificities of the AGD approach. It highlights the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as age, gender, disability, religion, ethnicity, physical appearance, etc.) combine, overlap, or intersect. It draws our attention to the impact of various overlapping social identities or intersectionality¹ on our work with groups of concern to UNHCR; more specifically, persons with disabilities, youth, children and adolescents, minorities and indigenous peoples, older persons and LGBTI+ persons. This tipsheet should be read in conjunction with UNHCR Need to Know Guidance [Working with older persons in forced displacement](#), which includes additional information for the implementation of these recommendations.

Who are we talking about?

At the moment, there is no United Nations standard definition or numerical criterion to identify older people. While in many contexts the age of 60 and above is used to refer to the older population, families and communities often use other socio-cultural referents to define age, including family status (being grandparents), physical appearance (having grey hair and wrinkles), or living with age-related health conditions. In addition, the impact of forced displacement may cause displaced populations to “age” faster than settled populations. Therefore, many challenges normally associated with old age will be apparent in forcibly displaced persons who are in their 40s and 50s.

¹ **Intersectionality** is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (e.g. gender, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, height, etc.) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality identifies advantages and disadvantages that are felt by people due to a combination of factors (Oxford English Dictionary).

Why does it matter?

Older persons are a relevant, distinct, and heterogeneous group that requires intentional and specific attention and visualization. UNHCR is committed to addressing the protection and assistance needs of older persons of concern, as outlined in the [Age, Gender and Diversity Policy](#) and the [Policy on Older Refugees](#).

Forced displacement situations pose serious challenges to older persons and yet their rights, needs as well as their contributions remain largely overlooked. Older persons may have chronic health issues and require specific nutrition interventions, and may be at heightened risk of violence, including GBV, discrimination and exclusion. In addition, age and gender often intersect, meaning that older persons may face very different situations from one another depending on their gender identity; the social and cultural roles assigned to their gender in their community may accentuate inequalities and further discriminate against older women. Finally, an estimated 46 per cent of older persons have a disability and face additional barriers to their access and enjoyment of assistance, protection and solutions, that tend to be exacerbated in situations of forced displacement.

At the same time, it is critical not to frame the experiences of older persons in terms of frailty and dependency, but to also recognize the vital support, guidance and knowledge they continue to provide to families and communities including in forced displacement settings. For example, older persons are often critical caregivers for children who have either lost their parents or become separated from them during forced displacement.

What can UNHCR do?

Older persons must be able to access and benefit from humanitarian assistance on the same terms as other members of the population. This requires the combination of inclusive programmes and targeted interventions. Below is a list of actions required if older persons are to be meaningfully included in UNHCR interventions. Actions are organized around the three key areas of engagement of the 2018 AGD Policy.

AGD inclusive programming

- Collect data disaggregated by sex, age, and disability, as well as data relating to the specific risks and barriers to access and participation that older persons may face. [International standards](#) recommend using age cohorts that capture the diversity of experiences faced by older persons, as follows: 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80+;
- Develop data collection and communication methodologies that are gender-sensitive and accessible to all older persons, regardless of their gender; train staff and partners on how to best communicate and collect information from older persons and adapt data collection tools and methods where necessary;
- Construct indicators to measure progress and change to show how the needs, barriers and participation of older persons are being addressed;
- Use data to inform the UNHCR operation management cycle, for example by applying recommended actions from the [Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities](#) to ensure the inclusion and protection of older women and men throughout.

- Use the online [IASC Gender with Age Marker tool](#) during programme design and monitoring to assess whether programmes meaningfully consider gender and age differences among older persons of concern to UNHCR.

