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# towards Habitat III a gender perspective

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**towards Habitat III  
a gender perspective**



## Table of contents/Sommario

### Editorial/Editoriale

- Reading the New Urban Agenda in a gender perspective/*Leggere la Nuova Agenda Urbana secondo una prospettiva di genere*  
Antonio ACIERNO 5
- Gender contributions for the implementation of the Habitat III Urban Agenda/*Contributi di genere per l'attuazione dell'Agenda Urbana di Habitat III*  
Ana FALÙ 11
- Habitat III: theories and practices of the women facing the global challenges in cities/*Habitat III: teorie e pratiche delle donne di fronte alle sfide globali nelle città*  
Teresa BOCCIA 17

### Papers/Interventi

- Exploring Ageing, Gender and Co-producing Urban Space in the Global South/*Esplorare la terza età, il genere e la co-produzione dello spazio urbano nel Sud del mondo*  
Chiko NCUBE, Marcus ORMEROD, Rita NEWTON 23
- Where to walk women? Routes and fears that limit women's experience in the center of Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil/*Dove camminano le donne? Percorsi e paure che limitano le esperienze delle donne nel centro di Recife, Pernambuco, Brasile*  
Lúcia DE ANDRADE SIQUEIRA 37
- Women's right to the city. A feminist review of urban spaces/*Il diritto delle donne alla città. Un approccio femminista agli spazi urbani*  
Laura PÉREZ PRIETO 53
- The gendered dimension of leisure: the case of young women in Athens/*La dimensione di genere dello svago: il caso delle giovani ad Atene*  
Polina PRENTOU 67
- LGBTQ2+ Experiences of Public Safety: Theorizing Violence in the Queer City/*LGBTQ2+Esperienze di sicurezza pubblica: Teoria della violenza nella Queer City*  
Jen ROBERTON 79
- Habitat III: Towards Gender Sensitive Urban Planning/*Habitat III: Verso una pianificazione urbanistica sensibile al genere*  
Ana SANCHO MARTÍNEZ 91
- Cities for whom? Re-examining identity, to reclaim the right to the city for women/*Città per chi? Riesaminare l'identità, per rivendicare il diritto alla città per le donne*  
Alicia YON, SriPallavi NADIMPALLI 105
- Does the domestic space belong to women? An Assessment of the Housing in the New Indian Urban Agenda through the lens of gender/*Lo spazio domestico appartiene alle donne? Una valutazione dell'Housing nella Nuova Agenda Urbana Indiana attraverso le lenti di genere*  
Rewa MARATHE, Suzana JACOB 119
- Metropolitan dynamics in the XXIst century: some elements to think about gender and sexuality

- in urban spaces/ *Dinamiche metropolitane nel XXI secolo: alcuni elementi per riflettere sul genere e la sessualità negli spazi urbani*  
 María JAZMÍN LÓPEZ 135
- Better half of Bangalore. Improving spatial conditions for women working in blue- and white-collar industry/ *La parte migliore di Bangalore. Migliorare le condizioni spaziali per le donne che lavorano nell'industria come operaie e colletti bianchi*  
 Nikita BALIGA, Lidewij TUMMERS 147
- Where is women's right to the night in the New Urban Agenda? The need to include an intersectional gender perspective in planning the night/ *Dov'è il diritto delle donne alla notte nella Nuova Agenda Urbana? La necessità di includere una prospettiva di genere intersettoriale nella pianificazione della notte*  
 Sara ORTIZ ESCALANTE 165
- Approach to the quality of urban life from a gender perspective/ *Approccio alla qualità della vita urbana secondo una prospettiva di genere*  
 Blanca GUTIÉRREZ VALDIVIA 181

## Sections/Rubriche

### Events, Exhibitions, Conferences / *Eventi, Mostre, Convegni*

- Angelica, Bradamante... and the others: a convention at the Triennale Exhibition in Milan to discover women's thought in contemporary creativity/ *Angelica, Bradamante... e le altre: un convegno alla Triennale di Milano per riscoprire il pensiero femminile nella creatività contemporanea*  
 Francesca PIROZZI 197

### Studies, plans, projects/ *Studi, piani, progetti*

- Medieval persistences in the feminine living within an Apennine settlement of Southern Peninsular Italy/ *Persistenze medioevali nell'abitare al femminile in un insediamento appenninico del Mezzogiorno peninsulare d'Italia*  
 Mario COLETTA 201

### Annex/Appendice

- Draft Habitat III New Urban Agenda (New York, 10 September 2016)/ *Bozza della Nuova Agenda Urbana di Habitat III (New York, 10 settembre 2016)* 215

