



Green Paper on Ageing - EuroAgeism Commentaries

Ageism is one of the most common and serious obstacles and challenges to intergenerational solidarity, as well as to health and well-being of older adults and their active involvement in the society. The Innovative Training Network EuroAgeism, funded under Horizon 2020 as part of the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions¹, identified that whereas ageism is a burning issue in everyday life, research and policy, it is almost neglected from the frame of the policy debate proposed by the Green Paper.

In this document, we provide an overview of the **impact and magnitude** of ageism in various domains addressed in the Green Paper in order to support the aim to **foster solidarity and responsibility** between generations.

Ageism refers to stereotypical, prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory treatment of persons based on their age. It is **deeply rooted** in the language, everyday practices and policies. It is **widespread** because of its intrinsic nature and current **social acceptability** (for a good overview of ageism manifestations, see The Global Report on Ageism²). **It concerns each of us** because, at the individual level, we all hold age-related stereotypes that play a substantial role in our health, well-being and social participation throughout our life course. There is thus a crucial need for a life-course positive approach to ageing and older persons' empowerment.

The concrete measures to overcome ageism should be introduced on the European Union, national, regional and local levels. The first step towards ageism-free societies is to **raise a concern** about ageism and provide a general policy to combat ageism on the EU level. This is crucial to ensure a dynamic, inclusive and representative agenda that addresses the **diversity** in the society in an unbiased manner. National legal frameworks and dedicated policies should then contextualise and adapt these efforts within the Member States. In the standing version of the Green Paper, ageism is only mentioned in relation to older adults' entrepreneurship (p.7, last paragraph). This shows under acknowledgement and **lack of understanding of the complexity** around ageism, which is one of the most spread forms of -ism that concerns everyone and all areas of life. Its prevention and reduction are crucial for implementing healthy and active ageing strategies in an intersectional and diversity-sensitive life-course perspective.

Having defined ageism and the need to address it in general, we move to explain both the personal and the wider societal approaches to ageism in the following domains:

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² Global report on ageism. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

- **Recognising the heterogeneity of older adults.** The Green Paper uses the term "older people" but does not define the group it captures. The paper uses different age categories for statistical examples and blurs the differences between **biological and chronological age** without making a clear distinctive remark between biological ageing and subjective experiences. Chronological age is frequently adopted into policies and measures, although it does not reflect the heterogeneity of the group it captures. This could, at worst, lead to violations of fundamental human rights of older adults, reinforce negative age stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination towards them. Such measures are also less efficient and often unable to reach the targeted aims. Older adults are a highly heterogeneous age group; as in line with the life-course approach, the advantages and disadvantages experienced during different life stages tend to accumulate. And while the EU's motto is **United in Diversity**, it is Diversity, not Categorisation, that should be upheld and praised. Thus, to ensure a sustainable, resilient and fair European Union for all ages, it is important to define, investigate and combat ageism. This requires moving away from the vision of the older adults as **homogenised others**. It is vital to stop problematising older people as a marginalised and vulnerable group as a whole (p.4, second paragraph) and set an ambitious goal to change the paradigm of ageing both on the governance and the individual levels. The first step would be to ensure that the current data collection framework includes the data disaggregated by age, sex and other relevant socio-economic characteristics without any upper age limits. The policymaking and the specially dedicated programmes should be more targeted and avoid labelling wide age groups. Capacity-building seminars and broad awareness-raising programmes could help to change a stereotypical vision of older people as a single homogeneous group. We also recommend that potential follow-ups to the Green Paper endorse the "life-course approach" instead of adopting the "life-cycle perspective", which tends to be underpinned by biological considerations. This change would undermine the aim of the Green Paper to accommodate fluid and dependent on individual trajectories and social context nature of modern life transitions, as opposed to a biologically determined continuous and irreversible sequence of changes undergone homogeneously by all individuals, which obviously does not reflect today's reality.
- **A holistic approach to healthy and active ageing.** Healthy and active ageing goes far beyond healthy lifestyles and physical activity (p.5, first paragraph). It is primarily about enabling people of all ages to be and do what they have reason to value³, to enable them to exercise their agency, including active social, economic and political participation. **The Green Paper tends to narrow the key policy options down to focusing primarily on medication, health and long-term care.** In the document, innovative ways of promoting healthy lifestyles are mentioned only for children and young people. However, the current and future generations of older people should not be excluded from the debate on the topic but, on the contrary, empowered and supported towards healthy ageing⁴. According to

³ For further information on healthy ageing and functional ability, see WHO resources, e.g. <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/news/q-a-detail/ageing-healthy-ageing-and-functional-ability>

⁴ For further information about importance of healthy ageing, see United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021-2030) URL: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/decade-of-healthy-ageing>

mainstreaming ageing principles,⁵ the complex situation analysis and investigation of policy context both on EU and national levels should be carried out to identify areas where older adults are excluded from the focus to ensure no age category is left behind in any policy area.

