

Ageism as a barrier to mainstreaming ageing- Prof. Liat Ayalon, Bar Ilan University, Israel

- Mainstreaming ageing is the ideal. However, there are multiple barriers that we face as a society and as individuals before we manage to mainstream ageing. I would argue here that rather than ageing, ageism is mainstreamed and highly rooted in our society. It is ageism which serves as a barrier to mainstreaming ageing.
- Ageism is defined as prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination towards people because of their age. Ageism is highly prevalent and is manifested at the macro level (for instance in policies), at the meso level (in interpersonal relations) and at the individual level (intrapersonal-level).
- Ageism can be both positive- when we think that someone is smart or stylish simply because of his or her age, but it is often negative, for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic older people were portrayed as a burden to society and as a highly vulnerable group simply because of their age. Ageism also is manifested at the institutional level, with governments imposing differential rules and regulations based on chronological age. We have seen this during the pandemic, with many governments worldwide enacting differential lockdown, exit, triage and vaccination strategies based on age. These policies restricted the

participation of older people in society and hampered their human rights.

Ageism is not only directed towards other people because of their age but is also directed inwardly so that people may perceive themselves as inadequate or a burden to society upon internalizing negative messages directed towards older people by society. This often results in a self-fulfilling prophecy and has shown to impact the health and wellbeing of older people.

- Ageism is manifested in all aspects of life with 1 of 2 people reporting ageist attitudes and 1 in 3 reporting exposure to ageism. For instance, as researchers we often fail to collect data related to different age groups. A good example for that is the fact that during the COVID-19 pandemic, even though older people were a highly susceptible group, many countries have failed to monitor COVID-19 cases and death by age or by residency in a long-term care setting (a place where most COVID-19 deaths occurred percentagewise, worldwide).
- Ageism also is manifested in the ways we discuss and portray older people. Even if our intentions are benign. Many times, policy stakeholders and researchers alike, discuss the “challenges of ageing” or the “ageing tsunami.” The negative connotations associated with old age are then internalized by society at large and of course impact the way older people view themselves. Terms such as the elderly or grandmas,

cougar, dementia patient and others also are derogatory and should be refrained as they belittle older people.

- The last example that I wish to discuss in relation to ageism concerns climate change discourse. Although older people are the ones most susceptible to the harmful effects of climate change, younger people are likely to experience harsher effects over time given the changing climate, and for a longer period of time, given their longer life expectancy. Moreover, younger people feel deprived of their voice and ability to impact, thus depend on older people to act. In our analysis of climate change activists' and lay people's discourse, we identified both instances of intergeneration solidarity but also tension between the generations. The fact that older people often are neglected from climate change policy even though they represent a highly susceptible population is another possible example of ageism. It is often the poorest older people with limited social ties who experience the hardest impact of climate change events. Hence, it is not only physiological susceptibility, but also social susceptibility that hampers the ability of older people to deal with severe climate change events. This is attributed to the failure of political, social and economic institutions to protect older people in the face of climate change events. It is time that older people will become active agents in the climate change movement and will join forces with younger generations in acts of solidarity towards a healthy climate.

- I hope I convinced you that ageism is problematic and has a substantial impact on our lives. We know that both educational interventions and intergenerational contact can be effective in reducing ageism. However, our own research conducted in Israel has shown that most people do not know what ageism is in Hebrew and therefore, they do not acknowledge experiencing ageism. Once the term ageism was explained to people, a lot more people acknowledged experiencing it. Hence, we should expect a surge in reports of ageism if we do a good job familiarizing ageism to the public.
- Although social campaigns do not have strong evidence, they often are used to eradicate ageism. Our own research has shown that it is important to convey diverse images of older people in order not to produce an overly positive, unrealistic stereotypical portrayal of successful ageing. It also is important to use different communication modalities (not only digital) and to collect data to support the effectiveness of the campaigns.
- Finally, legal interventions also have shown to be effective as they explicitly tell people what age discrimination is. We need a UN convention for the rights of older people in order to provide all nations with very clear guidelines about what constitutes age discrimination to ensure a human rights-based approach to ageing.