## Exploring Ageing, Gender and Co-producing Urban Space in the Global South

*Chiko Ncube, Marcus Ormerod, Rita Newton*

### *Abstract*

Women experience old age differently worldwide and their quality of life is impacted by an environment with both macro (societal, cultural) and micro (community, home) dimensions. There is an emphasis in debates on gender and the city, on the rights and development of girl children, and the needs and rights of younger “productive” and “reproductive” women. This paper argues that the vulnerabilities and contributions of older women in the Zimbabwean urban environment are rarely acknowledged. The absence of state support and inclusive policies creates an environment for exclusion and ignorance of the needs of older women in the design of human settlements and the

Abstract



*Harare - Zimbabwe*

provision of urban services. Older women in Zimbabwe, especially widows and those without children, are particularly vulnerable, both economically and socially. The contributions of older women are often part of the backdrop, despite the fact that they play important roles in the social and political discourse, such as caregiving, and intergenerational sharing of wisdom and experience. Applying the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen may be a useful contribution to the discourse. There is a need for a more balanced perspective that recognises the values and freedoms in urban development and the important implications for policy. The Age Friendly Cities model developed by the World Health Organisation emphasises the potential of re-positioning older people as central to the process of engaging in the production of cities.

#### **KEY WORDS**

*Ageing, Older Women, Urban Environment, Global South, Zimbabwe*

#### **Esplorare la terza età, il genere e la co-produzione dello spazio urbano nel Sud del mondo**

Le donne vivono l'invecchiamento in modo diverso nel mondo e la loro qualità di vita è influenzata dal contesto sia alla dimensione macro (sociale, culturale) che micro (comunità, a casa). C'è un'enfasi nei dibattiti sul genere e la città che si focalizza sui diritti e lo sviluppo delle ragazze, e le esigenze e i diritti delle donne più giovani "produttive" e "riproduttive". Questo articolo sostiene che le vulnerabilità e i contributi delle donne più anziane nell'ambiente urbano, sono raramente riconosciuti e spesso ignorati nella progettazione degli insediamenti, nell'ubicazione delle residenze e nella predisposizione dei servizi urbani. Le donne anziane, specialmente le vedove e quelle senza figli, sono particolarmente vulnerabili, sia economicamente che socialmente. Nonostante ciò, le donne anziane svolgono un ruolo importante nel discorso pubblico e politico, assistenziale, e nella condivisione intergenerazionale di saggezza ed esperienza. Applicare il metodo del *Capabilities Approach* sviluppato da Amartya Sen può costituire un utile contributo al dibattito. C'è bisogno di una visione più equilibrata che riconosca queste differenze nello sviluppo urbano e le importanti implicazioni per la politica. Si discute inoltre del potenziale di coproduzione quando si tratta del progetto e dello sviluppo di città amiche per la terza età.

#### **PAROLE CHIAVE**

*Terza età, Donne Anziane, Ambiente Urbano, Sud del Mondo, Zimbabwe*



## **Exploring Ageing, Gender and Co-producing Urban Space in the Global South**

*Chiko Ncube, Marcus Ormerod, Rita Newton*

### **Introduction**

Cities have become the centre of a global debate, mainly because of the incredible capacity that cities have to reduce barriers and find solutions for the lives of its urban citizens. Parallel to this is the ageing discourse as the heightened need to explore how and why urban environments can be inclusive for older people increases. Population ageing has become one of the major underlying demographic shifts and this trend is taking place in nearly all the countries of the world (UN, 2013) but is most dramatic in what this paper terms as global South nations. Consequently, the urban face of these cities is rapidly becoming the scene of social exclusion and deprivation with particular concern regarding the expansion of urban social-territorial spaces where formal or effective governance is absent. Africa has become the only continent where urban population and economic growth have not been mutually reinforcing, leading to a situation where the urban poor survive largely under conditions of informality (Duminy, Andreasen, Lerise, & Watson, 2014). Despite the many advantages that urban areas provide, the poorest residents often live in exceptionally unhealthy and dangerous conditions.

