

THE NGO COMMITTEE ON AGEING

BUILDING A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES



Welcome to the March 2026 Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY Newsletter

What's in this Issue

As we go to press, people from around the world have gathered for the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN. It started on March 9th and is running through the 19th. Through our mailing list, we have forwarded to you, our readers, notices of some events focused on older women specifically. A few are in person, but outside the UN building, so that a Grounds pass is not required. Several are either virtual or hybrid. We encourage you to attend as you can. We are pleased to welcome Tanvi Patel, a guest columnist and prominent advocate for the rights of women and older women, especially. (*CSW: Are We at a Turning Point?*) Tanvi is Gender Policy Advisor at HelpAge international. She welcomes the inclusion of older women's access to justice as a specific focus of CSW70 and expresses hopes that this is a sign of new and continuing concern for the rights of older women. Adriane Berg (*Words that are Trending*) highlights a specific violation of justice to older women, when people accuse their older family members of witchcraft to take over their land.

And, of course, we include an update and look ahead on our activities and events at the UN from our chair Bill Smith

Warm regards,

Martha Bial, Editor and Chair of the NGOCOA-NY Communications Committee,
Representative to the UN, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics



A word from the Chair

The 64th Commission for Social Development (CSocD 64) is completed and it identified much work to be done in the years ahead. The primary theme of this year's CSocD was the advancing of Social Development and Social Justice

through Coordinated, Equitable and Inclusive Policies. Continuing issues include the need to Eradicate Poverty and Ensure Dignity through Resilient Care and Support Systems. The Plenary Meetings were comprehensive and the Side Events were well organized and informative, giving participants the opportunity to learn and share information in discussions. Members of the NGO CoA NY participated in many of the sessions.

Reference was made during CSoCD to the Second World Summit for Social Development in Doha in November and the resulting Doha Political Declaration, which renewed the global commitment to people-centered, inclusive and sustainable development. Civil Society was very present.

Next is the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), which takes place at UN Headquarters in New York from 9 March to 19 March 2026, This year's priority theme is Ensuring and Strengthening Access to Justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices, and addressing barriers.

The NGO CoA and Civil Society will continue to urge the inclusion of older women globally during this important Commission. Older Women are frequently excluded from much of the discussion and action of the commission and they warrant specific focus.

Yours,

William T . Smith, PhD,

Chair, NGO CoA in New York

A Deeper Dive

Commission on the Status of Women: Are we at a turning point for the recognition and inclusion of Older Women?

By Tanvi Patel, Gender Policy Advisor at HelpAge international



A focus on older women - the emerging theme at CSW70

The seventieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) will take place in New York City from 9 - 19 March and represents an important moment in advancing gender equality across the life course. While older women have long contributed to and supported the advancement of the gender equality agenda, their specific realities and experiences have often remained peripheral within global policy discussions. This year, for the first time, older women are the focus of a dedicated ministerial roundtable on “the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for all older women,” signalling growing recognition of the need to address inequalities experienced in older age and hopefully as a starting point to ensure older women’s meaningful inclusion in gender equality efforts.

This development reflects growing understanding that population ageing is not only a demographic transformation, but also a gender equality issue requiring urgent, structural responses. Longevity does not automatically translate into security, dignity, or empowerment. Instead, many older women live these additional years subject to the cumulative effects of structural gender inequalities experienced across the life course.

Economic insecurity remains a defining feature of older women's inequality and a key focus of the ministerial roundtable. Old-age poverty reflects cumulative gender inequalities across the life course, including women's greater likelihood of informal employment, lower earnings, and disproportionate unpaid care. As social protection systems are often linked to formal employment histories, many older women lack adequate pensions or income security, with persistent gender gaps in both coverage and benefit levels.

