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Towards a society for all ages: Why and how should regional authorities combat ageism

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On October 26, COST Action IS1402 on Ageism, AGE Platform Europe and the Committee of the Regions organized an international event to advocate for a future world for all ages, in which age is no longer a barrier. This event summarized the work done on the topic of ageism by more than 200 researchers and policy stakeholders from 35 different countries, as part of a COST Action on ageism. The COST Action has collaborated on a special issue on the topic of ageism, a book on ageism, and a series of short videos to disseminate information about ageism to the general public.

The goals of this final meeting were to:

1. Present the outcomes of the COST Action on Ageism to national and sub-national policymakers responsible for providing services and developing programmes targeting older citizens.
2. Increase awareness to the topic of ageism and present solutions to combat ageism at the grass-root level.
3. Facilitate action to reduce ageism through sub-national policy and legislations.

A summary of main points discussed during the meeting

The introductory panel: Maciej Kucharczyk –Policy Director of AGE Platform Europe, Clemens Tesch-Roemer, from the German Centre of



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Gerontology and Vice-Chair of the COST Action on ageism and Liat Ayalon, from Bar Ilan University and chair of the COST Action on ageism Defined ageism and discussed its prevalence and pervasiveness. Ageism is manifested in the way we think, feel and act towards ageing and is embedded in our cultures, institutions and policies. It is the most commonly experienced form of discrimination and a major barrier to the social inclusion and equal participation of older persons, with negative evidence-based consequences at the individual, familial, and societal levels. Research has shown that ageism impacts all aspect of our lives.

Internalized ageism has a very negative impact on older adults' physical and mental health and social interactions, resulting in a greater risk of impairment, depression, loneliness and even premature death.

The panel stressed that the fight against ageism requires action at all political levels, including in local communities, where older persons' daily lives take place. It also requires the participation of each and every one of us in order to bring more awareness of this problem. In this context the 70-day #AgeingEqual campaign initiated by AGE Platform Europe, which aims to increase consciousness of the prevalence and gravity of ageism as a human rights violation, stressing that 'human rights do not diminish with age' is a good practice.

To live in a world for all ages, there is an urgent need to change the way we think, feel and act towards old age and ageing.

Recommended steps towards a world for all ages:

1. Age is just a number and therefore, should not be used to categorize individuals. There is a high heterogeneity in older age that should be acknowledged.
2. The way we talk about older age makes a difference. Talking about older people as elderly or seniors evokes images of frailty and incompetence. Policies, legislations and news articles that present



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- demographic changes like a tsunami or a crisis and attempt to tackle “the problem of ageing” further enhance or perpetuate ageism.
3. Anti-discrimination laws and regulations should explicitly prohibit age discrimination, using a human rights-based approach. Laws and regulations should be developed where they do not exist, or revised where necessary to also include age grounds, and mechanisms should be devised to adequately enforce them. Such laws should cover all areas, and move beyond the narrow focus that is seen today on employment.
 4. Interventions that challenge ageist stereotypes and prejudice through intergenerational contact or education need to be implemented since there is wide evidence of their effectiveness.
 5. Support the Global Campaign to Combat Ageism initiated by the World Health Organization and the #AgeingEqual campaign launched by AGE Platform Europe.

The manifestations of ageism and recommended good practices:

Ageism in employment

- *Moderator:* Jolanta Perek-Białas, Jagiellonian University
- Per Eric Solem, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Gjøvik
- Kai Leichsenring, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research

Speakers in this session have discussed the prevalence of ageism in the workplace, which can happen throughout the processes of recruitment, employment, and retirement decision. According to the findings presented in this panel, organizations are mainly youth oriented due to the ageist stereotypes, prejudices, and/or discrimination against older workers. Employers prefer to recruit young workers, and employees like to work with



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young teammates. There is a growing mismatch between older people's interest in working longer and employers' reluctance in hiring older adults.

Recommendations: In order to combat ageism in the workplace, speakers suggested to develop innovative social policy and social security system to reduce inequality and to achieve flexible retirement. Speakers especially emphasized, in particular with a view to technological developments in the context of 'Industry 4.0', the importance of providing opportunities for successful transitions between education, work, care and training over the entire life-course (sabbaticals, education accounts, conditional minimum income) as a precondition for working longer and/or abandoning the 'legal pension age' based on chronological age.

Ageism in healthcare

- *Moderator:* Sandra Buttigieg, University of Malta
- Daniela Fialova, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic
- Alphana Mair, Head of Effective Prescribing and Therapeutics, Scottish Government

The age-blind approach, providing the same treatments to older adults as younger adults, is considered a form of ageism and can keep older adults from receiving the services they need in health care. For example, frequent prescribing of high-risk medications and prescribing polypharmacy as a "standard." Not including older people in clinical trials for conditions that affect mainly older people is another form of ageism described by this panel.

