



#Intergenerational

DISCUSSION BRIEF



Intergenerational approaches to access to justice across the life-course: Barriers and policy pathways for adolescent girls and older women

Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Summary

Access to justice is a fundamental human right, a cornerstone of the rule of law, and an indispensable pillar of gender equality. Yet for millions of women and girls globally, justice systems remain inaccessible, unresponsive and often discriminatory. Women worldwide hold just 64 per cent of the legal rights of men, and nearly 2.5 billion women still live under laws that discriminate against them. The justice gap is particularly acute for those at both ends of the age spectrum—adolescent girls and older women—who experience a combination of age- and gender-specific forms of exclusion that remain largely invisible in policy debates. While global attention to access to justice has grown, the distinct and intersecting barriers faced by these two groups are insufficiently understood, documented and addressed.

Co-authored with HelpAge International, this discussion brief draws on the proceedings and outcomes of the side event, *Intergenerational approaches to access to justice across the life-course*, held in March

2026 as part of the Youth Forum at the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70). Co-organized by UN Women, HelpAge International, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the Government of Ireland, and the Government of Sweden, the event convened young and older women, Member States and UN agencies in a shared intergenerational space. Photos in this brief were taken at said event. This brief is supplemented by the UN Secretary-General's report on access to justice for women and girls and the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions.

The brief outlines:

1. The global context framing the justice gap across the life-course.
2. Barriers preventing adolescent girls and older women from accessing justice, including shared and age-specific dimensions.
3. Policy and programme recommendations to build more inclusive, responsive and accountable justice systems.

1. Context

1.1. The global justice gap for women and girls

Despite decades of normative progress under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, women and girls continue to face deeply entrenched barriers to justice.

Women globally face greater barriers to justice than men in nearly 70 per cent of surveyed countries.¹ In over half the world's countries, rape is still not defined on the basis of consent. In nearly three out of four countries, girls can still be forced into marriage under national law. And in 44 per cent of countries, the law does not mandate equal remuneration for work of equal value.² These legal gaps are compounded by discriminatory social norms, institutional biases, weak enforcement, and the chronic underfunding of justice and protection services. Recent analyses show that nearly one in four governments reported a backlash against women's rights in 2024, weakening legal protections and shrinking civic space.³ More than 400 organizations surveyed reported being significantly affected by funding cuts to violence prevention and response services.⁴ At the same time, 2 billion women and girls lack access to any form of social protection, leaving them more vulnerable to poverty, violence and limited legal recourse.⁵

Progress, however, is possible: 87 per cent of countries have enacted domestic violence legislation and more than 40 countries have strengthened constitutional protections for women and girls over the past decade. Since 1970, more than 600 million women have gained access to economic opportunities because of family law reform.⁶ These gains demonstrate that justice systems can evolve and transform when political will and resources are directed at structural change.

1.2. The life-course dimension: why age matters

While justice barriers affect women throughout their lives, the nature, intensity and intersection of these barriers shift significantly depending on age and life stage. The justice gap is most pronounced, and least addressed, at the two ends of the age spectrum.

Adolescent girls face intensifying digital harms and shrinking autonomy.⁷ Young women face barriers in being heard, believed and represented in systems designed without their participation. At the other end of the life-course, older women experience compounded inequalities resulting from the accumulated effects of lifelong gender-based discrimination and economic disadvantage. They often lack resources and institutional support to assert their rights effectively, including due to exclusion from pensions, lack of documentation, and persistent barriers to inheritance and property rights. Yet the experiences of both groups remain largely invisible in justice data, policy design and institutional practice. Ageism acts as a systemic barrier to justice for both groups and can diminish their autonomy and often undermines the credibility of their claims.

1.3. CSW70 and the normative moment

CSW70 provided a crucial normative moment for advancing access to justice. The Agreed Conclusions adopted introduce critical provisions supporting age-sensitive approaches, as well as formal recognition of community justice workers and paralegals, new commitments on digital justice and AI governance, and a call for gender-responsive and survivor-centred justice in conflict settings. More than 23,000 young people from 75 countries participated in pre-session consultations, calling for justice that is intersectional, intergenerational and focused on implementation. It is within this normative landscape that the intergenerational dialogue on access to justice across the life-course took place, underscoring the urgency of justice systems that recognize and address the distinct but interconnected challenges faced by women at different stages of life.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

2. Barriers to accessing justice: commonalities and age-specific dimensions

Barriers for access to justice for adolescent girls and older women are complex, interconnected and span structural, institutional, social and individual dimensions. While certain barriers are shared across the life-course, others are age-specific and require differentiated policy responses.

