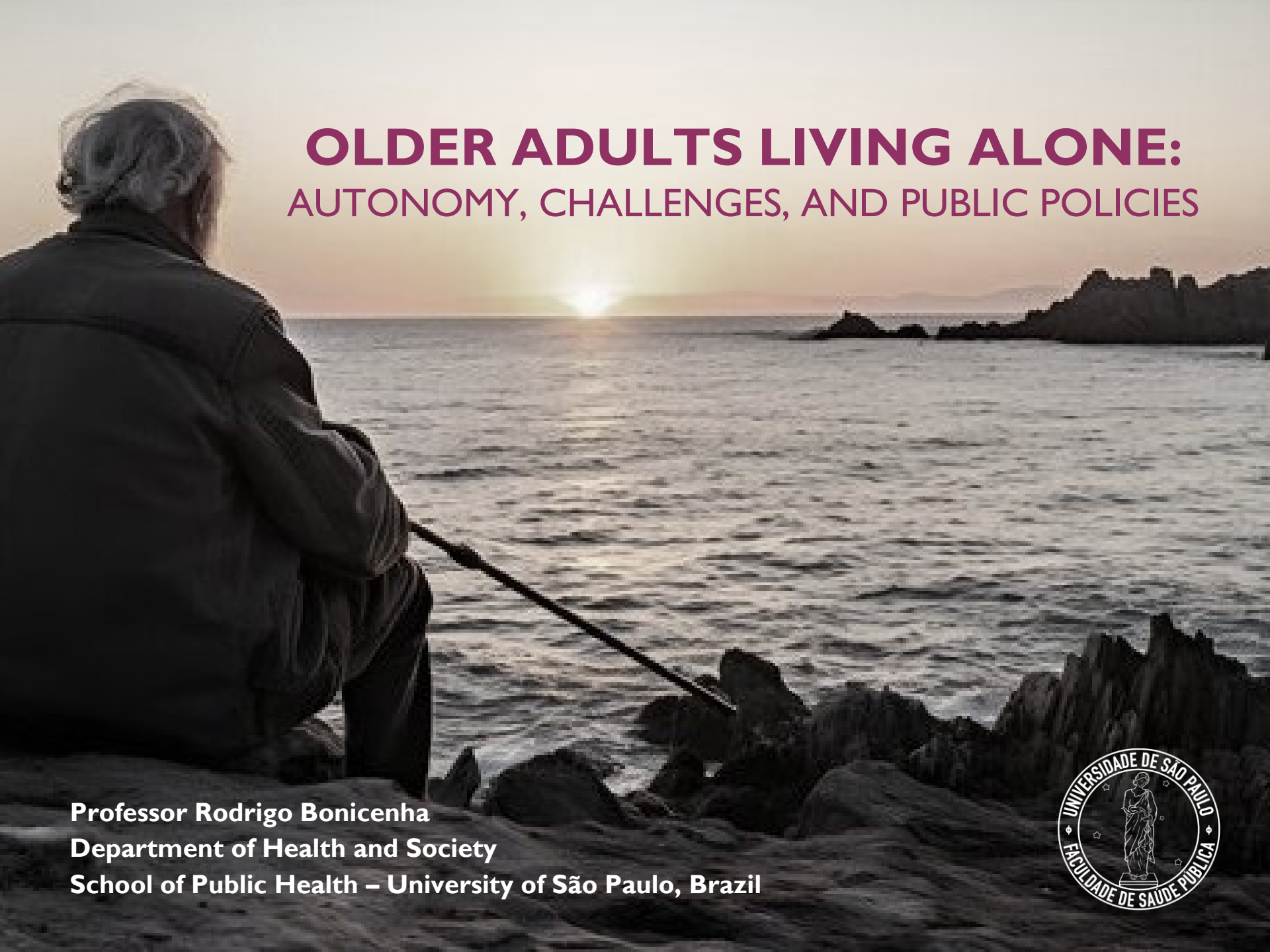

OLDER ADULTS LIVING ALONE:
AUTONOMY, CHALLENGES, AND PUBLIC POLICIES

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INTRODUCTION

- Who are the older adults living alone?
- Increasing number of single-person households among older adults.
- Not always synonymous with isolation or abandonment.
- Diverse subjective experiences and territorial contexts.

