

# **Ageism and Age Equality**

**IMPLEMENTING  
THE W.H.O.  
GLOBAL REPORT  
ON AGEISM**

**Summary Policy Brief**

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Full 22 page Policy Brief available here

[https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/ageism\\_and\\_age\\_equality\\_position\\_paper.pdf](https://www.ageaction.ie/sites/default/files/ageism_and_age_equality_position_paper.pdf)

# INTRODUCTION

While ageism is not a new concept,[1] the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a landmark study on ageism in 2021.[2] The report brings together the findings of hundreds of scientific papers to demonstrate the deep impact of ageism on our societies, not least in terms of health and wellbeing. Additionally, while it was not the primary focus of the report, which was in development before the pandemic, there were also extensive findings of ageism in relation to how countries reacted to COVID-19.

Age Action has written this briefing paper to present a sample of the global report's findings to an Irish audience, to highlight the reality of ageism in Ireland and the need for decisive action from Government, business and society to address ageism.

## What is Ageism?

Ageism refers to the harm done through how we think (stereotypes), how we feel (prejudice) and how we act (discrimination) towards others or ourselves based on age. Ageism can be conscious or unconscious.

Ageism occurs when people interact with one another (interpersonal), when organisations interact with individuals (institutional) and when people direct ageism towards themselves (self-directed).

## Why is Ageism a problem?

The 2021 WHO Global Report on Ageism shows that:

- Ageism is one of the most pervasive prejudices across societies around the world.
- Ageism damages health and wellbeing, and it is a barrier to effective policies on healthy ageing.
- Ageism characterises and divides people in ways which are unjust, and which lead to disadvantage and the undermining of human rights.

## What is Age Equality?

Age equality is the opposite of ageism. It involves making a conscious, active effort to overcome stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on age, in order to remove all age-related barriers to equality of outcome for older people.

1. See, for example: Bytheway, B (1995) Ageism Open University Press; Palmore, E P (1999) Ageism: Negative and positive, 2nd edition. Springer Publishing; Bowling, A (1999) 'Ageism in cardiology', BMJ 319:1353; and Minichiello, V, Browne, J and Kendig, H (2000) 'Perceptions and consequences of ageism: views of older people', Ageing and Society, pp.253-278.

2. WHO (2021) Global Report on Ageism <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>

Age equality promotes policies and laws that address discrimination and inequality based on age. Age equality promotes educational activities, including self-directed learning, to enhance understanding and empathy about ageing, and to transmit knowledge and skills to overcome ageism. Age equality promotes intergenerational activities, where people of all ages interact, to contribute to mutual understanding and cooperation between people of different ages.

The success story of longevity means that a greater proportion of people are living to retirement, and people are living longer in retirement.[3] As a result of this success, provision needs to be made for adequate public spending, which will naturally increase in a range of areas such as the State Pension, healthcare and social services.

The UN recognises that the environments in which we are born, grow, work and live strongly influence the opportunities available to each of us as we age. The WHO states that a significant proportion of the diversity in older age is due to the cumulative impact of health inequities across the life course, arising from people's physical and social environments and the impact of these environments on their opportunities and health behaviour.[4]

3. All data in this section is from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). Demographic projections for 2050 are taken from the middle of high to low estimates. Figures are rounded.

4. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

# How Ageism Occurs

Ageism occurs when people interact with one another (**interpersonal**), when organisations interact with individuals (**institutional**) and when people direct ageism towards themselves (**self-directed**).

A comprehensive, systematic review of studies on ageism in the period 1970-2017 reviewed the determinants of ageism identified in 199 separate papers.[5] Combining this information with other studies, the Global Report identifies a range of determinants as having a clear association with ageism or its prevention. The report also notes that the lack of research into institutional ageism limits available evidence.

As the Global Report states, “Ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time. From an early age, children pick up cues from those around them about their culture’s stereotypes and prejudices, which are soon internalized. People then use these stereotypes to make inferences and to guide their feelings and behaviour towards people of different ages and towards themselves.”

In addition “Ageism often intersects and interacts with other forms of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism. Multiple intersecting forms of bias compound disadvantage and make the effects of ageism on individuals’ health and well-being even worse.”

The Global Report also examines the determinants of ageism directed against younger people. “...there is some evidence that it occurs in the workplace and in legal and political systems. In Europe, the only region for which data are available, attitudes towards younger people are often more negative than they are towards older people”.

# Age Equality: Age Action's Campaign Against Ageism

Age equality is about a vision of society where age is no longer a barrier to everyone participating and living full, independent lives.

Differential treatment on the grounds of age must not undermine the human rights principles of dignity, autonomy and participation. Any justification for using age as a decision-making criterion must not be contaminated by ageist stereotypes, assumptions and prejudice.

Achieving age equality involves removing age-related barriers to the achievement of equality of outcome for older (and younger) people.

## Examples of Age Action's Work on Age Equality

The Global Report suggests three approaches for the future, to prevent and respond to ageism, all of which inform Age Action's work:

- Invest in evidence-based strategies to prevent and respond to ageism
- Improve data and research to gain a better understanding of ageism and how to reduce it
- Build a movement to change the narrative around age and ageing.

The focus of Age Action's advocacy work is on policy and law, with the aim of removing the age-related barriers that prevent equality of outcome for older people. For example, Age Action publishes budget submissions, briefings, submissions on legislation and policies affecting older people, and proposals for new laws or policies.

Age Action engages with Government, civil servants, public agencies, the Oireachtas, political parties and other civil society organisations, as well as the media, to increase awareness of the issues facing older people.

All of Age Action's work is rooted in the lived experience of older people, and we provide regular opportunities to participate through surveys, focus groups and other means.

# Recommendations for Immediate Action

As a first step to implementing the WHO Global Report on Ageism, Age Action calls for the following five actions, which are actions for Government but are also relevant for all political parties, for businesses, for civil society organisations and for all of us living in Ireland:

1. Acknowledge that ageism is a real and present threat to our health and wellbeing, and recognise ageism in our own lives.
2. Commit to eliminating the negative effects of ageism.
3. Commit to listening to the voices of older people and empowering their participation, including through establishing a Commission for Ageing and Older Persons.
4. Ensure that older people are not digitally excluded, including taking positive steps to include those not using the Internet.
5. Update and recommit to the National Positive Ageing Strategy, with concrete actions across Government and society to promote age equality.

# About Age Action

Age Action is the leading advocacy organisation on ageing and older people in Ireland. Age Action advocates for a society that enables all older people to participate and to live full, independent lives, based on the realisation of their rights and equality, recognising the diversity of their experience and situation. Our mission is to achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by eliminating age discrimination, promoting positive ageing and securing their right to comprehensive and high-quality services.



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