Accountability to affected people

- Sensitize older persons on their rights, entitlement and responsibilities, including how to hold humanitarian actors to account.
- Enable older persons to participate in all UNHCR programmes, across all phases of the operation management cycle including at decision-making level.
- Identify and remove the attitudinal, environmental, communication and institutional barriers older persons face when trying to access humanitarian services and programmes.
- Seek the advice of, and collaborate with, older people's associations (OPAs) to better engage with older persons in the affected community.
- Develop the capacity of older persons and OPAs to best contribute and benefit from humanitarian assistance and protection.
- Engage directly with older persons on identification of their needs, capacities, risks, including the risk of gender-based violence (GBV), and constraints, including in relation to humanitarian assistance.
- Ensure that information and communication is accessible for all and take into account the specific interventions that older persons may require to have equal access due to impairments they may live with, including possible hearing, visual and other impairments.
- Identify and mitigate the protection risks, including the risk of GBV that older person's face, as well as the factors underlying these protection risks, such as community attitudes and barriers to accessing services;
- Design feedback and response mechanisms that can be understood and accessed by older persons.
- To the extent possible, support older persons to submit feedback on their own behalf.
- Act on the feedback of older persons, validate their experiences and adapt interventions in a way that respects their safety, confidentiality, dignity and rights.

Gender equality²

- Facilitate the equal and meaningful participation of all older persons in decision-making and leadership structures, recognizing that it often takes sustained, safe, specific initiatives and support to ensure that older women can access and meaningfully participate in these structures.
- Identify older women and ensure that they hold personal documentation, especially in the case of widows, who are at a higher risk of not holding documentation.
- Mitigate any attitudinal, information and physical barriers to older women's access to and control over food, core relief items and cash-based interventions (e.g. raising awareness to address gender and age inequalities at household level; delivery mechanisms that include outreach procedures for older women who live in isolation; providing alternative means of delivery for older women with low digital literacy).

² In line with the Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, although the Commitments focus on women and girls, attention is also paid to gender inequalities that affect men and boys as well as other genders.

- Identify and mitigate physical, information and attitudinal barriers that may prevent older women from accessing sexual and reproductive healthcare (e.g. addressing misconceptions of family members or medical staff on their right to access these services; providing information in accessible formats; planning outreach mechanisms for older women with less access to health facilities, etc. where such services are available).
- Ensure that older women, especially widows, are included in initiatives to address housing, land and property rights issues.
- Ensure that older women have access to livelihood opportunities by mitigating the various barriers they might face (e.g. attitudinal, information, physical barriers), especially in the case of widows and those living alone.
- Raise awareness among staff and within communities of the warning signs of elder abuse,³ gender-based violence (GBV) and other forms of violence faced by older persons.
- Ensure safe and equal access to GBV prevention and response services, including mechanisms for reporting GBV incidents noting that older persons may experience more difficulties accessing specialized services and referral mechanisms that rely on the use of digital technology and may face attitudinal barriers when disclosing situations of violence or abuse, including GBV, to staff.⁴

Key resources

International legal and policy framework

- [UN Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#), 2002
- [United Nations Principles for Older Persons](#), 1991

International guidance

- [Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities](#), 2018
- [Protecting Older People in Emergencies: Good Practice Guide](#), 2012

UNHCR policy

- [Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) Policy](#), 2018
- [Policy on Older Refugees](#), 2000
- [UNHCR Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence](#), 2020

³ The mistreatment of older persons is sometimes referred to as “elder abuse”. It is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person”.

⁴ [UNHCR - UNHCR Policy on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation and Response to Gender-based Violence, 2020 \(PDF\)](#)

UNHCR guidance

- [UNHCR Gender Equality Toolkit, 2020](#)
- [Need to Know Guidance: Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement, 2013](#)
- [UNHCR Emergency Handbook - Older Persons](#)
- [UNHCR Community-Based Protection - Community of Practices](#). The website includes a [section on Diversity & Inclusion dedicated to Older Persons](#)

*This resource is a living document that will be updated to reflect ongoing UNHCR work on the inclusion of older persons and application of the resource in the field. UNHCR colleagues and partners can send questions and feedback to **UNHCR HQ Community-Based Protection Unit**, at hqts00@unhcr.org.*