

The elderly:

Undefined and unprotected

The elderly are the fastest growing segment of the population around the globe. Their rights are still largely undefined and unprotected. An adult literacy scheme in Bangladesh addresses the needs of older people to read and write

■ The elderly are the fastest growing segment of the population around the globe but their rights are still largely undefined, and action on a number of fronts is required. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights and other relevant international instruments do not specifically mention the elderly in their provisions. While they constitute a 'major group' the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) of June

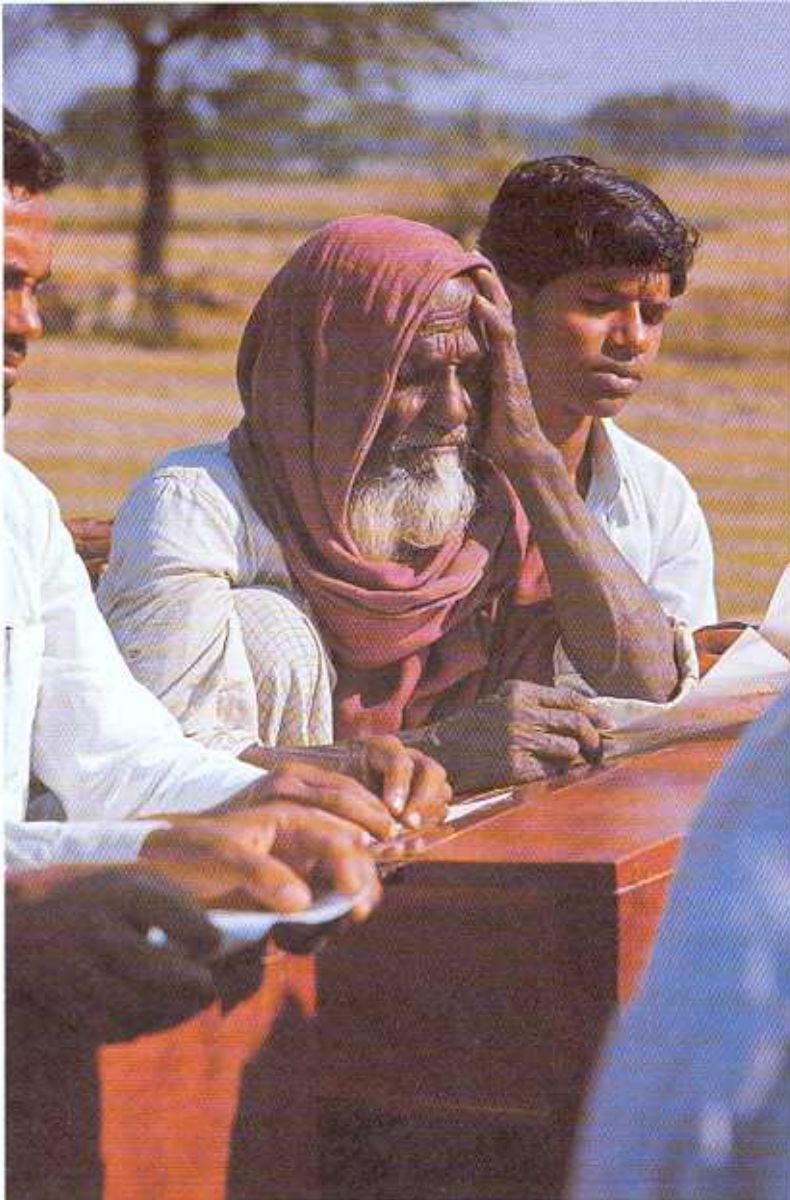
1992 did not include the elderly among the categories of major groups cited in its document Agenda 21. Further, in many countries the rights of older citizens are still not recognized or not protected adequately.

Older persons see their rights eroded or violated in a number of areas. Many suffer physical and mental neglect, and even violence within the family. Their dignity is often destroyed through negative stereotyping by the media. Many lack adequate shelter, food and health care. They encounter discrimination in employment. Their economic security is frequently eroded and they lack financial resources of their own (the family is not the answer to all elderly needs). They may also be unable to obtain or to afford legal assistance if required. Cultural beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples are being undermined in ways that endanger the protection these peoples have traditionally accorded their elderly. Older persons are often denied the right to participate in decisions that affect them at the local, national and international levels.

In recent years the United Nations and some countries have begun to address the rights of older persons. We urge the World Conference on Human Rights to focus attention on protecting the rights of the elderly around the globe, and, in particular, to ensure that in the future:

- Both age and gender are considered in the preparation of instruments that deal with issues relating to employment, health, housing, economic security, food security, criminal acts and physical abuse, the family, media and indigenous peoples.
- The right of the elderly to present their own case is fully respected.
- States required to report on the implementation of the International Covenants on Human Rights and other relevant international instruments (such as those dealing with racial discrimination, discrimination against women, refugees, torture, apartheid, population, children, environment) are requested to include in their reports information on the elderly to be considered by the various bodies entrusted with the review of these reports.
- Data and statistics on violence against individuals are compiled and broken down by age and sex.
- The United Nations, governmental and non-governmental institutions work towards finding solutions for the long-term care of the elderly, especially those who are disabled, single and live alone.

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