Recommendations: The *FIP7 program of the EUROAGEISM H2020 project (2017-2021)* focuses on discrimination of older adults in provision of appropriate and safe drug treatments, particularly in 8 Eastern and Central European countries and 2 developing countries. This project is targeted also to description of strategies that should increase availability of medication-safety and medication-management services to older patients in Europe (see



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<https://portal.faf.cuni.cz/Projects/Euroageism-Project/>). The EU project *Stimulating Innovation and Management of Polypharmacy and Adherence in the Elderly* focused on management of polypharmacy and described key recommendations that include: employing a systems approach with clinical and policy leadership in a variety of disciplines; nurturing a culture that encourages and prioritizes the safety and quality of prescribing; and using data to drive change (<http://www.simpathy.eu/>).

Ageism in the media

- Moderator: Eugene Loos, University of Amsterdam
- Virpi Ylänné, Cardiff University

Research has shown that older adults in the media tend to be underrepresented and misrepresented. Older adults are portrayed in a stereotypical manner or as a homogenous group. For example, they are often depicted in peripheral roles or minor roles, as non-realistic, exaggerated or distorted portraits, or as dependent on others. The media is highly influential for older adults' age identity, that is the inner experience of a person's age and aging process. The media is also a resource for younger people to learn about ageing and old age. Repeated 'positive' images in the media can also be ageist as they perpetuate a narrow definition of 'successful ageing'.

Recommendations: More varied depictions of older adults are needed. Much of the current media reflects what non-older adults think is ideal older age, of people who have money and can be consumers. A more diverse account, describing the different experiences of aging, needs to be shown.

Addressing ageism in health via the media

- Moderator: Israel Doron, University of Haifa
- Sylvain Biegeleisen (director: *Twilight of a Life*; 20 min.)



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This session involved a screening of excerpts from the documentary film “Twilight of a Life”, following director Sylvain Biegeleisen’s mother through her last years. The mother is bedridden, and the director spends many intimate hours by her side. The film was shown as a successful attempt to address the difficult topic of the end of life, focusing on life and enriching interactions between a mother and her son, instead of focusing on the heavy care related elements. The film raises the question of how do we want people to end their life? In focusing on dependency and imminent death? Or in seeking to enjoy life and sharing precious moments of joy and intimacy?

Recommendations: Death is part of life. We should accept both ageing and death as part of life and this will make our own lives more peaceful.

Why ageism gets under your skin and what can we do about it

- *Moderator:* Hanna Swift, University of Kent
- Klaus Rothermund, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
- Sibila Marques, University Institute of Lisbon

Age stereotypes influence our own development through: acquisition of stereotypes when we are young; internalization throughout middle age; and embodiment of stereotypes through actions in later life.

Recommendations: The internalization of age stereotypes cannot be changed by simply replacing negative views of old age with positive views. Instead, it can be possible by providing opportunities for older adults to participate in social life and framing old age as a unique and valuable stage of life.

Good practices: The imAGES intervention program to fight ageism in children in Lisbon initiated interventions such as: (1) learning sessions that



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promoted discussion of positive and real examples of aging; and (2) contact sessions with older adults that promoted positive and direct intergroup contact ties. The results showed a significant change in the children's representation of older adults through perceptions of competency, capability, and skill.

Law as a tool to fight ageism

- Israel Doron, University of Haifa
- Barbro Westerholm, Member of the Swedish Parliament, Expert AGE Platform Europe

Ageism in the field of international European law was addressed by Working Group 2. The presentations by Prof. Israel Doron and Ms. Barbro Westerholm, member of the Swedish parliament, highlighted the challenges of gaining legal protection for victims of ageism in different spheres of life. Until a decade or so ago, older persons' rights were rarely acknowledged or studied as separate from the general population, and consequently, older individuals' struggles with ageism did not receive the attention that they deserved. Although the current working group of lawyers and legal experts identified this gap and sought to create a coherent understanding of the interaction between elder law and ageism in European countries, the task proved difficult due to the highly complex legal system of the EU as a whole, and individual countries in specific. Even then, the members of the working group studied jurisprudence, legal methodologies, policy implications and interdisciplinary, intersectional challenges and opportunities in the field of elder law and ageism that culminated into the book titled, "Ageing, Ageism and the Law" (to be released shortly). The group also highlighted the challenges of measuring and quantifying ageism, especially when it co-occurs with other legally recognized forms of discrimination such as sexism, racism or discrimination based on sexual orientation. Among EU countries, Sweden has taken several steps to recognize age-based discrimination in its "Discrimination Act"- first enacted



