

## **NGO statement on International Protection and Solutions**

Dear Chair,

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs through a consultative process. NGOs express their support to the ExCom Conclusions Process and emphasize the importance of including older forcibly displaced people alongside other potentially at-risk groups, such as children, women, people with disabilities, people of diverse sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, and people with diverse ethnic, religious or linguistic backgrounds, in any ExCom Conclusion.

Population ageing is a significant achievement of the modern age, attributed to improvements in living standards, medical services, and education. By 2050, it is predicted that 20 percent of people will be over 60 years old. Eighty per cent of them will be living in lower-income countries and countries affected by conflict or the climate emergency, all triggers of multi-faceted crisis likely to generate important humanitarian needs. These estimates, coupled with the growing number of forcibly displaced people annually, make it clear that this is a population that warrants increased and specific attention.

### **Older People Overlooked**

Recent crises demonstrate that there is still much to be done to ensure the inclusion of older people and other vulnerable groups. The Covid-19 pandemic [exposed the devastating impact that ageism and age discrimination have on older people](#) and the need to uphold the fundamental human rights of all individuals in emergencies, with a specific focus on groups at higher risk or in vulnerable and marginalised situations. [Older people continue to be overlooked in the response to the war in Ukraine](#), despite making up a sizeable proportion of the population. If the humanitarian sector cannot adequately respond to the challenges facing older people in current crises when they are among those most at risk, it may be unprepared to address their needs and rights in the future.

The UNHCR document "[Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement](#)" provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by older people in displacement situations. However, the implementation of the guidance has not been sufficient, and older people often remain invisible and excluded.

With over 100 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, and six percent estimated to be older, there is an urgent need for the international protection system to adapt and become more inclusive as it responds to the evolving nature of displacement, particularly as demographics shift towards older age.

### **Protection Concerns of Older People**

Given the trend towards ageing populations and the implications for humanitarian crises, we would like to draw the Standing Committee Member's attention to the diverse and challenging protection situation of older people in displacement settings and the need for increased attention from UNHCR and its partners. When considering the protection of older people in displacement settings, it is crucial to acknowledge their intersecting identities, including their age, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, economic activity, and health status, and recognise their diverse experiences and protection concerns. UNHCR's [Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity](#) emphasises the importance of taking a comprehensive and inclusive approach and it is critical that UNHCR and partner staff continue to be sensitised to the policy.

Displaced older people encounter heightened protection risks, such as discrimination, physical harm, and psychological distress. It is not uncommon for displaced people, including older people, to lose or lack identity documents, leaving them more vulnerable to detention, refoulement, and other human rights violations. Health and care needs, reduced mobility, and social or economic disadvantages can make it difficult to prepare for and adjust to crises. Many older people are left without support networks, leading to isolation, neglect, and lack of assistance. Despite these challenges, older people have specific capacities and valuable contributions to make in preparing for and adjusting to crises, playing important roles such as caregivers for children or other adults, community leaders, advocates, sources of guidance and support, protectors, and guardians of cultural heritage, to name a few. However, they often encounter ageism, discrimination, and exclusion from humanitarian assistance. They are frequently overlooked in data collection, needs assessments and registration processes, leading to a lack of understanding of the specific barriers they face and potentially limiting their access to essential services and their right to participate in decision making that affects them

As acknowledged within UNHCR’s “Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement,” “older women are disproportionately poor, have less access than older men to housing, land and property rights, and less access to pension and affordable healthcare,” They also are likely to be at higher risk of violence than older men both before and during displacement, and may be more at risk of exploitation and abuse due to limited access to resources and decision-making processes. Furthermore, the majority of services specifically for women are targeted for those of reproductive age and/or adolescence, which often leaves older women – who have specific health and other needs – out of reach and sight of humanitarian actors.

Forty-six percent of older people experience a disability, with older women experiencing a greater prevalence of disability. People with disabilities are at heightened risk of violence, exploitation, abuse, and neglect and often encounter multiple and intersecting barriers to accessing essential services, lack accessible information, and face greater psychological impacts. These issues are all compounded by ageism and ableism from humanitarian responders. UNHCR’S [Approach to Persons With Disabilities in Displacement](#) provides crucial guidance for responding actors and should be implemented in all settings.

