Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on the Fourth Review and Appraisal of the 
Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 

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Opening remarks 
by the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, 
Ms. Claudia Mahler 

Excellencies, 
Ladies and gentlemen, 
Dear colleagues and friends, 

It is an honour for me to address you today via video message. First, allow me to warmly thank the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) inviting me today to contribute to this important conference on the implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, to which I would like to offer a human rights perspective, as the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons. 

In 2002 the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) became the global aspirational policy document on ageing, aiming at responding to the opportunities and challenges of population ageing in the twenty-first century. While MIPAA is not a human rights document, it contains a number of references relevant to human rights and adopts a conceptual approach that is in accordance with human rights principles. 

There are new emerging issues, such as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, climate change and digital transformation, and their impacts on people in older age which need to be discussed. From my perspective, there are additional layers which need to be addressed like gender, or other grounds of discrimination because inequalities are aggravated in older age. 

MIPAA along with the current international human rights framework have shown their limitations, especially in the face of the recent global challenges. Since I started my tenure in April 2020 as Independent Expert in the beginning of the pandemic, I have stressed on several occasions that the lack of a comprehensive international legal instrument dedicated to the promotion and protection of the rights of older persons has significant implications. The absence of inclusion and recognition of age discrimination and ageism in the current human right framework has the most impact on the lives of older persons. 

As we know, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been horrifying for millions of older persons, especially those in need of long-term care. In many countries of the ESCAP region, COVID-19 related deaths have been linked to older age particular in long-term care facilities, in some high-income countries. Cases of neglect and elder abuse were also on the rise as well as the overall increase in age discrimination and ageist attitudes, leading to trauma
and stigma. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that current legal provisions are not enough to ensure the dignity of people of all ages.

Ageism and age-discrimination are very often not clearly addressed and very easily justified. Ageist attitudes and negative stereotypes where visible in public discussions and the media – this seems to be a role-back because the positive age images have been deleted older persons were framed as dependent, frail and vulnerable beneficiaries and described as dispensable and very often as causes for restriction of rights. The positive contributions of older persons especially older women as carers for older and younger relatives where not taken into account.

In the face of new challenges and while the population continues to age older, policies and laws related to health and social support systems need to be adapted to the new and growing needs of our societies. Older persons are the most heterogenous group of the population. A specific age-limit will not serve the purpose of defining who might be part of the people in older age.

States must adjust their current social and health policies to the needs of older persons, including services that consider gender and disability. Older persons must be recognised as right-holders and should be able to exercise their rights in all circumstances. A human rights-based approach for older people, will enable us to combine efforts and therefore, maximise the benefits available to older persons. It will also increase the human rights protection for older persons.

It is important to prevent older persons from becoming dependent. To do so, States should promote active and healthy ageing, foster age-friendly environments, protect autonomy and active participation in all aspects of society. Access to health services should also be improved by providing for those living in rural or in remote areas.

To maintain maximum independence and autonomy of older persons, much more should be done regarding the use of, and access to new technologies (including digitalization, robotics, automation, and artificial intelligence), as well as education, employment, transport, and housing.

The translation of all these measures into a comprehensive international legal framework would contribute to give states guidance to better implement MIPPA and lead to an inclusive and age-friendly society. Older persons have a lot to contribute to our societies and we should never forget human rights do not diminish in older age.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you all fruitful discussions for all our future and the next generations of older persons!