

**Written Statement Submitted by  
Michel Gabaudan,  
Regional Representative for the United States of America and the Caribbean,  
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**



**Hearing on the Health and Welfare Needs of Elderly Refugees and Asylees**

**before the  
United States Senate  
Special Committee on Aging**

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Mr. Chairman, and members of the Committee, I would like to express UNHCR's appreciation for the opportunity to testify before you today. As this committee is aware, the elderly often face unique challenges, and today I would like to brief you on a particular vulnerable category, which is the elderly refugee population.

UNHCR is the UN refugee agency mandated by the international community to ensure refugee protection and to identify durable solutions to refugee situations. Our mandate defines a refugee as a person having a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

In 1997, UNHCR conducted a survey which highlighted the needs of elderly refugees during flight and once they have arrived in the country of first asylum. The survey indicated that older refugees actually make up a larger proportion of the refugee population than previously thought. Elder refugees comprise approximately 10% of the population of concern to UNHCR, and in some settings this percentage is actually higher. Moreover, the elderly face distinct protection challenges that often differ from the rest of the refugee community. These individuals are hindered by their age and are often discriminated against due to their disabilities. For example, in Eastern Europe the overall refugee population had a large percentage of elderly. With the dissolution of the Former Soviet Union, elders witnessed the disintegration of their traditional support systems including health and pension plans, thus adding to their vulnerability. In 2006, the elderly still comprised 17% of all the Armenian refugees.

When the 1997 survey was released, UNHCR increased its efforts to identify the problems of older refugees and to propose solutions to address their needs. Our High Commissioner at the time, Mrs. Sadako Ogata, made a statement that recommitted the agency to this population: She noted, "The elderly are among the most invisible group of refugees and displaced persons, and I hope to change that."

During times of war or conflict, seniors face the erosion of social support structures which have traditionally assisted them, largely as a result of separation from and dispersal of their families. Often, during flight, families make difficult decisions resulting in abandonment of their elders because of their lack of mobility and poor state of health. For example, in Sudan and Yemen, some elders have become completely marginalized by society. As a result, they are forced to survive as beggars, invisible to humanitarian aid agencies. Because of bad nutrition, poor living conditions and a lack of medical attention their life expectancy is significantly decreased.

The protection challenges of the elderly do not end once they have arrived in the country of first asylum. They often have trouble accessing refugee registration systems, which serve as the trigger for the identification of durable solutions for refugee situations. As a result, elders are often for example overlooked in resettlement efforts. The unfortunate result is that elders are sometimes left behind in refugee camps as their families start a new life in a third country. Resettlement programmes themselves-which should benefit

the most vulnerable- ironically also at times discriminate against the elderly especially when resettlement countries apply stringent health requirements. Long term refugee situations can result over time in a residual caseload comprised of elderly refugees who have not been provided a durable solution and are unable to obtain assistance from the family or the government. This can result in chronic dependency on UNHCR and other relief agencies.

It should be noted that the United States is one of the countries which supports the resettlement of the elderly and refrains from the application of health requirements. UNHCR greatly appreciates the openness of the United States to accepting such refugees.

Three years ago, based on recommendations of three independent evaluations which concluded that UNHCR was not doing enough to address the needs of the most vulnerable, UNHCR, in collaboration with its NGO partners, developed an approach to enhance refugee protection for all members of the community. This is known as the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming initiative (AGDM). The purpose of the AGDM project was 1) to promote gender equality and respect for the rights of refugee women and children; 2) to apply an age and gender analysis to operations through community development; and 3) to operationalize policies relating to the protection of refugee women and children.

Traditionally, women and children have been considered the most vulnerable among refugee subpopulations, but following the launch of AGDM, UNHCR found that the elderly refugee population also faces critical protection challenges. The AGDM process brought to the surface many of the needs of the elderly that have historically been overlooked. This included a lack of mobility, insufficient attention to chronic illnesses, lack of employment opportunities, breakdown in traditional care systems, and inadequate shelter. Since the late 1990s UNHCR has strengthened its protection response for the elderly refugees and has raised awareness amongst its staff of these specific needs. As a result, a voice has been given to this vulnerable population and their needs have been given greater focus.

The support of the United States both in political and financial terms is critical to UNHCR's ability to fulfill its mandate of refugee protection and assistance. This partnership has greatly enhanced the international focus on populations at risk, including the elderly. We look forward to working with the Committee to continue to advance this progress so that elderly refugees can fully enjoy their rights and resume their lives in safety and dignity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today, and I would be happy to address any questions you may have.