Many older people as urban citizens experience these divisions and forms of socio-spatial segregation as part of a constant rather than an exception in the social and spatial life of their cities. Women are of particular significance as they make up the majority of the old. A decaying urban home environment can bring an even greater sense of being trapped for older women and this may limit their ability to maintain a sense of self-identity and belonging (Buffel, Phillipson, & Scharf, 2012). Older women are central to the social reproduction of the city as a whole, however it is an integration that often assumes inequality rather than one which seeks to overcome it. Despite the growing interest and the increasing coincidence of age and gender, the contributions and vulnerabilities of urban older women are yet to fully visible. Under the pressure of the increase of population ageing and the large influx of people in cities, the built and social urban environment must begin to re-assess the critical and important hurdles keeping women from exercising their citizen rights. How urban environments choose to do this will determine to a large extent the quality of life, well-being and availability of agency and choice for older women. Discussions about older women in the context of global South cities are at an early stage. Combinations of factors have been understood to contribute to this lack of interest. Firstly, African countries are typically seen as “young countries” projected to grow slowly relative to other areas in the world. There is an emphasis in debates on gender and the city on the rights and development of girl children, and the needs and rights of younger “productive” and “reproductive” women. The competing (and possibly per-

ceived as conflicting) priorities for spending scarce public development resources, with a focus on younger age-groups or on macro-economic improvements makes it challenging for the welfare of older people to make public policy agenda. Secondly, the issue of ageing is often addressed within the structure of the household, but in Africa, the task is made more difficult by the fact that defining “family” in Africa is a very complex and a changing concept that includes extended families as well. Within developing county contexts it is therefore essentially about the ability of family networks to sustain multi intergenerational support in the face of changing family structures and in the context of poverty and pandemics (Hoffman, 2015). An additional concern and pressure is the weakening of customary family support mechanisms, which have traditionally protected older persons unable to sustain themselves.

This paper will explore the increased vulnerability and contributory role of older women in urban Zimbabwe, the changing role of family support systems and applying the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999). This is discussed as a lens for analysis in this paper. The is also discussed with its potentialities for an urban environment that is co-produced with older persons. There is a growing sense in which older people’s relationship with both macro (societal, cultural) and micro (community, home) dimensions is starting to be questioned in different ways. Are there ways of thinking about older people as urban co-producers, social actors actively engaged in the production and reproduction of cities? The World Health Organisation Age-Friendly Cities model is discussed as a framework towards this, developed to support governments to strengthen health and social policies that are responsive to an ageing population.

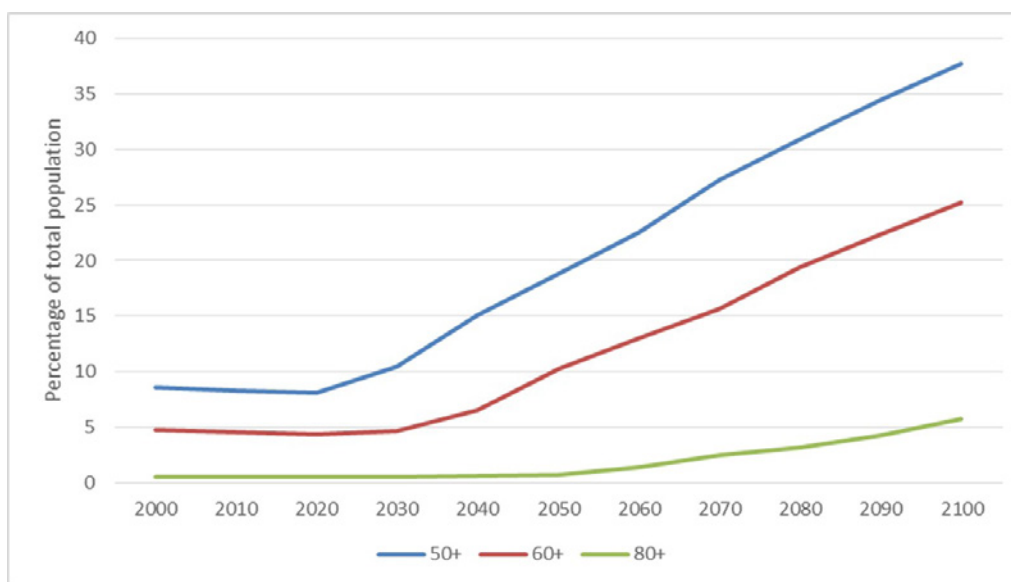
### **Older People in Urban Zimbabwe: The argument for a “feminisation of ageing”**