At the same time, significant gaps in data, funding, and participation continue to render older women largely invisible in gender equality frameworks. Combined with persistent gendered ageism and discriminatory social norms, this invisibility limits their ability to influence policies and decisions that affect their lives and uphold their rights. Older women are routinely excluded from major surveys, and HelpAge research shows that in 2021, just 0.1 per cent of funding targeting gender equality reported to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee explicitly referenced older women. Violence against older women also remains widespread but under-recognised, with global monitoring and policy responses, often excluding older age groups. This lack of data, investment, and representation constrains effective policy responses, accountability, and the development of inclusive strategies that can address older women's specific needs and rights.

Negative social and cultural norms, reinforced by gendered ageism, limit older women's visibility, participation, and access to essential services. They also contribute to systemic barriers in areas such as justice, employment, and social protection, undermining the recognition of older women as rights holders and active contributors to society.

The ministerial roundtable at CSW70 provides a critical opportunity to address these intersecting inequalities by surfacing the realities of older women, sharing good practices and making key recommendations to advance policies, investments, and accountability mechanisms that recognise older women's rights and support their dignity and inclusion.

CSW70's priority theme is access to justice for all women and girls. Older women face persistent structural barriers, including high legal costs, inaccessible courts, lower levels of literacy, limited legal knowledge, discrimination which prevent many from claiming their rights. Across 24 countries, 71 per cent of older people HelpAge surveyed reported justice-related issues, with older women disproportionately affected by disputes over property, inheritance, violence, and public services. Gendered ageism remains a central, yet under-recognised, obstacle. Older women's testimonies are often dismissed or trivialised, and discriminatory norms undermine their legal autonomy and credibility. Widows, in particular, face dispossession, inheritance denial, and exclusion from decision-making. These patterns reflect not isolated incidents, but systemic failures rooted in lifelong discrimination.

The review theme will look at women's participation in public life and the elimination of violence for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. It is important that older women's experiences are recognised. Violence takes many forms for older women, from intimate partner violence, financial abuse, neglect, and psychological harm, and remains widespread yet not visible in discussions.

The recognition of older women at ministerial level marks a long-overdue shift to ensure that rights nor dignity does not diminish with age. The challenge now is to translate visibility into sustained policy and attitude change. Ensuring access to justice, economic security, protection from violence, and meaningful participation demands coordinated action by governments, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, civil society, and older women. Only by adopting a truly life course approach can the global community fulfil its commitment to leave no woman behind.

Witch Hunts - When a Land Grab Becomes Elder Abuse - and What We Can Do About It

By Adriane Berg, United Nations representative, International Federation on Ageing; Board Member of The Global NGO Executive Committee (GNEC), Member of NGO Committee on Ageing NY



Across parts of Africa, older women—and sometimes older men—are being accused of witchcraft, attacked, driven from their homes, imprisoned, or killed. The motive is often to get their land.

In counties such as Kisii County in Kenya, lynchings of older women have been reported with disturbing frequency. Similar patterns have surfaced in parts of Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent. These acts are frequently framed as cultural or spiritual responses to misfortune. But beneath the accusation lies a familiar, deeply human driver—property, inheritance, and economic desperation.

When an older person owns land, particularly in rural communities where land equals survival, the temptation to remove them can become lethal. The label “witch” becomes a weapon.

This is not folklore. It is elder abuse.

In Kisii County, Kenya, local and international news outlets have reported multiple cases of older women being beaten or burned after accusations of witchcraft. In several documented cases, the victims were widows living alone on inherited land.

Community advocates report a recurring sequence:

1. A death, illness, crop failure, or family dispute occurs.

2. An older woman—often frail or cognitively impaired—is accused.
3. A mob forms.
4. The elder is assaulted, expelled, or killed.
5. The land changes hands.

In some cases, police investigations stall. Witnesses refuse to testify. The “belief” explanation shields what is, in effect, violent land seizure.

Job Kebata Omayio, Director of the Gesabakwa Elderly Care Initiative, has documented how elders in rural sub-counties such as Bomachoge Chache and Bomachoge Borabu live in fear—not of spirits, but of neighbors.

