

Confronting Ageism

**Improve public understanding and discourse
about the issues caused by ageism**

Policy Position Paper August 2024

Introduction

Age & Opportunity has been challenging ageism for over 35 years. While Irish society has changed immeasurably during this time, age continues to be the area of discrimination most reported according to Ireland's Central Statistics Office (CSO). This doesn't just cause significant damage to individuals but also to our economy and society. The Centre for Ageing Better UK report that far from being harmless, 'Ageism causes people to be excluded from society and its institutions; it also leads people to limit their lives, activities, and aspirations, damaging their health and wellbeing. And the ageism that is engrained in our culture and institutions means that people are devalued and marginalised as they get older, creating divisions and inequalities in society.' Ageism also, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 'costs society billions of dollars'.

The World Health Organisation also claim that 'by seeping into our everyday lives, ageism can become normalised and, subsequently, remain unchallenged.' This is why improving public understanding about the issues caused by ageism is such a priority for Age & Opportunity. The human costs include social exclusion, poor health, and poverty. Ultimately ageism can lead to an earlier death. A 2002 study by Levy et al found that 'older people who hold negative views about their own ageing live on average 7.5 years less than people with positive attitudes.' Society also loses out on the contributions that older persons can make.

Raising Awareness

The *For Equality in Ageing* national awareness campaign launched in 2024 by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Authority aims to challenge societal and individual attitudes towards older people in Ireland. Age & Opportunity played an advisory role in this campaign which featured older persons telling their own stories about the effects of ageism. We welcome this first step and believe there is scope for more education and training aimed at different audiences of all ages and in a variety of settings. This is the approach endorsed by the World Health Organisation who recommend that ‘National governments and other actors should design and deliver formal and non-formal educational activities because these are among the most effective strategies to tackle ageism and are also likely to be affordable.’

The *For Equality in Ageing* campaign was promoted on a variety of media channels. According to the Centre for Ageing Better UK mass media ‘exercises untold power to shape what society thinks about certain groups of people and to propagate those views far and wide’. Broadcast, print and social media producers, along with advertisers, are therefore key players in confronting ageism and should be targeted specifically with evidence about the issues ageism causes for individuals and society and resources promoting best practice about how to report news and opinions about older persons and the ageing process.

Building capacity

Giving people of all ages the knowledge and skills to challenge ageism in the media and society is also important. Building awareness and capacity among older individuals and groups and continuing to support Age Sector NGOs is essential to creating a movement behind the social change that is necessary to confront ageism and its effects. 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. This Duty is a legal obligation on public bodies to have regard to the need to eliminate discrimination caused by ageism and other grounds.

Putting structures in place

In addition to nurturing a grassroots movement, ageism should be highlighted and monitored at the highest levels. To this end, we call for Government to establish an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People. This office would monitor and highlight to the public the issues caused by ageism and demonstrate action to mitigate them. A United Nation Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would support this office, further highlighting the issues caused by ageism. A Convention would provide the basis for provide the basis for rights-based advocacy, public awareness, and education on the rights of older people. It would also, as highlighted by Age Platform Europe, ‘draw public attention to the specific structural and cultural barriers that prevent older persons from enjoying their rights. It will prescribe the changes that are necessary for States to fulfil their obligations under the existing universal human rights instruments and encourage the establishment of mechanisms that older people can use to claim their rights.’

Gathering evidence

Public understanding is reinforced by evidence. Age & Opportunity maintain that more research is needed to produce evidence relating to ageism and its impacts on older persons and society in general. Recognising that all older persons are not the same, research should differentiate between age and circumstance. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights points out that ‘Disaggregation by age and other critical sociodemographic variables such as gender, living arrangements, education, employment and income, means that data can be properly analysed and compared with other

population groups.’ Research should take a human rights-based approach including consultation with older persons at all stages. Resources should be allocated to accessible public dissemination of research findings to improve public understanding about the impacts of ageism.

Age & Opportunity is working to improve public understanding and discourse about the issues caused by ageism by:

- Recommending and implementing actions to raise awareness and understanding about the impacts of ageism for citizens of all ages through:
 - multi-faceted and sustained public awareness campaigns targeted at different audiences of all ages and delivered in a variety of settings.
 - appropriate formal and non-formal education and training including school-based resources.
 - education, training, and resources to raise awareness of and reduce the incidence of ageism in the media.
 - initiatives to raise awareness and build capacity among older individuals and groups to recognise and resist the impacts of ageism.
 - increasing public awareness about the rights of older persons and the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.
- Calling on Government to establish an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People to include the role of monitoring and highlighting the impacts of ageism on individuals and society.
- Calling on Government to support the global movement for a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.
- Calling on Government for greater investment in research collection and data disaggregation to gain a better understanding of ageism and its impacts on individuals, communities and our wider society and economy.

References

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