Zimbabwe is a Southern African country and like most countries in the global South it remains the youngest in terms of the share taken by persons aged 60 and over, however, there will be an increase on the absolute numbers of older people. Projections based on the 2012 national census show that 785 000 persons aged 50 and over were living in Zimbabwe in 2012 and by 2050, it is projected that there will be three times this number at 2, 556 000 older persons (UNFPA & HAI, 2012). The change in in the number of older people from 2000 - 2100 is illustrated in Figure 1 with increases expected for all sub-groups of older persons. Zimbabwe is becoming increasingly urbanised and the urban population is growing at a faster rate than the rural population. The pace of these demographic changes means that population ageing in terms of dependency will not be something Zimbabwe has to contend with in the next few decades. However, there is an opportunity for Zimbabwe to benefit from a potential demographic dividend; a large increase of economically active adults who enter the workforce as fertility declines. This means that if investments in education, health and economic opportunities for adults are expanded, this rapidly increasing number of older adults have the potential to provide a catalyst for national economic growth and development (Maharaj, 2013). This

will undoubtedly be a challenge particularly due to the fact that so many urban policies attempted in African cities have little positive impact, and often have highly negative and unforeseen circumstances (Watson & Agbola, 2013). There is an important relationship between the physical and social urban space and older person's health, and urban planners and key actors in the built environment particularly in rapidly urbanising and poor cities have not yet properly addressed this in Zimbabwe.

It is the combination of spatial characteristics (lack of services and unsafe physical environment) with an incapacity to flourish in the cash economy and the denial of legal and political rights that characterises the situation of the urban poor (Rakodi, 2014). Economic growth in Zimbabwe did not outstrip the increase in its population, in contrast to all other global South regions which have seen drastic improvements. Zimbabwe continues to experience a gradual but systematic decline of the formal economy and to the rapid growth of the informal sector, especially in the rapidly growing towns and cities. The trajectories of urban poverty in Zimbabwe have been associated with the development of increasingly informalised urban employment and "illegal" low-income housing solutions across the urban hierarchy. Urban Zimbabweans are increasingly forced into informal settlements (Potts, 2006) and many older persons rely on renting out backyard shacks to supplement their retirement as any pensions have been seriously eroded by inflation over the years (Tibaijuka, 2005). Due to the differential life expectancy of women and men (figure 3), there are simply higher numbers of older women than older men. The relationship between women, ageing and poverty in the context of Zimbabwe is of particular significance. Later life is associated with an increased probability of experiencing poverty, therefore population ageing will, other things being equal, result in higher rates of poverty (Barrientos, Gorman, & Heslop, 2003). Women make up not only the majority of the old in Zimbabwe (figure 2), but also the majority of the poor old. This is because they generally have less opportunity to earn a living during their lifetimes, tend to be less economically active in their older years than men, do not

Figure 1 - Predicted change in the proportion of the Zimbabwean population in older age groups from 2000 - 2100 (Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division - 2015. World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. NB: projections are using medium variants)



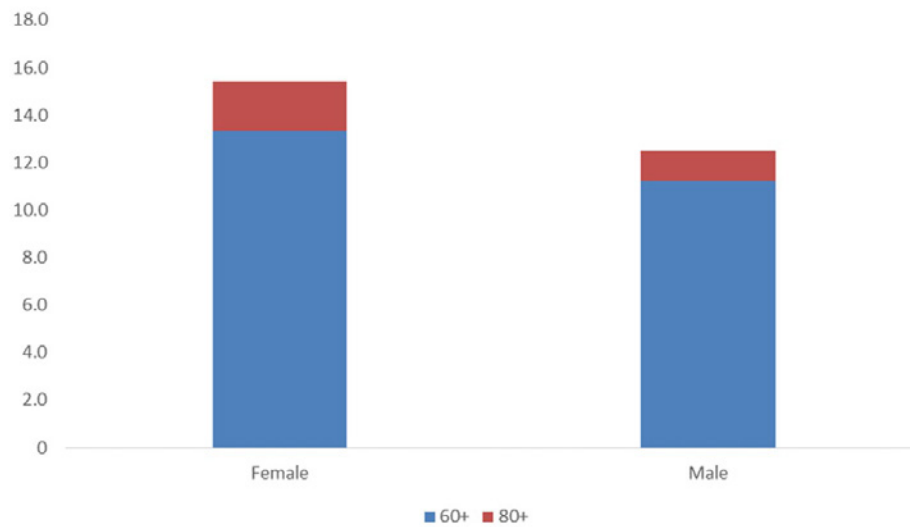


Figure 2: Percentage of female older persons among 60+ and 80+ for world population in 2015 (Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division - 2015. World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. NB: projections are using medium variants)