Five African Leaders, One Shared Alarm

In January 2026, five Kenyan civil society leaders met online at an event organized by the author to discuss the surge in witchcraft-related persecution and how to stop it. Each came from a different discipline and region, but all agreed on one truth: systemic ageism, poverty, ignorance of chronic diseases, and failure of effective laws fueling violence.

In addition to myself, the attendees included:

- **Job Kebata Omayio**, Director, Gesabakwa Elderly Care Initiative (Gesabakwa Elderly Care Initiative), Kisii County, Kenya
- **Julius Wanjama**, human rights advocate, Haki Yetu Organization
- **Michael Kimuhu**, Co-chair of the UN General Assembly Partners PCG Older Persons, the Founder/CEO of Mangu Integrated Community Project (MICOP Kenya), and an Ambassador to the 3rd World Congress of Age-Friendly Cities and Communities.
- **Arege Douglas** serves in sub-national government as the Director of Youth, Gender, and Social Services at the County Government of Kisii
- **A representative of MADCA Malindi**, MADCA focuses on protecting Mijikenda cultural heritage through music, art, and community engagement while supporting the elders who are the keepers of these traditions.

Our solutions were multifaceted and holistic—legal reform, community education, economic empowerment, media strategy—but their diagnosis was unified: accusations of witchcraft are being manipulated to dispossess elders of land and homes.

The Anatomy of a Modern Witch Hunt

Several forces intersect to make a witch designation a powerful tool to persecute and strip away human rights. Some forces may be categorized as ageism, misinformation, and poverty. Three juggernauts of inequality and targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:

Traditional beliefs in witchcraft are weapons because the ageing of poor relatives, even parents, causes a drain on a family that is unsustainable in the long run. Further cognitive decline, dementia, or Alzheimer’s disease may be mischaracterized as proof of sorcery. Behavioral changes become “evidence.”

At its core, this is prejudice against older persons. When elders are viewed as burdens rather than contributors, violence becomes easier to justify.

High unemployment and land scarcity increase intergenerational tension. If an elder controls property, younger relatives under economic stress may see removal as a solution. As horrific as this sounds, years of marginalization, especially of older women, make elders a disposable commodity, and in the face of what seems like no alternatives, their holding onto unproductive land, in the face of poverty, seems wrong.

The residual belief in witchcraft becomes justification, convenient, but also based on the belief of many of the elder victims, who were taught to their younger relatives. Couple this with no understanding of natural aging or the symptoms of chronic diseases, and the problem is more complex than murderous children stealing land from fragile, helpless elders.

The problem is further complicated by the failure to enforce the rights of older persons, even where assault, eviction, or murder laws exist; enforcement is inconsistent. Community complicity or silence protects perpetrators. So long as there is no community outrage, law enforcement is unmotivated to investigate, arrest, and punish those who perpetrate most abuse, which is perpetuated by family members or those hired by them. So frightened observers don't report on what might be their brother, son, or neighbor.

A Sad Byproduct of Witch Persecution is Grandchildren in the Crossfire

Many accused elders are primary caregivers for grandchildren. When the elder is attacked or expelled, children are displaced, traumatized, or forced into precarious situations. In some cases, children themselves are stigmatized as “tainted” by association. This is not just elder abuse. It is intergenerational harm.

I have seen photos of a five-year-old boy with fear in his eyes being forced to wear a Medieval pointed nose plague mask while he and his grandmother were taken to be stoned, presumably to death. This photo was part of a plea for help conducted by a Lisbon church group many years ago to expose the problem. There has been little progress since.

This is not an isolated incident. It is part of a pattern across regions of Kenya and parts of Nigeria and other African countries, where accusations of witchcraft are used to dispossess older people—primarily women—of property.

The solutions are myriad and must be affected in tandem if the problem is to be solved.