2.1. Shared structural barriers across the life-course

Several fundamental barriers affect both adolescent girls and older women in their efforts to access justice:

- **Discriminatory legal frameworks:** Strong legal frameworks form the basis from which women and girls can access justice and claim their rights. However, both groups encounter laws that fail to protect or actively discriminate against them. Discriminatory policies and legal gaps affect women differently at different ages but create a shared foundation of exclusion that affects women across the life-course.
- **Patriarchal social norms and impunity:** Deeply embedded gender norms silence, delegitimize and discourage women across all ages from reporting abuse or pursuing justice. Women face greater barriers to justice than men, driven in significant part by discriminatory social norms, victim-blaming, fear and community pressure. Social norms can be as powerful as laws in dictating who has access to justice. Globally, almost one in three women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, non-partner sexual violence or both at least once in their lives, yet progress in reducing intimate partner violence has been extremely slow, with only a 0.2 per cent annual decline over the past two decades.⁸
- **Economic barriers and poverty:** Poverty shapes justice outcomes long before legal institutions become involved. Financial constraints limit the ability of both young and older women to access legal aid, transportation and court processes. Two billion women and girls globally lack access to any form of social protection. There is a persistent gender gap in social protection coverage, with women's effective coverage lagging behind men's by 4.5 percentage points globally, and 165 million older persons worldwide still receiving no pension benefit at all.⁹ At the other end, 63 per cent of women globally give birth without maternity benefits—rising to 94 per cent in

sub-Saharan Africa—creating economic vulnerabilities that accumulate over a lifetime and compound barriers to justice in older age.¹⁰

- **Lack of intersectional and age-disaggregated data:** Justice systems rarely collect data disaggregated by both age and sex. Only 20 countries globally produce complete sex-disaggregated data across key social protection areas. Without such data, the experiences of adolescent girls and older women remain invisible, resulting in policy gaps and inadequate programming. While intimate partner violence data are now available for 168 countries, between 4 and 5 per cent of women aged 60 and older have experienced intimate partner violence in the past year alone,¹¹ a figure that likely undercounts its true scale since it does not capture financial abuse, withholding of medication, or neglect.
- **Exclusion from policy design and decision-making:** Both groups are systematically excluded from the design of the justice systems and policies meant to serve them. Many justice policies are designed at the national level without sufficient input from the women and girls they are intended to serve. The justice sector and lawmaking processes remain largely male-dominated at decision-making levels: the absence of female justice actors reflects structural gender imbalances and, as evidence shows, can discourage women from engaging with justice systems.
- **Institutional distrust and inaccessibility:** Women at both ends of the age spectrum frequently lack trust in justice institutions. Access to justice is prevented by everyday realities such as cost, time, language and a deep lack of trust in the very institutions meant to protect them. Survivors and the organizations supporting them face persistent barriers to justice, intensified by civic space restrictions that amount to a rapidly evolving denial of justice, with nearly 90 per cent of organizations working to end violence against women and girls reporting reductions in essential services.¹²

2.2. Age-specific barriers facing adolescent girls and young women

Adolescent girls and young women face a distinct cluster of barriers shaped by their developmental stage, legal minority status and the rapidly evolving digital environment:

- **Legal minority and dependency:** As legal minors, girls frequently depend on the very individuals who may be harming them to access justice. An estimated 640 million girls and women alive today were married in

childhood, with approximately 12 million girls entering child marriage each year.¹³ One in five young women aged 20 to 24 were married before their 18th birthday, and girls in fragile settings are twice as likely to become child brides as the average girl globally.¹⁴ Child marriage and early pregnancy compound legal dependency, as girls find themselves unable to independently seek remedies. Recognizing girls as a distinct legal and developmental group—not ‘women-in-training’ but as rights-holders with unique pathways and vulnerabilities—remains critical. The combined legal, psychological and economic support needs of girls often go unmet, including a shortage of age-appropriate services cognizant of a child’s neurological development.