### **Agency of older people**

There is intrinsic value to ensuring older people can influence the way humanitarian responses takes shape; having choice, control and a voice is central to our dignity and self-worth and is a key part of a rights-based approach to ageing, older age and older people’s lives. There is also ethical value, as all humanitarians are accountable to all affected populations. Practically, including older people’s voices in decision-making processes can make responses more effective by improving access to and quality of services. In addition, given their leadership roles in many communities and their understanding of community dynamics and power structures, it can increase trust and legitimacy and improve success and sustainability of our programmes. We therefore urge UNHCR and its partners to promote the engagement, participation, empowerment, agency, and autonomy of older people and all at-risk groups, incorporate their perspectives into all levels of design, implementation and monitoring of programmes and policies, and provide the necessary resources and support to fully and effectively participate in decision making. This includes reviewing pledges for the 2023 Global Refugee Forum process with a gender sensitive and age and disability-inclusive lens, with and for older people.

### **Improving Data Collection**

To design effective interventions for older people in displacement settings, we need better data. We encourage UNHCR and Member States to require the collection, analysis, reporting and use of data that is disaggregated by age, gender, disability, and other intersecting identities, which will help us to better understand the protection concerns of older people and other at-risk groups. As with all data, ensuring appropriate and ethical collection, analysis, use and sharing of data for older persons is critical. Requests to partner organisations to share personal data of refugees, as is the case in Bangladesh, must only be

made for relevant purposes and in line with the principle of data minimisation. We ask UNHCR to follow the recently updated IASC guidelines on data sharing and urge Member States to support UNHCR in its engagement with specific governments on this issue.

### **Twin Track Approach: Mainstreaming and Targeted Programming**

The rights and needs of older people and other at-risk groups must be prioritised in any response to displacement. We urge UNHCR, donor countries, and other stakeholders to ensure that resources provided to humanitarian crisis prioritise targeted services that meet the specific needs of older people, in all their diversity, alongside mainstreaming older people into general assistance programmes.. It is also critical that UNHCR and its partners hire and train staff with the skills and knowledge to deliver inclusive responses, free from ageism and all forms of discrimination.

### **Strengthening partnerships with community-led organisations**

To improve protection and assistance for older people and other at-risk groups in displacement settings, we call on UNHCR to expand partnerships and enhance collaboration with affected communities. This entails cooperating with older people's associations, organisations for people with disabilities, women's rights and child rights organisations, and other civil society actors alongside local and national authorities and humanitarian organisations. It is also important to support the capacity strengthening of organisations and entities working with and for older people, tailoring this to the specific context so that robust programmes for older people can be developed.

### **Durable solutions to displacement**

Finding appropriate durable solutions for older displaced people requires a comprehensive approach that addresses their specific needs and challenges. Advocating for conditions that are conducive to voluntary return is critical for the protection of older refugees and asylum seekers. We urge UNHCR to ensure that their rights and well-being are considered when engaging with countries of origin and working to create an enabling environment for safe and dignified return. During any repatriation process, the rights of older refugees and asylum seekers must be upheld, and specific and tailored assistance should be provided to support repatriation, such as arranging accessible transportation and providing medical support.

We call on UNHCR to work in collaboration with host countries to facilitate the socioeconomic integration of displaced older people, ensuring that they have equal access to services through their inclusion in national policies and programmes related to healthcare, housing, and social assistance. We also encourage UNHCR to work with local authorities, community leaders, and relevant organizations to implement programmes that enhance the capacity of and empower displaced older people, including initiatives like income-generating projects, community-based healthcare programs, and social support networks that provide them with the necessary resources and assistance to rebuild their lives.

Lastly, facilitating resettlement and complementary pathways can be an important solution for displaced older people. We encourage UNHCR to collaborate with resettlement countries to prioritise the admission of older people and ensure their specific needs, circumstances and vulnerabilities are considered when providing access to services including healthcare, social support, and housing. This can be complemented by exploring alternative pathways such as family reunification, private sponsorship, and labour mobility schemes that provide older displaced people with opportunities to rebuild their lives in safe and supportive environments.

To conclude, rapid population aging and growing displacement suggests that older people will be increasingly impacted by humanitarian crises. It is critical that our sector prepares itself and adapts to the rights and needs of this diverse group, ensuring that the provision of protection and assistance is inclusive and tailored to the needs of everyone. We need a system that empowers and safeguards the wellbeing of older people so that no one is left behind.

Thank you.