

Beat: News

Protection of older persons' rights needed now 'more than ever': Bachelet

UN News

U.N. Headquarters New York, 12.04.2022, 04:55 Time

news.un.org - 11 April 2022

Human Rights

The basic rights of older persons need to be protected today, more than ever before, said the UN human rights chief on Monday, but existing legal safeguards render them, in effect, "invisible".

Michelle Bachelet was addressing the Working Group on Ageing, at UN Headquarters in New York, the first to do so in person, since it began its "vital role", in 2011, she said.

"Today, more than ever, older persons need stronger protection to fully enjoy their human rights", she added. "But the reality is that international legal frameworks – which should protect everybody, without discrimination – still render older persons invisible."

Ageing World.

She noted that by 2050, there will be twice as many older persons aged 65 than there are now, and will outnumber young people aged 15 to 24.

"We should ask ourselves: what kind of world do we want to live in by then? I would like to imagine a world where older persons everywhere are guaranteed to live a life of dignity, with economic security.

"A world where they can continue their work and contribute to society for as long as they wish and are able to. Where they can live independently and make their own decisions."

She called for action to end violence, neglect and abuse of older persons, where "quality health services, including long-term care, are easily accessible."

"In a future like this, older persons should be able to actively participate and contribute to sustainable development", she told the meeting, and, if needed, they should have access to justice, for any human rights violations they may suffer.

Distant Vision.

Currently, "we are far from this vision of a better reality" for the older generation, she warned, noting that the majority of the six million lives lost to COVID-19, were older persons.

"The crisis has exposed and deepened critical human rights protection gaps for older persons", she said.

"It has demonstrated how age-related discrimination creates and exacerbates poverty and marginalization, and how it amplifies human rights risks. Older persons have been left at the edges of society at the time when they are most in need of our support."

Climate change too, has left them more likely to face health challenges, and at risk of losing access to food, land, water and sanitation, and ways of making a living in old age.

Existential Threats.

"Their fundamental well-being is at grave risk", said Ms. Bachelet, not least in the context of Russia's war being waged in Ukraine, where "older persons are facing a particularly appalling humanitarian situation.

"Long-term care facilities are suffering a lack of food, heating, electricity, water and medication. Many residents who have chronic health conditions rely on others for care and are struggling to access bomb shelters or safe areas."

She point out that violence against older women and the lack of access to medical care and mental health and psychosocial support

services, had severely impacted health, also in the war-racked Tigray region of Ethiopia.

“And in Syria, older persons continue to suffer the consequences of destroyed and damaged health infrastructure.”

‘Urgent Imperative’ To Act.

Strengthening the human rights of older persons, is therefore “an urgent imperative that we all must strive towards”, said the High Commissioner.

For too long, their rights have suffered from “inadequate protection”, and they continue to be overlooked and neglected in national policies.

“At the international level, they are simply forgotten”, she emphasized, pointing out that her Office, OHCHR, had conducted several studies pointing out the protection gaps.

Her report last month to the Human Rights Council on ageism and age-discrimination, produced conclusions that were “no surprise” she said.

The existing framework for older persons, is “wholly inadequate”, while international engagement has been “far from systematic” or coherent.

“Finally, the distinct lack of a dedicated human rights instrument for older persons - as well as clear limitations of existing ones - is a continued reminder that we are not doing enough to effectively protect their human rights.”

Ageism Pervasive.

Ageism is “woven into the very fabric of life” of older persons, said Ms. Bachelet, and all pervasive.

“The stereotypes resulting from ageism and discrimination are counterproductive and can even be dangerous. They significantly contribute to the vulnerability of older persons and are one of the main obstacles to their enjoyment of human rights.”

Currently, she said, none of the UN human rights treaties contain any specific provision on age discrimination or ageism.

“We need to fight against this. In Our Common Agenda, the UN Secretary-General called for a renewed social contract anchored in human rights. Older persons are integral to this.”

‘Intergenerational solidarity’

She called for the creation of a new and strong “spirit of intergenerational solidarity”, as a way of unlocking progress towards the protection of human rights, “at every stage of life”.

“My hope is that future generations will all be able to enjoy the equalities and human rights we are demanding for older persons as part of this week’s vital discussions.”

She said most importantly - together with the active and meaningful participation of civil society, national rights institutions, and other stakeholders - the journey to bolster rights, “needs to be guided by the voices and lived experience of older persons themselves.”

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-20456/protection-of-older-persons-rights-needed-now-more-than-ever-bachelet.html>

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