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in 2008 to include ageism in work life and education; subsequently amended in 2013 to include ageism in healthcare, social services, goods and services, and housing. Even then, the commitment of ageism against individuals has been hard to prove in court as 1,221 out of the 1,228 complaints received between 2013 and 2017 have not been satisfactorily resolved due to lack of clarity and scope regarding legal protection against ageism. The working group unanimously agreed that all countries and societies must work harder to recognize ageism as a form of discrimination in all spheres of life, allocate human and material resources to tackle ageism, and amend/enact laws and policies to protect their older population.

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What policy stakeholders do to address ageism:

An overview of the WHO campaign to combat ageism

- Alana Officer, World Health Organization
- Vânia de la Fuente-Núñez, World Health Organization

Good practices: The WHO campaign combats ageism by focusing on four work areas. One major project is the development of an *evidence base for action*, comprising of reviews of policy reports, systematic reviews, as well as lived experiences. Another pillar is to *raise awareness* by informing, advocating and changing the representation and discourse around age and ageing. Further, the core group attempts to *build a broad coalition* involving stakeholders, donors and UN collaborations. The fourth project focuses on the *design of a platform to share good practice* examples and country needs in order to optimize policy responses and improve lives. *The Global Campaign to Combat Ageism* encourages stakeholders and researchers to contribute to the “Ageism Stakeholder Mapping”



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(<https://tinyurl.com/ycm6kuzf>) so as to identify and build on already existing projects and initiatives worldwide. With all these mentioned actions WHO aims to add value to local initiatives, achieve the ultimate goal of enhancing the day-to-day experience of older people and optimize policy responses.

Where do we go from here: Lessons learnt and future plans to reduce ageism

Moderator: Clemens Tesch-Roemer, German Centre of Gerontology, vice-chair COST Action on ageism.

- Claude Cahn, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Brussels office emphasized that it is time for a human rights movement to address the rights of older adults. If older people are told that a complaint regarding ageism is not a legal issue, they should tenaciously defend their right and in doing so make sure that age cannot be used as legal basis for discrimination.

Recommendation: Ageism is at the core of a potential convention for the rights of older persons as it is currently discussed by the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing.

- Vitalija Gaucaite Wittich Chief of the Population Unit, Statistical Division, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) described the work of UNECE on policy briefs on ageism in the labour market.

Recommendation: The active ageing index (on country and regional level) is a useful tool to facilitate political action on the regional level. Information about the Active Ageing Index and its implications should be put into plain language in order to maximize the dissemination of relevant information.

- Johan ten Geuzendam, DG Justice, European Commission stressed the fact that combating discrimination is broader than age discrimination or



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ageism. Older persons have same human rights as other persons and should be able to use their rights as any other humans.

Recommendation: The European Commission should continue its support to Member States and NGOs to fight age discrimination.

- Angelika Poth-Mögele, Executive Director European Affairs of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions stated that local authorities have a role in raising awareness and disseminating information.

Recommendation: It is not only the task of municipalities and regions to combat ageism, but European and international law should be used to help them achieve this objective.

- Sergio Murillo Corzo, Department of Social Development, Government of Biscay described a local version of the Active Ageing Index to monitor and fight ageism and to make the Basque country an age friendly region. In the Basque Country there is an active council which consists of representative associations from the county, chaired by older persons, and civil servants from the county. This council has three working groups: active ageing environments, social services for older people, and changing the social image of older persons (results from the last group: a film was produced to provoke the audience, observatory on media on ageism, the formation of old people as spokespersons to talk in public).

Recommendation: Fighting ageism on the local level could be supported by an active council of older people.

- Ebbe Johansen, President AGE Platform Europe highlighted that ageism is still a largely unknown phenomenon and concept: in some languages there is not even a word to describe ageism. When people do not have a word to describe this experience, it is hard to acknowledge its existence and to develop adequate responses to tackle it



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- **Recommendation:** To address older people's feelings about ageism in communication from politicians and scientists in order to foster societal change.

Useful links:

- COST Action on Ageism conference 'Towards a society for all ages: Why and how should regional authorities combat ageism': <http://notoageism.com/brussels/>
- WHO Global Campaign to Combat Ageism: <http://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/campaign/en/>
- #AgeingEqual campaign: <http://ageing-equal.org>
- Research Report 'Longevity Increased by Positive Self-Perceptions of Aging': <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-832261.pdf>
- Presentations of speakers at the conference