AUTONOMY AND PERSONAL FREEDOM

- Living alone is often associated with freedom, privacy, and control over daily routines.
- Policies should respect and support this autonomy.

"I pay my bills, do everything my own way, without depending on anyone."

"I go to the bathroom just in my underwear. Here, I feel comfortable."

"My wishes are these: I have my freedom. I can arrive whenever I want and leave whenever I want."

"Living alone makes us much freer."

LIVING ALONE ≠ BEING ALONE

- Many maintain emotional bonds and social support networks despite living alone.
- Others report that emotional isolation may affect their well-being and develop strategies to cope.

"Living by yourself is not the same as being alone. Being alone is when you don't have anyone around to share moments with."

"When I feel isolated, I try to compensate by talking to myself."

"Living alone doesn't mean living in isolation... The difference is that, even when I'm alone at home, I maintain connections and don't feel the weight of loneliness."

SUPPORT NETWORKS AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

- Informal networks of neighbours, friends, and pets play a crucial role.
- Community activities help prevent isolation.

"There's always a neighbour, like Marisa – she lives just opposite and helps me when needed."

"When I feel down, I look for a group or join meetings."

"I talk with the geese, with the chickens. I don't feel alone."

"I keep in touch with my brother and my nephews – that family bond, even if fragmented, is fundamental."

SAFETY AND EMERGENCIES

- Fear of falls, break-ins, and lack of immediate assistance.
- Physical adaptations and remote monitoring are common strategies.

“I opened the door and a young man ran in; I called the neighbor and the police came right away. It was frightening, but it also made me rethink my home's security."

“During my surgery, having to wake up every 6 hours, I realised how urgent it is to have help immediately when I’m alone.”

"One morning, I was coming down the stairs in my flip-flops, and I ended up slipping and hurting my back pretty badly. By the time I realized my phone was left upstairs, I was in so much pain I couldn't move. I had to call my neighbor to help me out, which really drove home how rough living alone can be."

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Isolation can cause distress, especially during illness, anxiety or pain.
- Psychological support and ongoing care are essential.

“I had an anxiety attack fearing I might get sick alone - I had to learn to breathe and face this feeling.”

"Living alone has forced me to get to know myself better; even though I have moments of sadness, I look for ways to take care of my mental health by joining groups and activities.”

"We eat and sleep whenever we want, but when health problems arise, the support we need is missing.”

URBAN MOBILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

- Urban barriers directly impact autonomy.
- Urban planning must consider the ageing population.

"It's hard to take the bus; many times, I have to take three or four, and it can be exhausting."

"Climbing stairs without help is a challenge."

"I struggle to cross busy streets, which makes me rethink whether I can go to certain places alone."

TECHNOLOGY AS AN ALLY

- Digital tools (monitoring devices, text messaging, digital networks) have a growing role.
- Digital inclusion needs continuous support, and alternatives must be guaranteed.

"My children call me several times a day – this digital connection ensures I never feel completely isolated."

"I started learning Excel and using spreadsheets to track my expenses."

FAMILY CHANGES AND LOSSES

- Living alone may be a result of widowhood, separation, and “empty nest”.
- Policies should include support for grief and rebuilding bonds.

"I lived with my mother for 56 years; her passing was a shock that completely changed my existence."

“I’ve lived alone for over 30 years – a result of losses in family relationships.”

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Living alone can represent autonomy but also brings challenges.

- Public policies must address:

  - Respect for autonomy.
  - Psychological and social support.
  - Urban and digital accessibility.
  - Integration of health, social care, and territorial planning.

THANK YOU!

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