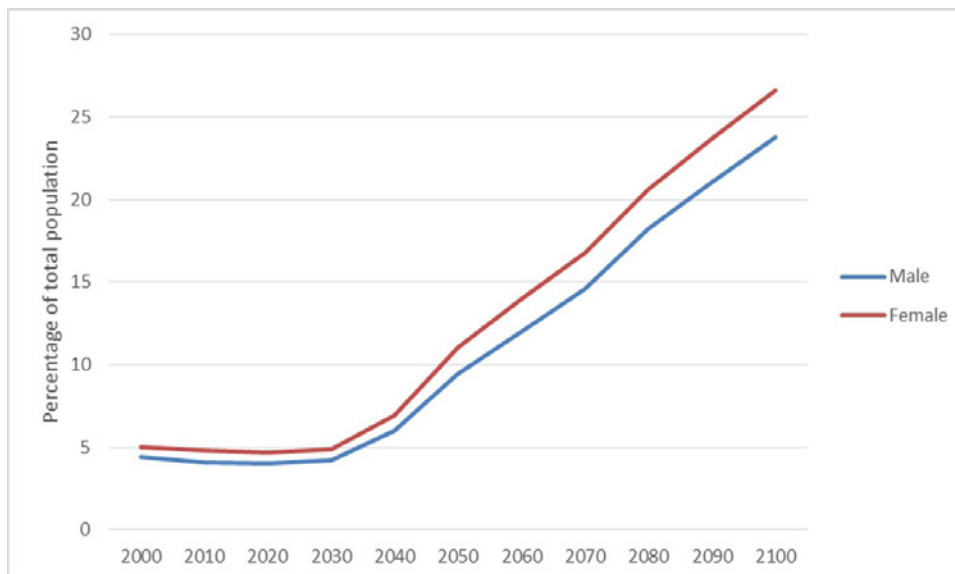


Figure 3: Predicted change in the proportion of the Zimbabwean population aged over 60 years from 2000-2100, by gender (using medium fertility variant) (Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division - 2015. World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision. NB: projections are using medium variants)

have access to formal social security systems and tend to have lower social status and economic rights when they are widowed. Older people, especially older and widowed women, are among the poorest as defined by poor people themselves (Barrientos et al., 2003). This means that older women who endure a lifetime of poverty, malnutrition and heavy labour may be chronologically young but “functionally” old at age 40. This so-called “feminisation of ageing” has important implications for policy.

Given that disability rates rise with age, there are substantially more older women than older men living with disabilities. This means that even if women on average live more years than men, many of these years may be spent living with disability or illness.

### **Older women as “active” urban contributors**

The diverse needs of older people are best viewed as a continuum of functioning (WHO, 2015) with polarised between two very different perspectives on ageing: contribution and vulnerability. Yet policy responses often appear disjointed, focusing on one end of the continuum, the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of older persons in urban society. Policies often do not account for the fact that, in all societies, older people both want to and do contribute economically and socially well into old age (Apt, 2001, 2002). Zimbabwean social policies supporting older persons have relied on tradition in a typical African household which claims that older people in Africa are not excluded from the process of productive and social participation, each person has a role to play, whether young or old (Apt, 2001, 2002, 2011). According to this tradition, the elder acts as the community educator, and guiding spirit behind many initiatives of the young, psychologically a very satisfying role. Although, the reality is more complex than the intergenerational inclusive family ideal suggests.

Apt argues that by “depicting older people as victims, objects of pity and a burden, we condemn ourselves as well as others to an existence where the normative values we seek for others do not apply”. Older women play important roles in public and political discourse, caregiving and volunteering work and intergenerational sharing of wisdom and experience (Beard, Kalache, Delgado, & Hill, 2012; UNFPA & HAI, 2012). They continue to be a valuable and productive economic resource, significantly contributing to the human capital. Despite their invisibility in research on productivity, older women tend to remain economically productive, have stronger social networks than men and still fulfil their obligations in the home. This aligns with the concept of “active ageing” originally developed during the United Nation’s Year of Older People in 1999 and further elaborated by the European Union and the WHO (2002). The approach to active ageing has focussed on a broader range of activities than those normally associated with production and the labour market, and has emphasised health, quality of life and the participation and inclusion of older people as full citizens (Walker, 2015). A change in story has been suggested for older people; from the representation of old age as a period of dependency and decline, to “active living” and social participation for older people. Yet this suggestion depends upon an interpretation of human nature that is underpinned on the idea that all groups of people including older women are consumers and producers of urban life.