- **Limited legal literacy, information gaps and intersecting vulnerabilities:** Young women often lack awareness of their rights and the processes to claim them. People with disabilities—including those with autism—face compounding barriers such as inaccessible communication formats, sensory overload in loud and daunting environments like police stations and courtrooms, and assumptions about their capacity to understand proceedings. These barriers leave young women with disabilities feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. A wide variety of justice barriers persists, including inadequate support for youth advocacy and the systematic exclusion of young women from accountability mechanisms.
- **Digital and technology-facilitated violence:** Young women face intensifying online harms that justice systems have not kept pace with. Between 16 per cent and 58 per cent of women and girls have experienced some form of online violence, while 1.8 billion women and girls still lack legal protection from online harassment.¹⁵ More than half, 58 per cent, of girls and young women have experienced online harassment.¹⁶ Less than 40 per cent of countries have laws addressing cyber harassment or cyberstalking, and the rise of AI-generated abuse—including deepfake sexual imagery—has deepened impunity across borders.¹⁷ Close to one in four women human rights defenders, activists and journalists have already experienced AI-assisted online violence. In 2024, an estimated 50,000 women and girls worldwide were killed by intimate partners or family members—1 every 10 minutes—underscoring how online violence and offline harm are deeply interconnected.¹⁸
- **Criminalization and stigma around sexual and reproductive health:** Issues such as adolescent pregnancy are often framed solely as public health concerns rather than as gender and human rights issues. Many young girls experiencing early pregnancy face gender-based violence and coercion, stigma within their communities, limited access to reproductive health services, and lack of legal support when abuse or exploitation is involved. Many trafficking victims are recruited at a very young age by individuals they knew—friends, neighbours or even relatives—and entered exploitative situations while still minors. While 70 per cent of 115 countries have laws guaranteeing access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, a stark implementation gap persists, rooted in chronic underfunding, provider bias and entrenched patriarchal norms.¹⁹
- **Exclusion from justice reform processes:** Young women are rarely included in policy discussions, justice consultations or reform processes. When they are included, their participation is often tokenistic rather than substantive.

2.3. Age-specific barriers facing older women

At the other end of the life-course, older women face a distinct but equally significant set of barriers reflecting the accumulated effects of lifelong inequality:

- **Compounded and intersecting discrimination:** Older women experience the intersection of age-based and gender-based discrimination—gendered ageism, compounded by poverty, disability and ethnicity. CEDAW General Recommendation No. 27 recognizes that older women experience discrimination differently from men because lifelong gender inequality compounds the vulnerabilities associated with ageing. Ageism is exacerbated by factors such as health status, marital status, place of residence, displacement and sociocultural norms, and acts as a systemic barrier to justice. Stereotypes portraying older women as frail, cognitively impaired or socially irrelevant, coupled with gendered assumptions questioning their authority and autonomy, often leads to people infantilizing them,²⁰ and results in the dismissal of complaints, particularly in cases of violence, abuse and neglect.
- **Economic insecurity and lack of social protection:** Older women have fewer assets than men in older age. They frequently lack adequate pensions (nearly 6 out of 10 in low- and middle-income countries, and 1 out of

10 of women in low-income countries do not receive a pension),²¹ relevant documentation and property rights—often as a direct consequence of a lifetime of unpaid care work and exclusion from formal employment. Only just over a third of the working-age population (35 per cent) contribute to a pension scheme, with a persistent gender gap.²² Older women are often excluded from discussions and resources, with 57 per cent reporting no solutions to the problems they face.²³

