



Session Three: Solutions Towards Aging Women's Health Challenges

In 2020, there were an estimated 727mn people aged 65 years or over worldwide. This number is set to double by 2050, reaching over 1.5bn persons. Women accounted for 55% of the global population aged 65 years and over and those that are aged 80 years or over constituted of 62%¹. In the sub-Saharan African region, females aged 65 and over were estimated to be over 19mn².

Just as the childbearing years bring a variety of pressures (biological, socio-cultural and economic) to bear on the health of women in the African region, so do the years that follow. Many of these pressures are a continuance of stresses that have existed since birth. Health problems such as malnutrition, malaria or diarrhoeal diseases precede the onset of sexual activity and continue through the reproductive years and beyond. Then, as the life course continues, African women are faced with new risks and their morbidity and mortality profile begins to alter. HIV/AIDS continues to take the greatest toll on lives, but noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) start to weigh quite heavily - notably, cardiovascular diseases, cancers (breast, cervical, colon, lung, ovarian and stomach), diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases. Other health problems experienced by women that decrease physical and cognitive functioning include arthritis, depression, dementia, poor vision (cataracts) and hearing loss³.

Some of these health problems in the later years are a result of a combination of genetic, physiological, environmental, and behavioural factors. This includes exposure to risks first encountered in youth, including tobacco and alcohol use and a diet with high content of cholesterol, saturated fat and salt, but lacking in fresh fruits and vegetables. Health problems in this age group may also reflect a lack of physical exercise, excessive physical stress especially in farming, in gathering and carrying food commodities, wood, water and other goods, and in nurturing children. They may also reflect a lifetime of exposure to violence and accidents in farms, the streets, or homes. Additionally, being overweight and obese is also characterised with a range of chronic conditions including diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease, affect women disproportionately in the Region. Urban population growth and rising incomes across Africa are also associated with diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

The reason women are experiencing these types of disabilities more than men is due to several determinants of health for example inequities in norms and policies that disadvantage women, household structures and higher rates of unpaid or informal sector work leading to poverty which affects nutrition and health. These factors increase the vulnerabilities and reduce access to much needed and effective health services⁴. When it comes to conditions like depression, dementia, arthritis, poor vision and hearing loss, in the African region there is lack of information, stigma and cultural issues which are significant barriers that prevent people from seeking help.

As governments across the continent strive towards providing equitable access to healthcare in the midst of the "double burden" of disease of communicable and non-communicable diseases, it is vital that all sectors work together to accelerate solutions that strengthen health systems to respond to the public health crises and continue to provide quality care. Effective interventions to address diseases in women as they age - both communicable and non-communicable - require a life course approach where health is considered from preconception through adolescence and adulthood. In order to achieve this, women's holistic health must be prioritised. Women should be empowered through health education in their early years so that they have the information required to lead a healthy life.

The public sector can form linkages with the private sector in order to strengthen the response to healthcare provision and accessibility to women as they age:

- Deliver essential health services - scaling up early detection and coverage
- Educate health professionals - train the health workforce and strengthen the capacity of health systems at primary care level to address the prevention and control of diseases
- Obtain knowledge and lessons learned - strengthen and orient health systems to address diseases and their risk factors in women through people-centred health care and UHC
- Provide financing for the procurement and distribution of essential commodities - prioritising cost-effective high-impact interventions, improve the accessibility and availability of basic diagnostics and essential medicines including the use of generics which can treat major diseases in both public and private facilities.
- Accelerate innovation - use of digital technologies to increase health service access and efficacy for disease prevention and to reduce the costs in health care delivery
- Strengthen policymaking - advocacy and well thought out policy reform, backed up by effective legislation.



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The Session

Diseases related to aging in women in Africa can no longer be overlooked, and urgent government funding and public-private partnerships are needed to help control the growing burden. These programs will benefit not only the population at risk but also the economy of these countries since these are long-term diseases. The session seeks to provide an advocacy and action framework for solutions towards aging diseases in women in Africa.

Key areas of discussion will be:

- National and regional strategies supporting diseases related to aging in women under the UHC frameworks
- Awareness of diseases related to aging among women and the challenges they face in access, quality and finance.
- Innovation in diseases related to aging and care for women: Private sector - what are they doing? What can be scaled?

¹ UN DESA, "World Population Ageing 2020 Highlights", 2020.

² World Bank, "Population ages 65 and above, female - Sub-Saharan Africa | Data", Data.worldbank.org, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.65UP.FE.IN?end=2020&locations=ZG&start=1960>. [Accessed: 20- Sep- 2021].

³ WHO, "Women's Health", WHO | Regional Office for Africa, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/womens-health>. [Accessed: 20- Sep- 2021].

⁴ WHO, "WHO package of essential noncommunicable (PEN) disease interventions for primary health care", Geneva, 2020.

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