### **Vulnerabilities and barriers to participating in urban society**

An important and sometimes overplayed discourse is the generalisation about the high levels of dependency and vulnerability of older people. Older persons are often particularly vulnerable to the influence of urban characteristics. They may spend more time in their neighbourhoods; have increased biological, psychological, and cognitive vul-

nerability; have changing patterns of spatial use; and rely more on community sources of integration (Buffel et al., 2012). Poor urban housing conditions, distance from health services and schools, unsafe neighbourhoods (because of both environmental hazards and high rates of crime and violence), and limited access to water and sanitation put an additional burden on older women who, within households, are responsible for child-care, food preparation, cleaning and washing (Tacoli, 2012). The cause of such a lack of safe and secure shelter is related partly to a lack of income (Mitlin, 2008), but it is also related to the inability of the state to provide a framework within which adequate shelter is plentiful and affordable, and hence access to secure tenure and basic needs are met. This leaves older persons having less autonomy and less financial independence. A position of high risk for older women, and the opportunity for this group to be infantilised today and seen as disconnected from the real “productive” world. The urban landscape for older women has considerable pressures and lacking of choice and mobility, with certain limiting cultural values restricting women’s economic empowerment and exacerbated their poverty in old age (Apt, 2011). Older women have lower levels of education and this limits their ability to obtain information, access services or take part in social, economic or political activities (UNFPA & HAI, 2012), making it more likely for them to work and live in informal spaces. An added level of vulnerability are the changes in household structures arising from such factors as migration, and HIV/AIDS, which have undermined informal old age support. With the absence of formal support structures, older women indeed may be becoming experts in dealing with this lack of “fit” between themselves and the built and social urban environment. It is therefore imperative for the diverse experiences of older women to be recognised in preventative policies rather than reactionary, to enable increased participation in the life of urban society.

### **Care for older persons: the changing landscape**

In many African countries, neglect and isolation of older persons is increasingly surfacing at two levels: at the family level and at the societal level (Apt, 2001, 2002, 2011). Mutual intergenerational support is seen as the ‘African way’ as opposed to the so-called Western ways, and a moral asset upon which the African care model can and must be built (Hoffman, 2015). This type of support is commonly known as “Ubuntu”. Increasingly, the indicators are of a trend away from the traditional perception of an obligation to the older person and the practice of caring for them. As a philosophy, ubuntu does not fit into the Global North model of formalised knowledge but it is flexible as well as being context and content dependant. Few Africans have access to pensions in old age, so nearly all rely eventually on their families for income and other support. In spite of this, numerous articles have evidenced that there is a steady decline in the traditional kinship structures – the “joint” and “extended” family systems which previously guaranteed older family members shelter, care and support (HAI, 2011; UN, 2013; WHO, 2011). Informal care is provided mostly by female members of the immediate or extended family or, alternatively by hired, informal unqualified help. Though to a large extent

the nuclear family, especially adult children are still caring for older persons it is evident that this is at premium and as result many of them are experiencing poverty, neglect and abandonment, ill-health and abuse. Rural to urban migration of the youth and the increasing geographic mobility has resulted in a loss of hands-on family support. Therefore, care of older persons in the community is only practiced with the mobilisation and support of voluntary organisations and NGOs. Despite this, older people in Zimbabwe remain overlooked without consideration as a policy issue due to the belief that families still remain as the strongholds of support.

### **The Grandmothers' disease and HIV/AIDS**

Hoffman (2015) describes the concept of vulnerability as an argument that tends to focus on the AIDS epidemic in Africa. This is particularly true in Zimbabwe. HIV/AIDS is portrayed as a unique phenomenon characterised by frailty disempowerment, insecurity and rupture, which inevitably translates into an inability and failure of families to manage. According to this argument and much of AIDS-impact literature, HIV/AIDS has caused the eventual disintegration of families and unfortunate reality for grandmothers who otherwise should be enjoying a restful retirement. The lack of a well-developed public health service in many African countries means that the overwhelming burden for caring for persons with AIDS is almost certain to fall on family members, including those of older age. For many decades in Zimbabwe, grandmothers customarily stayed behind to care for grandchildren, and have been dependent on remittances from their adult children. Research has shown that this takes place predominantly in rural areas but the trend is now being observed in urban areas. Situations of reciprocal exchanges have occurred in replace of retirement: grandmothers raised children; young children assisted with house work and "absent" adult children (the parents of the children being raised by these grandmothers) provided income (Madhavan, 2004). An increase in multigenerational living has begun to shape, offering independence for and co-dependence between older people and their families. What has emerged in urban society is the reinvention of the home to accommodate privacy and community at home and accommodate a new organisation of the extended family.

