

# UN urges protection for elderly as world grays (Update)

October 1 2012, by Elaine Kurtenbach

---



In this Saturday, Sept. 29, 2012 photo, elderly women rinse their mouths with holy water at a shrine in Tokyo. The U.N. Population Fund has urged governments to build safety nets to ensure that older people have income security and access to essential health and social services as the world's elderly population grows. The U.N. agency said discrimination toward and poverty among the aged are still far too prevalent in many countries. It released its report Monday, Oct. 1, 2012 in Tokyo, capital of the world's fastest-aging country. (AP Photo/Itsuo Inouye)

(AP)—The fast aging of Japanese society is evident as soon as one lands at Tokyo's Narita airport and sees who is doing the cleaning. Young people tend to take such menial jobs in other countries, but here they are often held by workers obviously in the second half-century of their lives.

Having the world's highest percentage of older people is creating unique challenges for Japan, but a report released Monday by the U.N. Population Fund warns that they will not be unique for long. Japan is the only country with 30 percent of its population over 60, but by 2050 more than 60 other countries, from China to Canada to Albania, will be in the same boat.

The report urges governments to summon the political will to protect the elderly and ensure they can age with good health and dignity. Discrimination toward and poverty among the aged are still far too prevalent in many countries, it says, even in the relatively wealthy industrialized nations.

The problem is worse for women, whose access to jobs and health care is often limited throughout their lives, along with their rights to own and inherit property.

"More must be done to expose, investigate and prevent discrimination, abuse and violence against older persons, especially women who are more vulnerable," the report says, calling on countries to "ensure that aging is a time of opportunity for all."

"We need bold political leadership," said Babatunde Osotimehin, executive director of the Population Fund. "Aging is manageable, but first it must be managed."

In some countries, such as Latvia and Cyprus, about half of those over 60 are living in poverty. And even in highly industrialized countries such

as Japan the elderly struggle to get some services.

Hisako Tsukida, a 77-year-old retired elementary school teacher in Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto, is living what sounds like a dream retirement life, taking tai chi and flower arrangement lessons and visiting a fitness center for spa treatments and muscle training.

But her current leisure followed many years of caring for her ailing husband and then for her mother. Japan's elderly often take on enormous burdens in caring for older relatives at home.

Tsukida spent years trying to find a nursing home for her mother, now 100, and finally succeeded about six months ago after a rare vacancy opened up. But now she wonders about the time when she'll have to go through the same struggle for herself.

"I wonder if I could do this again when I'm even older and need to find myself a place to go," she said.

The U.N. report said that policy discussions of all kinds must include a consideration of problems facing the aging if mankind is to reap a "longevity benefit" from people's longer life expectancies.

Governments should build safety nets to ensure older people have income security and access to essential health and social services, it said. The report cited data from the International Labor Organization showing that only about a fifth of all workers get comprehensive social insurance.

Aging is no longer solely an issue for rich countries. About two-thirds of people over 60 years old live in developing countries such as China, and by 2050 that figure is expected to rise to about 80 percent.

One in nine people—810 million—are 60 or older, a figure projected to

rise to one in five—or more than 2 billion—by 2050.

Even Japan, the world's third-largest economy, offers only meager social benefits, though government-subsidized services provide affordable household help and daycare in some areas.

Neighbors and religious groups often help older people, and public facilities have been vastly improved from a few decades ago, with elevators and other handicapped access now the norm.

The discovery earlier this year, though, that an aged couple and their son apparently had starved to death in their home in a Tokyo suburb highlighted Japan's own growing problems with poverty and unemployment.

Growing numbers of people suffering from dementia pose another challenge. About 35.6 million people around the world were afflicted with the disease in 2010, a number growing about 7.7 million a year and costing about \$604 billion worldwide.

Provisions must be made for the infirm to ensure their basic human rights, the U.N. report says.

In many countries, including the United States, India, Brazil and Mexico, statistics show the elderly often pay more into pension systems over their lifetimes than they receive in return. Meanwhile, as retirement ages are raised and benefits cut due to ballooning deficits, the elderly are paying proportionately more in taxes.

The report blamed a bias toward youth in mass media, which stereotype aging as a time of decline, for lowering expectations about life for older people. It noted that older people often live highly productive, enjoyable lives if they have good health and reasonable levels of income.

The report's authors also argued against a prevalent belief that older workers should make way for younger job seekers, saying that way of thinking is based on the mistaken idea that there is a finite number of jobs and that workers are perfectly interchangeable.

"More jobs for older people do not mean fewer jobs for younger people," it says.

**More information:** U.N. Population Fund: [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)

Copyright 2012 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: UN urges protection for elderly as world grays (Update) (2012, October 1) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-10-urges-elderly-world-grays.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--