

Diversity and Inclusion

Foster greater visibility and acknowledgement of the diverse range of older people

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Introduction

Ireland is a signatory to the Rome Ministerial Declaration on Ageing (2022) which charges member states with ‘Promoting a positive culture and image of ageing by making the diversity among older persons an asset and by highlighting the manifold contributions of older persons to society’. Age & Opportunity’s vision sees all older people more active, visible, creative, connected, and confident about ageing. We believe that greater visibility and acknowledgment of the diversity among older people are key to promoting equity and social inclusion and here we set out some of the key areas in which policy can contribute to this end.

Challenging Ageism

The assumption that all older people are the same is one of the key drivers of ageism. The World Health Organisation reports that age stereotypes can contribute to assumptions about a person’s physical and mental capabilities, social skills, political and religious beliefs, and other traits based on their age. However, stereotypical perceptions of ageing often fail to consider the wide range of identities, experiences and age cohorts within our older population, leading to marginalisation and discrimination – particularly among dependent older people and structurally vulnerable groups. As long as ageism pervades our thinking older people will continue to be less visible and regarded as more homogenous. A policy focus on eradicating ageism at all levels is therefore an essential strategy for any society that strives to treat all citizens with equity.

Enhancing Visibility and Diversity

A 2010 report about Age & Opportunity's relative impact on Irish society states 'What Age & Opportunity has taught us is that ageing is about maximizing capabilities and enhancing diversity, not creating dependency and encouraging homogeneity.' Current policy relating to older people in Ireland is largely in the realm of health and care. The National Positive Ageing Strategy and the Ministerial Portfolio for Older People are both situated in the Department of Health. Taking these out of health where they are based on a deficit narrative and putting them into an equity space would put older people into a more positive, proactive and multi-dimensioned space and make us all more visible in all walks of Irish life. Furthermore, ageing should be mainstreamed across all government departments in order to prioritise a fundamental shift in thinking about ageism and older people which will lead to a more equal society for all as we age.

Mainstreaming ageing is not a one-size-fits-all. Policymaking that fails to consider the diversity within the older population may overlook specific needs and challenges faced by subgroups. For example, older people from ethnic minority communities may face language barriers or cultural differences in accessing services, while LGBTQ+ older adults may encounter unique issues related to isolation and care. Policies that acknowledge and address these differences are more likely to be relevant and effective.

Engagement

Finding out about the capacities, needs and preferences of different groups of older people requires consultation with these different groups. In June 2021 Age & Opportunity was funded by IHREC to host five online 'Citizens' Assemblies' during which older people were facilitated to explain how they experienced 'cocooning' and other pandemic-related restrictions and initiatives. Lack of consultation was seen to be at the core of perceived poor decision-making, from communication about restrictions at the start of the pandemic to, the following year, the location of vaccination centres in places which were difficult to access by public transport. Some

participants understood the lack of consultation in itself to be a manifestation of ageism and a breach of human rights.

In 2023 Age & Opportunity commissioned an older person led study about older persons' perceptions of themselves as rights holders and how their rights are compromised by ageism. Findings included a strong desire expressed by older people for better consultation and communication from the government regarding policy changes that impact them.

Inclusive consultation is one of the key pillars of the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty which is a statutory obligation where all public bodies must provide services in a non-discriminatory way, including providing equality of access and protecting human rights for both its users and employees. Greater awareness of and implementation of the Duty would lead to greater visibility and acknowledgement of diversity among older people. We believe that stronger commitment by Ireland to the development of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would also raise awareness about rights and increase visibility of diverse groups of older people in relation to policy development.

Research and Data Collection

Government should allocate specific funding for research initiatives that explore the experiences of diverse older adults in Ireland and this research should be used to inform policy development and service design. Publicly funded research and data collection should aim to capture the diversity within the older population, including disaggregated data by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, socio-economic status, and other relevant characteristics. This data will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the specific needs, preferences, and contributions of different groups of older people.

Recognising Contributions

Expanding the narrative about older people beyond health and care challenges the idea that we are a burden, dependent on others, in need of care and confinement and invisible in wider society. However, findings from the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) underscore the ‘vibrant and important contribution that adults aged 70 years and over continue to make to society in Ireland.’ This research highlights the magnitude and the importance of the contribution that older people make, to our own families, through providing help and resources to both older and younger family members and to wider society through volunteering and active social participation. By recognising and highlighting the myriad contributions that older people make to keep society functioning, we can address challenges to visibility and diversity that enable ageism in policy and practice.

Age & Opportunity is working to foster greater visibility and acknowledgement of the diverse range of older people by:

- Advocating for and contributing to anti-ageism campaigns to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about older people.
- Highlighting the social, civic, cultural and economic contribution of the diversity of older people to Irish society.
- Raising awareness about the rights of older people and the Public Sector Human Rights and Equality Duty.
- Calling on Government to establish an Independent Commissioner for Ageing and Older People to increase visibility of all older people in relation to policy development and implementation.
- Calling on Government to support the global movement for a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.
- Advocating for a dedicated Minister for Older People and taking this portfolio out of the Department of Health in order to increase the visibility of older people in all areas of society.
- Creating opportunities and advocating for greater consultation and feedback from diverse groups of older people in decision-making processes relating to research, policy and practice.
- Commissioning, conducting and contributing to research to inform policy and practice for diverse groups of older people.
- Advocating for the mainstreaming of ageing across all Government Departments.

References

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