### **Lens for analysis: The capability approach**

There is a degree of truth in both of the generalisations of contribution and vulnerability: some experience good health, but others experience a significant loss of capacity and require substantial care. Policies cannot just focus on one end of this spectrum. The main shortcoming of these opposed viewpoints is that they portray later life as a common experience. To develop a more balanced perspective, it is necessary to appreciate later life as a fluid, complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Applying the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) may be a useful contribution to the above discourse. The capability approach is a theoretical framework that puts emphasis on

the importance of freedom to achieve well-being, where freedom to achieve well-being is understood in terms of people's opportunities to choose and how to be (Frediani, 2007). In 2003, Barrientos et al. argued for the adoption of Sen's approach and put forward that options of old age dependence; based upon undervaluing older people's contributions, impose a valuation of lives in purely instrumental terms. They further emphasise that "notions of dependency in later life contribute to a restrictive view of human agency purely in terms of future production, and preclude adequate consideration of the contribution of human agency to substantive freedom" (Barrientos et al., 2003). Capabilities are understood as people's freedom to achieve the values they have reason to value (Frediani, 2007). This approach, which sees the goal of development as expanding the freedom of individuals to pursue the life "they have reason to value," considers two main dimensions: what people have reason to value doing or being (their valued functionings) and people's abilities, freedom or opportunities to pursue or achieve these functionings (their capabilities) (Aboderin, 2007). These freedoms are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

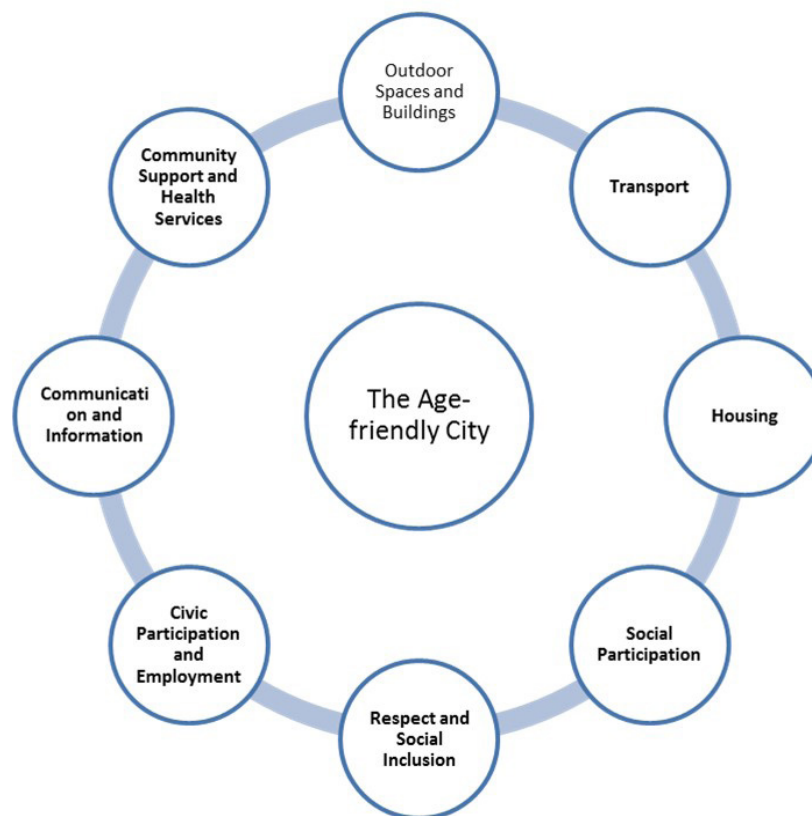
### **Developing Age-Friendly Cities and the potentialities of co-production**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) initiated the Age-Friendly Cities (AFC) model (WHO, 2007) which is a step towards the development of policies that recognise the freedoms and values of older persons. The AFC model adopted a locally-driven and "bottom-up" participatory approach and protocol that required a minimum of material and technical resources, and be adaptable to varying cultural and economic contexts (Plouffe & Kalache, 2010). This draws attention to the lack of services and enabling features for older people in global South cities. Physical accessibility, service proximity, security, affordability, and inclusiveness were important characteristics everywhere. Older people and care providers from the focus groups identified eight domains of city life that might influence the health and quality of life of older people (see Figure 4). These domains are: outdoor spaces and public buildings, transportation, housing, social participation, respect and social inclusion, civic participation and employment, communication and information, community support, and health services.