- **Physical and geographic barriers to justice institutions:** Older women face significant physical difficulties in accessing courts, police stations and legal services. They frequently encounter barriers including the physical inaccessibility of justice institutions, lack of awareness of available remedies, financial constraints, and cultural norms discouraging them from reporting abuse or neglect. Essential services such as police protection or legal assistance may require long and costly journeys by boat or on foot in many contexts—barriers that disproportionately affect older women with limited mobility.
- **Language and communication barriers:** Language barriers are a major obstacle for older women who have had limited access to education throughout their lives and may be unable to communicate in official or administrative languages, and to navigate formal justice procedures. These challenges have been compounded in recent years by the increasing digitalization of public services. Lower levels of digital literacy among older women, combined with limited access to technology and the absence of age and gender-responsive outreach, have further restricted awareness of rights, access to information, and the ability to seek support or redress through formal systems.
- **Internalized ageism and reluctance to seek help:** Younger generations may view older women as a burden, and older women frequently internalize this message, choosing not to seek justice so as not to burden others or bring shame on their families. Cultural norms make it acceptable for older women's grievances to be deprioritized. This internalization of ageism represents a distinct barrier that differs from the exclusion experienced by younger women; it is not merely that justice systems fail to serve older women, but that older women themselves have been socialized to believe they do not deserve justice.

- **Invisibility and underreporting of violence against older women:** Violence and abuse against older women takes multiple forms—whether economic, psychological, physical or neglect. This often remains largely invisible and absent from policy discussions. However, one in six people aged 60 and older (15.7 per cent) are subjected to some form of abuse each year, with the global number of victims projected to reach 320 million by 2050 as populations age.²⁴ Women are disproportionately affected, comprising over 65 per cent of elder abuse victims, while 60 per cent of elder abusers are family members. Rates of elder abuse in community settings may have increased by as much as 84 per cent during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁵ Violence surveys designed for women nor justice systems rarely collect age-disaggregated data or proactively reach out to older populations, meaning that the true scale of violence against older women is significantly underestimated or understood.
- **Absence of a binding international instrument to protect the rights of older persons:** Unlike children (protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child) and persons with disabilities (protected by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), older persons do not yet have a dedicated UN convention to uphold and promote their rights. The normative gap is significant, and while CEDAW General Recommendation No. 27 addresses older women's rights, it remains a non-binding interpretive guidance.

While both younger and older women are marginalized by justice systems, not designed to meet their needs, the nature of their exclusion differs. What they share is a justice system in which women face greater barriers than men, and a policy environment that has not yet prioritized intergenerational, life-course approaches to justice reform. Together, the absence of age-disaggregated data, persistence of discriminatory laws and social norms, and chronic underfunding of women's rights organizations lead to both groups remaining at the margins of justice.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

3. Policy and programme recommendations

Drawing on the intergenerational dialogue, the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions, the UN Secretary-General's report and complementary evidence, the following recommendations are directed to Member States, UN entities and civil society partners.

3.1. Build gender- and age-responsive justice systems

- Repeal discriminatory laws across statutory, customary and religious legal frameworks that affect women's access to justice at any stage of life. Particular attention should be given to laws governing marriage, inheritance, property and family relations that disproportionately affect both adolescent girls and older women.
- Enact, implement and enforce laws that protect women's and girls' fundamental rights.
- Ensure justice systems collect, analyse and use sex- and age-disaggregated data to identify patterns of exclusion and inform evidence-based policymaking. Data systems should capture the diverse realities of women across the life-course, disaggregated by age, gender, disability, ethnicity and geographic location.
- Develop age-sensitive protocols within law enforcement, judicial institutions and legal aid services. This includes training judges, police and legal actors to recognize and address both gender and age bias, as well as ensuring the physical accessibility of courts and reporting mechanisms for both young and older women such as extending court working hours and simplifying paperwork.
- Address digital and technology-facilitated violence against women and girls through regulatory frameworks that ensure technology serves equality, while also leveraging technology to expand access to justice services, including through digital courts, mobile courts, chatbots and video-conferencing for remote and underserved communities.

3.2. Strengthen survivor-centred and integrated services

- Establish integrated, multisectoral service models that bring together justice institutions, social protection agencies, health providers, legal aid and civil society organizations. Coordinated referral systems have proven more

effective than fragmented approaches in supporting survivors throughout the justice process.

- Ensure survivor-centred, trauma-informed and age-appropriate services for both adolescent girls and older women. For young girls, this includes psychosocial support, safe shelters, accessible reporting mechanisms and legal assistance. For older women, this includes accessible complaint mechanisms, strengthened social protection and legal aid that accounts for mobility, language and economic constraints.
- Invest in sustainable, flexible and multi-year funding for women's rights organizations and civil society groups that serve as front-line providers of access to justice, particularly community-based organizations working with marginalized young and older women.