- **Acknowledging the contribution to social, economic, political, and voluntary activities.** Older adults may (or may not) participate in education, paid and unpaid employment, social, cultural and political life, and not only through intergenerational learning and cohesion as mentioned in the document (p.10, 4th paragraph). Their contribution, like that of other age groups, is diverse and multifaceted. We call on the EU and Member States institutions to recognise and value these contributions with more emphasis as well as to acknowledge these actions in the development of policies, for example, in the fields of voluntary activities, political participation and informal care older adults often provide for younger and older generations. EU actions should facilitate and enable older people's contributions to all spheres of life to maximise their full potential, not just narrowing the recognised activities to several limited areas.
- **The image and the representation of older people in the media, scientific and policy documents.** In the media, older adults are often presented inappropriately. Older women, in particular, are portrayed (compared to younger women or older men) as being unattractive and are under-represented in media presentations. The media is, on the contrary, expected to tackle ageism by increasing the recognition of older people's contributions to family, community, and society and confronting negative images of older people. In scientific papers and policy documents, stereotypical notions (e.g. addressing the whole group as vulnerable or in need of long-term care) as well as generalisations ("older people" in results on the sample size of people aged 50-64 years old) frequently appear. If we want to change the attitude towards ageing and shift towards a more realistic direction, varied and real representations of old age should be available to everyone from childhood onwards (e.g., fairy tales, school educational courses) to deconstruct the stereotypical picture of frailty and dependency. Broad awareness-raising campaigns and capacity-building seminars for media specialists can give impetus to change.
- **Agency and political involvement.** The measures, initiatives, and technological solutions should be developed with target groups (not only defined by age – as on page 8, 6th paragraph), rather than for them; the voices of the end-users should be heard. The EU has a challenging appeal to balance the needs and expectations of its citizens and residents from different generations and socio-economic backgrounds while preserving sustainable growth and the resilience of the welfare state, making sure that everyone can participate in society according to the potential and values. The mapping of key EU, national and local stakeholders should be performed, and the mechanism of meaningful participation of older adults in policymaking and intergenerational interventions at all levels established.

⁵ For further information see e.g. UNECE, 2011. Guidelines for Mainstreaming Ageing URL: <https://unece.org/population/publications/guidelines-mainstreaming-ageing>

- **Intergenerational solidarity.** The COVID-19 pandemic revealed tensions in the attitudes and behaviours between younger and older generations, raising questions about who should be blamed, who should bear the burden of containment measures and who should 'sacrifice' their way of life. Solidarity is based on dialogue, recognition and appreciation of individuality and dignity, and COVID-19 exacerbated an urgent need for open policy debate on the issues of intergenerational fairness and how to solve them for everyone's welfare. Intergenerational contacts and joint actions on the EU and national levels are required to bring generations together instead of pitting them against each other.
- **Digitalisation and technology design and equalising access to goods and services.** In our highly digitised society, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, digital skills and accessibility of digital technologies has become a basic necessity for access to goods and services, education, employment and social interaction. Older people are highly stereotyped regarding their abilities to use and adapt to the use of new digital technologies. Ageism, therefore, can influence how digital technologies are used, but furthermore how they are developed. The issue of learning digital skills is important throughout the life course. It relies to some extent on intergenerational learning and the involvement of older people in the design process of new digital technologies and related policies. Finally, creating inclusive digital environments is essential to ensure that no one is left behind because of their age. This also raises the question of whether access to the internet is a basic right in times when some services can only be accessed digitally and how the EU can ensure the accessibility, affordability, availability and safety of the digital reality to all its members.
- **Dignified work for every age.** Discrimination and ageism are mentioned in the Green Paper only in connection with employment. The encouragement of the older age groups' labour market participation is illustrated with only fiscal incentives for employers to recruit older workers, which may accelerate the existing stereotypes and othering. The Green Paper asks about innovative policy measures to improve participation, while the basic age-management strategies and diversity management are still lacking. The key areas of action could include support of tailored employment services, age-management guidelines to businesses, provision of care and educational leaves on the national level, legal right and financial support of flexible working arrangements, setting standards for the age-friendly working environment etc. Ageism concerns every stage of working life at every age; hence, organisations, employers, and job centres should be educated regarding ageism and its detrimental effects. Skill gaps and mismatches are also strong barriers for older adults, who possess a high level of human capital and may experience a deficit of updated knowledge in particular fields. The right of people of all ages for life-long learning, oriented by content and design towards the needs of each socio-demographic group, campaigns encouraging participation in training programmes, and fiscal stimulus, may be used to get the area off the ground.
- **Healthcare, long-term care, medication use.** In the healthcare system, older adults are less likely to be offered expensive or innovative treatments. They are often excluded from clinical

trials, which could have helped define geriatric doses and analyse basic medication efficacy and safety. Moreover, older adults disproportionately use healthcare services, and the availability of social and health services for this population is limited. This situation has led some researchers to argue that older adults have a duty to die, and the dignity and agency of older people living in institutions are not insured. The rights of older persons for equal access to healthcare should be ensured on the highest political level.

- **Human rights.** Human rights are more than political proclamations that aim to promote a minimum standard of dignified living, but rights that are present in our day-to-day lives and protect our freedom to control the different aspects of it. Within the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights framework, the European Union has committed itself to protect these fundamental human rights (e.g. the right to life, non-discrimination or free speech). Ageism and age discrimination are undoubtedly human rights violations, whether they prevent or hinder older people's access to work, health care or equal participation in any other areas of life. Therefore, the European commitment to upholding human rights implies a commitment to combat and reduce ageism and age discrimination, especially given the lack of dedicated human rights protection for older people. In order to honour this commitment, it is crucial to address older people first and foremost as holders of rights and not as welfare recipients, an anonymous group united by its chronological age or as vulnerable subjects.

EU institutions have a capacity to initiate a discussion around ageing and ageism, to change the currently limited paradigm for a whole-of-society holistic life-course age-sensitive approach and raise awareness about the barriers that people of different generations may face as well as of vital, often silent, contribution they make. Evidence-based, heterogeneity-accommodating and contextualised policies and programmes are needed to move forward, supported by anti-discrimination legislation, broad awareness-raising and educational campaigns, building on a participatory approach and intergenerational social dialogue. We believe that only in the case of joint EU commitment to eliminate ageism and to promote solidarity between generations can the full potential of all the members in the society be realised.