

Confronting Ageism

Oppose negative prejudice and discrimination informed by ageism

Policy Position Paper August 2024

Introduction

Age & Opportunity has been challenging ageism for over 35 years. In this policy paper we consider the three dimensions of ageism – stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination – which act as drivers of inequality in later life. While we recognise that ageism and age discrimination affect people from across the life course, our focus here is on older persons.

A Global Challenge

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines ageism as a combination of how we think about age (stereotypes), how we feel about age (prejudice) and how we behave in relation to age (discrimination). From birthday cards to skincare, ageing is framed as a negative and the goal of slowing it as desirable. As a result, ageism has a negative impact on people's opportunities, levels of participation, health, and well-being, and occurs in a variety of contexts, such as the labour market, the local community, the social environment, the consumer society, political spheres, and the media.

Ageism is a global challenge. WHO report that every second person in the world is believed to hold ageist attitudes – leading to poorer physical and mental health and reduced quality of life for older persons and costing societies billions of dollars each year. It also shortens lives. The Centre for Ageing Better UK points out that 'If a previously unidentified virus was found to diminish life expectancy by over 7 years, considerable effort would probably be devoted to identifying the cause and implementing a remedy.'

Confronting age prejudice and discrimination is difficult because it is so ingrained in our society. Covid-19, however, made ageism more visible and obvious with the rights and freedoms of older persons curtailed by application of an arbitrary chronological age. As Irish policy analyst Ann Leahy pointed out 'It is as if every ancient stereotype and (as we thought) every debunked myth about what it is to age was suddenly centre stage in informing policies and discussions.'

Stereotypes and Prejudice

Ageism can affect how we think and feel about others we perceive as 'old' or 'young' and it can also affect how we feel about our own ageing process. The World Health Organisation points out that 'Ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time. From an early age, children pick up cues from those around them about their culture's stereotypes which are soon internalised. People then use these stereotypes to make inferences and to guide their feelings and behaviour towards people of different ages and towards themselves.' This process of 'othering' - holding negative attitudes to those who we see as different to ourselves - results in stereotypes which can be fixed, oversimplified and, in the case of older persons, more negative than positive. Age stereotypes are internalised (often implicitly) over the life-course and in older age we tend to apply these stereotypes to ourselves. This self-directed ageism can result in people conforming to their society's age stereotypes which in turn reinforces interpersonal and institutional ageism.

Prejudice is defined by the World Health Organisation as the emotional reaction or feeling that is directed towards a person because they are perceived to belong to a particular group. If stereotypes have fuelled the attitude that the characteristics of all these group members are negative, then people will generally not want to be associated with it. This is what Nelson called 'prejudice against our feared future self'. The Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing states that prejudice 'can contribute to the social isolation of the

oldest generations, limiting their ability to make a positive contribution to the collective whole, and perpetuating fear of aging in all individuals.’

Discrimination

Discrimination refers to behaviour rather than thoughts or feelings and it occurs when actions, practices or policies are directed at specific groups of people. In Ireland, Age is recognised in the Equal Status Acts since 2000 and in the Employment Equality Acts since 1998 as one of nine grounds or characteristics to be protected against discrimination. Despite this, the CSO (Central Statistics Office) reported in 2019 that, at 34%, age was the most common ground of discrimination experienced, followed by race (22%). This figure is rising rather than falling with CSO figures showing experience of age discrimination was 24% in 2014. Broken down by setting, the Department of Health’s Positive Ageing indicators report (2016) reveals that age discrimination was most evident in looking for work (87%); in shops, pubs, and restaurants (37%); banks (36%); the workplace (33%); transport (25%); health (24%) and public services (16%). Age & Opportunity research in 2023 found that older persons often do not consider themselves as rights holders and that there is limited awareness of the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty which is a legal obligation on public bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination.

Double Jeopardy

It is important to recognise that many other factors interact with ageing to determine the experience of older people. These may include gender, economic disadvantage, educational disadvantage, disability or belonging to another minority. This intersectionality can lead to what the Centre for Ageing Better UK call a ‘double jeopardy’ where members of already marginalised groups are further stigmatised as they age. Discrimination can also occur when policy and practice decisions which affect communities have a disproportionately adverse effect on older persons who may be more reliant on local services such as public transport and community care.

Gathering Evidence

More research is needed on ageism to understand the full extent of how it fuels discrimination in Ireland. On International Day of Older Persons 2020 Claudia Mahler, the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons said that older people are ‘chronically invisible’ in data. Stating that data is essential to shed light on structural and systematic ways in which older persons are left behind, she added that ‘in most countries, information about the lived realities of older persons is at best fragmented, at worst, non-existent.’ The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) reports that ‘Ireland is now in an ideal position to prepare for successful population ageing and to ensure that some of the lessons learned in societies that aged at an earlier stage are taken on board here - but to do this we urgently require accurate and representative health and socio-economic data.’

Policy Frameworks

There are many national policy frameworks already in existence with commitments to mitigate ageism and discrimination – all underpinned by a National Positive Ageing Strategy published in 2013. However, delay in implementation of policy relating to older persons has been an ongoing feature. In 2022 the Alliance of Age Sector NGOs, of which Age & Opportunity is a member, highlighted and challenged this pattern asking ‘Is the lack of urgency itself a manifestation of institutional ageism? What has made implementation so problematic?’ The Alliance has called for the establishment of an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People to include the role of monitoring and holding Government to account on the pledges it has made in respect of combatting ageism when adopting the 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing.

In addition to the Rome Declaration, Ireland has also ratified and adopted the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing which recognises that ‘national policy makers should address priority issues with direct implications for older people.’ Mainstreaming ageing

across all government departments will mitigate the disproportionate disadvantage that particular policies and services can have on older persons, effectively discrimination. (See Age & Opportunity's Policy Position on Mainstreaming [here](#).)

AGE Platform Europe, of which Age & Opportunity is also a member, argue that a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would 'improve older persons' awareness of their rights, empower them as rights holders, and help fight internalised ageist stereotypes that sometimes impede them from reporting rights violations.' We support the call for such a convention, applied to all older persons everywhere, as a key instrument in the fight against ageism.

Age & Opportunity is working to oppose stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination informed by ageism by:

- Calling on Government to establish an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People. This should include the role of monitoring and holding Government to account in relation to implementing existing policies and on the pledges it has made in respect of combatting ageism when adopting the 2022 Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing.
- Calling on Government to support the global movement for a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.
- Promoting the recognition of older persons as rights holders in all law, policy and practice contexts.
- Encouraging Government and other stakeholders to involve older persons and their representatives in law and policymaking at all levels to better reflect their rights and diverse needs and interests.
- Calling on Government for greater investment in research to gain a better understanding of ageism and how it enables discrimination.

- Calling on Government for greater investment in appropriate education, training, and awareness initiatives to recognise and oppose ageism.
- Facilitating intergenerational contact interventions to foster interaction and solidarity between people of different generations.
- Identifying ageist policies and practices and calling for their revision
- Promoting raised awareness of the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty among older persons (rights holders) and service providers (duty bearers).
- Calling for the development of age-friendly Government Policy on Recruitment/ Employment aiming to make the public sector a model of good practice in all aspects of employment and retirement.
- Encouraging the mainstreaming of ageing across all government departments including the development of impact assessments with specific focus on older people to mitigate against disproportionate disadvantage.

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