3.3. Institutionalize meaningful and inclusive participation

- Move beyond consultation to co-decision-making. Ensure that both young women and older women are meaningfully involved in shaping justice policies, programmes and institutional reforms. Participation should include seats on advisory boards, committees and monitoring mechanisms with a target of at least 25 per cent representation, as recommended during the intergenerational dialogue at CSW70.
- Create safe, intentional and accessible spaces for participation that go beyond traditional meeting formats. Tailored workshops using accessible language, digital platforms enabling creative expression by young people, and formats adapted to the communication needs of older women and persons with disabilities should be developed.
- Institutionalize participatory monitoring of justice systems through community-based documentation, sectoral dialogues and feedback mechanisms that systematically integrate the lived experiences of women at different life stages into policymaking and programme design.
- Support intergenerational mentorship models that connect young women and older women in mutual learning and advocacy, recognizing that older women bring depth of knowledge and life expertise while young women bring innovative approaches and energy for change.

3.4. Bring justice closer to communities

- Formally recognize and strengthen community justice workers and paralegals within national legal frameworks, as called for in the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions. These actors serve as critical bridges between formal justice institutions and marginalized communities.
- Expand mobile legal assistance, complaint services and community human rights education programmes to reach older women in rural, indigenous and disaster-affected communities who face geographic, financial and cultural barriers to formal justice institutions.
- Strengthen referral pathways between community actors and formal justice institutions, ensuring that community-based mechanisms serve as bridges to formal justice processes rather than as replacements.
- Promote legal empowerment across the life-course by ensuring that legal literacy, rights awareness and access to legal identity begin at the earliest stages of life and are sustained into older age. Birth registration is a girl's first defence against child marriage, while registering marriages ensures an older woman can claim inheritance and legal standing.

3.5. Strengthen the normative and international framework

- Ratify and fully implement CEDAW and its Optional Protocol, with attention to General Recommendation No. 27 on older women and the protection of their human rights, and General Recommendation No. 40 on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems.
- Support the process launched by the Human Rights Council to draft an international legally binding instrument on the rights of older persons, ensuring that older women are at the negotiating table and that the instrument has specific provisions for older women, addressing gendered ageism, access to justice, gender-responsive social protection and violence against older women.
- Implement the CSW70 Agreed Conclusions at the national level through concrete legislative reforms, adequate resource allocation and accountability mechanisms, including national action plans with age-specific actions, measurable targets and timelines.
- Adopt intergenerational and life-course approaches in all justice-related policy and programming, recognizing that age is a structural determinant of access to justice and that solutions must be designed with the participation and perspectives of women across generations.

Conclusion

The CSW70 intergenerational dialogue surfaced a powerful truth: justice systems are not inherently just.

They reflect the power structures and social norms of the societies that design them. When those systems overlook the realities of adolescent girls and older women, they reproduce and deepen inequality. When women across generations shape the justice agenda together, new possibilities emerge. Adolescent girls and older women bring distinct but complementary perspectives; their combined voices create a more complete picture of what justice must look like across the full span of life. While both groups face shared structural barriers—discriminatory laws, patriarchal norms, economic exclusion and data invisibility—the age-specific dimensions of their exclusion demand differentiated and targeted responses. Achieving access to justice across the life-course requires not only legal reform, but a fundamental reorientation of justice systems towards the lived realities of women at every age. Justice cannot be universal if entire generations are left out. When women across generations shape policy and institutional reform, justice systems become not only more accessible but also more equitable and more accountable. This is how justice moves from an abstract principle to a lived reality for all women and girls.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Endnotes

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UN Women exists to advance women's rights, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As the lead United Nations entity on gender equality, we shift laws, institutions, social norms and services to close the gender gap and build an equal world for all women and girls. We keep the rights of women and girls at the centre of global progress – always, everywhere. Because gender equality is not just what we do. It is who we are.

UN WOMEN CO-AUTHORED THIS BRIEF IN PARTNERSHIP WITH HELPAGE INTERNATIONAL

HelpAge International is an international non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting the rights of older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives. It serves as the secretariat of a global network of over 200 organisations across 99 countries united in advancing the wellbeing, rights and inclusion of older people.