

*Statement by the Women's Representative in the delegation of The Netherlands in the  
General Assembly of the United Nations, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2003*

## **Gender and age: a challenge that matters**

Older women count. That is the slogan on the purple t-shirts. It is Madrid, April 2002. Just before the start of the UN Second World Assembly on Ageing. I am there for the NGO Forum on ageing. Here, in Madrid, older women are making themselves seen and heard. The slogan on their t-shirts takes me to the theme of the statement I am honoured to be making here today. I will focus on the interrelatedness between gender and age. I will talk about the impact of age, age discrimination and the ageing society on the position of women, older women in particular. So let me stress the need to put these issues high on our agenda.

Mr. Chairperson. Strategies on the advancement of women have developed significantly in the past few decades. First we talked about empowering women. Then the notion of gender came into the picture. Now the emphasis is on diversity and intersectionality: the interrelatedness of gender with, for instance, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, class and age. Today, I appeal for more focus on the interrelatedness between gender and age, and for more research on the subject.

### **Age discrimination**

Gender and age is not only about the position of the girl child and older women. Age can also act as an inappropriate, even discriminating criterion at other stages of life. As a consequence, women's qualities and capacities are not used to the full. Take reintegration into professional life. In my country, the Netherlands, women wanting to return to work after having taken care of children, have far less chance of reintegrating if they are over the age of forty. And take actresses and TV presenters. They gradually disappear from our screens once they have reached the age of thirty-five.

Governments and business alike should take a stand worldwide. They should fight the forms of age discrimination that affect women most severely. Within the European Union we are slowly setting new standards. Member states are now implementing European legislation to combat age discrimination in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The EU is currently implementing article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, which aims amongst others to combat age discrimination in the workforce.

## **The contribution of older women**

Mr. Chairperson. Age matters. Not only in the individual lives of women, but also in the composition of the global population. Never before in the history of mankind have people lived so long. And remember, among old people, women are a huge majority.<sup>2</sup> Women over 80 outnumber men of the same age by a factor of almost two to one. That is why it is encouraging that the WHO's Active Ageing policy framework devotes so much explicit attention to gender and ageing.<sup>3</sup> Also, governments can make a difference and give more support to the work of organisations for older women.<sup>4</sup>

## **Instruments for poverty reduction**

Mr. Chairperson. Poverty is one of the biggest threats confronting older women, especially widows. This impacts their health, their living conditions and their participation in community activities. To eliminate poverty, action needs to be taken not only for the poor women of today. Future poverty needs to be tackled too. That calls for a sustained

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<sup>2</sup> In 2002, 10% of the world population is older than 60 years. It is expected that by 2050 this percentage will double: 21% of the world population is expected to be older than 60 years. In 2002, there are 81 men aged over 60 for every 100 women aged over 60. There are 53 men aged over 80 for every 100 women aged over 80.

Source: UN population division, DESA.

<sup>3</sup> Active Ageing. A Policy Framework. WHO 2002. According to the section on the Feminisation of Ageing: "While women have the advantage in length of life, they are more likely than men to experience domestic violence and discrimination in access to education, income, food, meaningful work, health care, inheritances, social security measures and political power. These cumulative disadvantages mean that women are more likely than men to be poor and to suffer disabilities in older age. Because of their second-class status, the health of older women is often neglected or ignored. In addition, many women have low or no incomes because of years spent in unpaid caregiving roles. The provision of family care is often achieved at the detriment of female caregivers' economic security and health in later life. Women are also more likely than men to live to a very old age when disabilities and multiple health problems are more common. (...) Because of women's longer life expectancy and the tendency of men to marry younger women and to remarry if their spouses die, female widows dramatically outnumber male widowers in all countries. (...) Older women who are alone are highly vulnerable to poverty and social isolation. In some cultures, degrading and destructive attitudes and practices around burial rights and inheritance may rob widows of their properties and possessions, their health and independence and, in some cases, their very lives." (pp 39/40).

<sup>4</sup> See also the resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2002 (A/RES/57/177) in which governments are called on "to take measures to enable older women to be actively engaged in all aspects of life by assuming a variety of roles in communities, public life and decision making, and to develop and implement policies and programmes in cooperation with civil society, including NGOs, to ensure older women can achieve their full enjoyment of human rights and quality of life, with a view to contributing to the realisation of a society of all ages."

effort to enable women to take care of themselves at every stage of their lives. To this end, we need to focus more sharply on obstacles rooted in culture, religion, tradition and the law. These obstacles exclude women from training for work, from pursuing a career and from holding on to their assets, especially after they have become widows. We have tackled these issues in Beijing, in Madrid and here in New York.<sup>5</sup> But implementation is still lacking. I therefore want to underscore the importance of political will to genuinely and speedily implement the agreements made in Beijing, Madrid and New York.

[ With a sounder position on the formal labour market, women are not exclusively dependent on their own families, whatever their age. We need to turn the spotlight on this point in particular, given changing family structures in various parts of the world.]

### **The power of images and stories**

Mr. Chairperson. Stories frame our thinking, frame our world and frame our future. That is why I would urge everyone to take a careful look at stories about older women, and the image we have of them. Too often, they are presented as second-class citizens. Open the newspaper, or turn on the television and you will see that they are often literally invisible. You can't even talk about a negative image: they have no image at all.

And if an older woman does appear in the picture, she is usually portrayed as the victim of a disaster or as a grandmother. That is hardly likely to generate self-esteem. Let alone give a positive example to young women. We should not underestimate the power of these stories and images. We live in a society in which image is becoming more and more important. That is why I would call for more stories and images showing the diversity of older women, showing how older women play many different roles.<sup>6</sup>

Representatives of governments could start by screening their own documents. What image of older women do policy papers project?<sup>7</sup> We must also improve the quality of statistics by consistently breaking down figures by gender and age. This shows more clearly how older women contribute to society, through care and unpaid work, for

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<sup>5</sup> The Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing + 5 Political Declaration and Outcome Document, the Madrid International Plan of Action and the UN General Assembly's 2002 Resolution on the situation of older women in society.

<sup>6</sup> See section 113 (h) of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing: "Promote a positive image of older women's contributions to increase their self-esteem."

<sup>7</sup> An example of good practice is the committee the Dutch government appointed to encourage the public broadcasting companies to put more women on television.

instance. To paraphrase Kofi Annan: ' Older women represent a powerful untapped resource for society.'<sup>8</sup> It is easier to appreciate their contribution when it is visible. All this brings me back to where I started. The women in purple t-shirts bearing the slogan that we must not forget. Older women count.<sup>9</sup> They were clearly visible for the rest of the world to see. From a distance in time and place I would like to thank them for taking this initiative.

### **The interrelatedness between gender and age matters**

Mr. Chairperson. By way of conclusion. The interrelatedness between gender and age matters. That's precisely why the issue should be high on our agenda in the coming years!

Thank you.

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<sup>8</sup> On 1 October 2003, on the Day of the Elderly, Kofi Annan pointed to the importance of exploiting the qualities of older people in developing societies. He said, ' Older persons represent a powerful but untapped resource for society' and ' And yet, until recently, little attention has been paid to how we can best use the skills of older persons in development.'

<sup>9</sup> I should like to point out that their source of inspiration was the UN summit in Beijing. When I talked to them, they told me that experience of the Beijing summit had helped them prepare for the Madrid conference. An unexpected bonus from the Beijing summit!