



**Older persons in climate change-induced hazards and building back better:
International Psychogeriatric Association, World Psychiatric Association-Section of Old
Age Psychiatry, and NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva Position Statement**

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An unparalleled level of global cooperation will be required to deal with climate change, a “crisis multiplier” and the ‘biggest threat modern humans have ever faced’ with profound implications and impact, according to the United Nations ^{1,2}. All living things, including humans, are expected to experience more severe and frequent weather events in years to come due to climate change. Climate changes are known to reduce biodiversity by affecting rising sea levels, melting of glaciers, causing droughts, floods, tornados, hurricanes, wildfires and extreme cold and hot temperatures. Climate change is also known to substantially impact the health and wellbeing of all human beings, in addition to impeding access to adequate and safe food, water, air and shelter.

Climate change affects older persons disproportionately³. Research has shown that following extreme climate events such as severe heat waves, for instance, it is older persons who are more likely to die. Severe heat is also responsible for a disproportional increase in cardiovascular events, whereas pulmonary illness and dementia are more likely to occur due to air pollution. These conditions are especially pronounced among older persons. The Lancet Commission on ‘Dementia prevention, intervention, and care’ in their 2020 report mentions air pollution to be one of the 12 potentially modifiable risk factors for dementia. It carries a population attributable risk of 2%⁴. They also may experience some of the negative mental health effects of extreme climate events. These include suicide ideation, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It also is important to note that older persons, and especially those in long-term care settings may become the subject of abuse and neglect during climate-induced evacuation.

Nonetheless, when considering older persons’ susceptibility, it is important not to group all older persons as a single group. It is older women, older people of color, older people who live in poverty, residents of long-term care settings, older persons with mental or cognitive conditions, older persons with physical impairments, and older persons who live in the developing world, who are more susceptible to the negative effects of the changing climate. This susceptibility of older persons to the changing climate has been attributed not to their age alone but also to the limited social, financial, and community support available to them, especially at times of threat⁵. Hence, the role of structural and institutional inequalities cannot be underestimated.

There is a scientific consensus that human (in)action is responsible for the changing climate, which among other things is a direct result of our growing carbon footprint². In this statement, we argue that not only are humans responsible for the changing climate, but also to disasters which occur because of the changing climate. Therefore, we believe that the term

climate change-induced disasters should be avoided. Although the climate might pose hazards, it is humans' failure to mitigate and adapt to the changing climate, which results in disasters⁶. In this statement, we wish to turn the spotlight to structural and institutional inequalities which make certain groups of older persons particularly susceptible to the negative effects of the changing climate.

An important lacuna can be found in current climate change policies. There is a shortage of policy, which explicitly targets older persons in the case of climate change mitigation and adaptation. This is even though older persons are particularly susceptible to the negative impact of the changing climate. These groups of older persons, who have shown to be susceptible to the negative effects of climate change also have contributed less to the changing climate and are less likely to be involved in climate change mitigation and adaptation policy. Their voices are unheard and not reflected in national and international policy provisions. Hence, inequalities prevail regarding all aspects of the changing climate. The limited acknowledgement of older persons and other susceptible groups in current climate change policies results in their neglect by social, health, and financial institutions, which are supposed to protect their health and wellbeing. The absence of mention of specific protection of older persons in current climate change policies is a result of ageism, but may further contribute to age-based discrimination and to the social of older persons.

The climate change movement is one outlet to impact policy change. However, currently the movement is characterized by its youthful nature⁷. Moreover, at least some of the climate change discourse is characterized by a blaming tone, which assigns the responsibility for the changing climate on older generations who have failed to preserve the environment. Older persons often are characterized as greedy geezers, who have been acting in their own self-interest, while neglecting the impact their (in)actions have had on the

environment and the climate and subsequently on future generations. These characteristics of the climate change movement could potentially hamper older persons' involvement in it.

Nonetheless, despite challenges to the involvement of older persons in the climate change movement, there are several examples of organizations, which explicitly target climate change policy, while stressing the disproportional effects of the changing climate on older persons. For instance, the Raging Grannies started in the mid 80's of the previous century in British Columbia, Canada. The Raging Grannies is composed of older women, who explicitly attempt to mimic ageist stereotypes of older persons to bring attention to the environment as well as to other social issues. On their website, the Raging Grannies state: "We are out in the streets promoting peace, justice, social and economic equality through song and humor." Another group, called, KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz, is composed of Swiss older women. The group has recently filed a lawsuit at the European Court of Human Rights against the Swiss government for its inaction in the case of the climate change crisis. According to KlimaSeniorinnen, because only people with legal standing can sue, they have formed an association which emphasizes the susceptibility of older women. This susceptibility, however, serves as a leverage for the benefit of society at large as children, older men, and people with disability also are highly susceptible to the negative impact of the changing climate. Of note is the fact that both organizations emphasize intersectionality of older age and female gender, thus attempting to overcome structural barriers which hamper older women's involvement in climate change mitigation and adaptation policies.

Although these efforts are encouraging, they represent the global north. Much less is known about the climate movement and the role of older persons in the global south. This is even though it is older persons, especially in the global south, who potentially have a traditional body of knowledge that can be beneficial for the development of sustainable energy solution. The global south is already taking much of the burnt associated with the

changing climate. Yet, it is the global south, which is now asked to transition to sustainable energy solutions at the expense of benefiting from existing industry that might advance the economy in the short run yet harm the environment in years to come. Moreover, these efforts are age-and gender- segregated and although there is no doubt that older people and especially older women are disproportionately affected by the changing climate, there is ample research to show that intergenerational solidarity and collaboration are particularly effective in combating ageism. Hence, we would argue here that instead of relying on age-segregated organizations, current efforts should be geared towards fostering greater collaboration between young and old to impact climate change policy.

Recommended steps for building back better:

- We argue for the need to acknowledge the susceptibility of older persons to climate change events, while paying particular attention to intersectionality (e.g., older age and female gender, older age and mental health or neurocognitive conditions).
- The climate change movement should divert from its age-segregated nature and instead strive towards intergenerational solidarity. Under such circumstances, we expect higher levels of collaboration between all sectors of society towards a healthy climate. This also is likely to result in reduced ageism towards a world for all ages.
- Climate change policy should specifically target susceptible groups including older persons with mental, cognitive, or physical conditions, people who live in poverty, women, refugees and migrants, and older persons in the developing world.
- Some future events are not yet foreseen or imagined at this point. Hence, policy and health systems should remain flexible to meet future challenges. Voices of older persons need reflection in policy provisions. Media has a vital role in showcasing the specific vulnerabilities of older people to climatic changes.

- It is important to acknowledge the fact that since the changing climate is now becoming more severe, it is younger persons who will be most affected by the changing climate for a longer period.
- A legally binding United Nations convention on the rights of older persons is now imperative and urgently needed to protect and promote the rights of older persons, everywhere, while addressing the impact of climate change.

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