The features are intended to serve as a reference for other communities to assess their strengths and gaps, advocate and plan change, and monitor progress. The WHO work concluded that an age-friendly city should emphasise enablement rather than disablement, 'friendly for all ages' and not just 'elder-friendly'. The experience of the Age-Friendly Cities Network and "Age-friendliness" is already providing some insight into what might be needed to achieve the vision of an age-friendly community. Gaining political buy-in and engaging political leadership has emerged as a pivotal factor in developing Age-Friendly Cities because it addresses a real need among a key constituent group in a way that optimises the strengths of the city (Finkelstein & Netherland, 2010). Unfortunately for many developing countries, an image of the government has developed as being far from being a body that exists to implement the rights of citizens



Figure 4: The WHO framework for assessing the age-friendliness of a city: The eight domains of an Age-Friendly City (Source: WHO, 2007a)



(Hors, 2000). Gaining political commitment and responsiveness to citizen concerns can be a significant challenge. The Age-friendly Cities concept helpfully re-positions older people as central to the process of engaging in the production of an Age-friendly City across all its eight domains. This concept is termed co-production. This approach embraces the fact that older people should be recognised as urban citizens; they should have the ‘right’ to appropriate urban space; the ‘right’ to participate in decision-making surrounding the production of urban space and the ‘right’ to shape strategies for urban planning and regeneration. Aboderin and Ferreira (2008) explain that plans and policies have an obligation to realise the fundamental human rights of older persons. This includes recognising older people as key actors in society. This approach is not traditional in its ways, but rather cross-disciplinary, engaging with sociologists, politicians, older people and many other disciplines in the design and discourse of urban space.

Co-production, when considered, is viewed as a strategy used by citizens and the state to extend access to basic services with relatively little consideration given to its wider political ramifications (Mitlin, 2008). Co-production has been widely discussed in relation to the provision of state services both in the context of North and South. The concept has been explored as another set of discussions of forms of state-society engagement which are structuring planning and urban development processes in certain global South contexts (Watson, 2014). Watson explains that co-production represents one way in which poor urban communities have been able to secure significant improvements

to their living environments under conditions in which governments are either unwilling or unable to deliver land and services. A case of co-production in Zimbabwe is primarily linked to the work of the international non-governmental organisation (NGOs): Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). In a 2008 article Diana Mitlin interprets the work of the global NGO federation known as SDI, as “bottom-up co-production”. She explains this form of co-production as a political strategy used by citizen groups and social movement organizations to “enable individual members and their associations to secure effective relations with state institutions that address both immediate basic needs and enable them to negotiate for greater benefits” (Mitlin, 2008, p. 339). The SDI approach to co-production, she argues, is increasingly being used by the urban poor as a way of politically consolidating their base and extracting gains from the state. Mitlin (2008) argues that SDI’s co-production is different from standard “participation” or “partnership” arrangements. It is also more effective than “lobbying” or “protesting” in terms of actually gaining benefits, and the predominantly non-confrontational nature of the process used by SDI allows greater participation from women and better chances of securing political gains. In an informal settlement in Harare, Zimbabwe, the local planning authority sanctioned the enumeration process and actually participated in data gathering and in an SDI-organized “learning exchange” with other countries (Chitekwe-Biti, Mudimu, Nyama, & Jera, 2012). Local politicians appear to have engaged in community building in support of this process.

### Conclusion

This paper suggests that it is of value in exploring the situation of older women in the South. Many developing countries have young populations and the challenge is that governments have not put policies and practices in place to support their current older populations or made enough preparations for the future. There are also underlying implicit assumptions in global North strategies about choice and availability of options and in contexts with high levels of poverty, inequality and socio-spatial segregation, these assumptions do not necessarily hold. Therefore the idea of older women as “the subjects of rights and participants in actions affecting them” rather than merely “passive beneficiaries” (Frediani & Hansen, 2015) has not gained sufficient currency in the context of the African human rights system. The overwhelming reality is that older women are alienated from their environment and the co-production (Purcell, 2002) of the space they live in. Instead of conceiving older women as a social problem or burden, the new discourse constructs ageing as a positive process and emphasises the active roles older people continue to play in society. To develop a more balanced perspective, it is necessary to appreciate later life as a fluid, complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. Effective implementation of human rights, equality and non-discrimination cannot be achieved without the proactive involvement of local and subnational governments. New co-production ideas provide inspiration for planning theory and practice, to think how

planning might need to operate differently in a changing world, to unsettle assumptions on which current theories of engagement are based, and to expand the scope of debates in planning related state–society engagements to be more appropriately international. The ageing of urban populations will not only provoke demand for changes in the provision of services and the re-design of infrastructure, it will also influence the lifestyles of all age groups and the trajectory of urban development.

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