A Media Breakthrough: The Nigerian Model

In Nigeria, [Dr. Temitope Farombi \(Brain Health Institute Nigeria\)](#) fought the witchcraft stigma through a national radio campaign in two languages, explaining dementia and other aspects of cognitive aging and personality change. It was successful insofar as loving family members were now empowered to get help. For a full interview of her method, listen to my interview with her [on *On The Ground*](#), the podcast of the [Global NGO Executive Committee](#).

Dr. Farombi responded with a direct strategy: radio education campaigns in multiple languages explaining dementia and Alzheimer's disease as medical conditions.

The lesson is powerful: when communities understand brain health, they are less likely to weaponize superstition. The lesson: education is protection.

Practical Property Protections

In countries such as the United States, mechanisms like life estates, trusts, and sale-leaseback arrangements allow older homeowners to remain in their homes while structuring inheritance transparently. Adapted to local legal systems, similar tools could:

- Guarantee the elders' lifetime occupancy
- Clarify succession rights
- Reduce intergenerational suspicion
- Minimize incentives for violent displacement
- A long period of time before inherited land can be transferred

These solutions require local legal expertise—but the principles are transferable. The goal is to train people of all ages about inheritance rights and strategies to extract cash from property ownership before the landowner's demise. To the extent that motivation is purely venal, financial education and contributions to civil property laws can provide families in need with the money they need.

Practical Caregiver Initiatives

But as in all countries, especially those with limited healthcare resources, the issue of chronic care for older adults must also be addressed. Integrated into education on aging and financial savvy, there must be realistic ways to support families as caregivers. Solutions like the [village caregiving project in Vietnam](#) and [Sahaja Foundation in Bali](#) could be solutions in African enclaves. Listen to my interview of Reverend Johnson on [On The Ground](#), on the success of Sahaja.

Recognizing Witch-Hunting as A Global Human Rights Issue

The persecution of older persons through witchcraft accusations is not confined to one country. It represents a failure to protect the rights, dignity, and safety of aging populations.

As life expectancy increases across Africa, property ownership among older adults will rise. Without coordinated intervention, so may the violence.

Civil society, governments, faith leaders, and international aging organizations must act together. Aging should not be a liability, and ownership should never become a death sentence.

It is imperative that the Convention for the Human Rights of Older Persons be confirmed.

Greater Media Exposure

Here are just a few of the powerful reports that can be used to increase awareness of this ongoing tragedy:

[Ghana: Branded for Life: How Witchcraft Accusations Lead to Human Rights Violations](#)

Explores how hundreds of women — mostly older and widowed — are exiled, stripped of dignity and property, and denied basic rights. ([Amnesty International](#))

[Amnesty International - Human Rights Protection Call](#)

Another angle on how witchcraft accusations strip land and rights, calling for

legal remedies and protections.

[A HelpAge advocacy piece](#) urging government action against witchcraft accusations that lead to lynchings and land-grab-motivated murders of older people.

A Call to Action: Let's Form a Silo-Breaking Coalition

Too often, elder rights groups, human rights organizations, legal advocates, faith leaders, and development NGOs operate separately. This fragmentation weakens the response. Investigative reporting in Kenya has documented:

- Elderly widows burned alive following accusations tied to inheritance disputes.
- Older men were attacked after refusing to subdivide land.
- Families forcibly evicting aging parents, labeling them as sorcerers to avoid community backlash for property grabs.

These are not isolated villages operating outside national law. These incidents occur in communities connected to mobile networks, national elections, and global markets. The coexistence of modern governance and medieval accusation exposes the core driver: systemic ageism.

If we are serious about ending systemic ageism, this is a frontline issue. The time for siloed sympathy is over. The time for coordinated action—legal, economic, educational, and moral—is now.

Let us hear from you about your interests, whether you want more information, to become a member of the coalition, or to be invited to our next online meeting in April 2026. Email adrianegberg@gmail.com

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