



The Human Rights of Older Persons in the age of COVID-19 and beyond¹

On May 12, Servas International representatives at the UN attended the webinar on « The Human Rights of Older Persons in the age of COVID-19 and beyond ». It was possible to submit questions in advance, and to publish comments and questions on the chat during the meeting.

The one-hour virtual debate welcomed the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet, as well as the new Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Ms. Claudia Mahler, and Representatives Member States in the Groups of Friends of the rights of older persons in New York and Geneva. The event was moderated by Ms. Silvia Perel-Levin, Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva, who invited the experts and organized the discussion.

The panelists analyzed the current situation and discussed how to advance the conversation around the rights of older persons during these challenging times, and how we can move from debate to action.

Recognizing that older persons are at high risk of severe illness and death following infection from COVID-19, many countries adopted a variety of specific measures. However, even well intended and aimed at a greater protection for older persons, those measures may have in many ways negatively impacted their rights and freedoms.

The panelists addressed some important questions: Have some COVID-19 measures impacted older persons to a larger degree than other groups? Did they highlight already existing ageism, negative stereotypes, and age-based discrimination? Also, have the views of older persons been considered?

The panelists admitted that there is not an easy definition of who is an « old person », yet Michelle Bachelet said: « *We must also shift our mindset and challenge the ageist view of older people as frail, dependent and vulnerable. The older population is an incredibly diverse group and they – we I should say – we have a tremendous potential to contribute to the recovery efforts.* »

Though there is no specific Convention to protect the rights of older people (these lie within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)), it was widely recognized that there is a need to strengthen legal frameworks to promote and protect the human rights and dignity of older persons, including the rights of those living in residential care homes, facing special vulnerability and a broad range of risks².

The challenge therefore remains the establishment of a frameworks for older people, including the work on a draft resolution by the UN. As the High Commissioner stated, “*This crisis has laid bare, and often amplified, many challenges that older people have been facing for years, such as discrimination based on older age, lack of social protection and access to health services, lack of autonomy and participation in decision-making, and risk of violence, neglect and abuse.*”

As SERVAS members, we wish to contribute to a better tomorrow. If this crisis has taught us anything, it is that more protection is needed for the most vulnerable of our societies, wherever they may be. All together, be it inside our communities or on political level, we can work hand in hand together towards these goals as – in line with the words of the High Commissioner – “*This crisis has taught us that a society can only be as strong as its weakest member.* »

¹ Watch it on YouTube Channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-Hw2wBeFcXvgZ0hP-Zr6Xg>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9Fw3J81ez0&t=12s>

² In Europe, according to the World Health Organization, up to half of total deaths have been among those living in long-term care facilities (Michelle Bachelet).