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Special Article

Climate Change and Mental Health of Older Persons: A Human Rights Imperative

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received June, 17 2021

Accepted June, 17 2021

Key Words:

Human rights
climate change
ageism
susceptibility

ABSTRACT

Climate change threatens the basic prerequisites for wellbeing, including clean air and water, food supply and the adequacy and security of shelter. Climate change is a powerful and ongoing presence in the lives of older persons, both creating and exacerbating vulnerabilities. The absence of a legally binding international instrument specifically protecting the human rights of older persons and minimal references to older persons in key international climate instruments attest to the lack of attention to and visibility of older persons in national and international law. There is a need to integrate the areas of older people and environmental sustainability to ensure that the rights of older people are preserved especially now, as the effects of the climate change crisis become more pronounced. (Am J Geriatr Psychiatry 2021; ■■■:■■■–■■■)

Highlights

- **What is the primary question addressed by this study?**—The aim of this paper is to highlight the connection between climate change and mental health conditions of older people. We show that climate change exacerbates vulnerabilities of older people with mental health conditions, triggers new mental health conditions and that climate change ageism threatens wellbeing.
- **What is the main finding of this study?**—The absence of a legally binding international instrument specifically protecting the human rights of older persons and minimal references to older persons in key international climate instruments attest to the lack of attention to and visibility of older persons in national and international law.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jagp.2021.06.015>

Climate Change and Mental Health of Older Persons: A Human Rights

- **What is the meaning of the finding?**—A United Nations convention on the rights of older persons is urgently called for to enable older persons to live free from discrimination and to fully enjoy their rights. There is a need to integrate the areas of older people and environmental sustainability to ensure that the rights of older people are preserved especially now, as the effects of the climate change crisis become more pronounced.

Climate change threatens the basic prerequisites for wellbeing, including clean air and water, food supply and the adequacy and security of shelter. Its effects on older people are particularly deleterious. Older people succumb much more readily to climate-related adversities with high incidence of physical and mental health conditions resulting in significant mortality from exposure to extreme conditions such as heat or hurricanes. A recent report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights concludes that climate change threatens older persons their “rights to life, health, food, water and sanitation, housing, freedom of movement, livelihoods, social protection, development and culture.”¹ We concur. In this short commentary on the mental health impacts of climate change, we underscore the urgency of enshrining human rights of older persons.

Climate change is a powerful and ongoing presence in the lives of older persons, both creating and exacerbating vulnerabilities. However, it has been overlooked, underappreciated and considered hard to comprehend. We challenge the legitimacy of this marginalization by describing three themes in the ways that climate change creates inequities among older people.

1 Climate change increases vulnerability of those with current mental health conditions. Older people with mental conditions are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of climate change. They are at risk of limited social support² during natural disasters resulting from stigma that impairs their social connections. They are more likely to live in poverty, increasing their susceptibility to the negative effects of climate change resulting from inadequate living conditions.³ Many experience violence, exploitation, neglect and abuse during climate crises. Financial abuse in the form of theft, neglect in the form of abandonment and physical abuse including domestic violence have been documented in disaster

situations.⁴ Long-term care settings, in which older people with mental conditions are overrepresented, also are hazardous to older people whose mortality rates are high during times of evacuation due to natural disasters.⁵ In light of their limited personal and material resources, this group is the most vulnerable to being left behind in the context of climate change.

2 Climate change triggers new mental health conditions. Climate change disproportionately affects the mental health of older persons, causing shock, trauma, stress, anxiety and depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), phobic impairment, substance use disorders, increase in suicidality or aggression.⁶ Survivor guilt after such experiences is common in older persons especially those who lose children or grandchildren. This group of older persons differs in their personal and material resources that may be mobilized to help them address these climate change shocks. Further, climate change increases the effects of air pollution, which leads in turn to increased risk of dementia.⁷

3 Climate change ageism threatens wellbeing. Despite their heightened susceptibility, older people often are blamed for contributing to greenhouse gas emissions and for not contributing to the climate change movement. Older people may even be portrayed as villains, whereas younger people may view themselves as heroes in the climate change movement.⁸ These negative images and discourses might impact older people’s wellbeing. Older persons may internalize these views, feeling guilty and powerless about the world they will leave behind for future generations.

Climate change ageism may be most amenable to intervention, particularly among older people who are in contexts in which volunteerism is supported.⁹ There is evidence that engaging older people in environmental volunteerism may result in improved wellbeing, preparing older volunteers

for leadership roles in environmental stewardship in ways that may be scaled up to define their generational legacy. Thus, engagement in climate change activism may reduce feelings of powerlessness, and in turn, negative mental health effects.¹⁰

The absence of a legally binding international instrument specifically protecting the human rights of older persons and minimal references to older persons in key international climate instruments attest to the lack of attention to and visibility of older persons in national and international law.¹ A United Nations convention on the rights of older persons is urgently called for to enable older persons to live free from discrimination and to fully enjoy their rights. There is a need to integrate the areas of older people and environmental sustainability to ensure that the rights of older people are preserved especially now, as the effects of the climate change crisis become more pronounced. As has been argued here, this is even more detrimental in the case of older people with mental conditions who are highly susceptible to the negative effects of climate change both mentally and physically and likely have even fewer resources in the face of natural hazards.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Authors contributed equally to this manuscript.

SIGNIFICANCE CLIMATE

Climate change threatens the basic prerequisites for wellbeing, including clean air and water, food supply and the adequacy and security of shelter. Its effects on older people are particularly deleterious. A United Nations convention on the rights of older persons is urgently called for to enable older persons to live free from discrimination and to fully enjoy their rights. There is a need to integrate the areas of older people and environmental sustainability to ensure that the rights of older people are preserved especially now, as the effects of the climate change crisis become more pronounced.

DISCLOSURE

This work was partially supported by a grant from the Israel Science Foundation 217/20 to Liat Ayalon and Norah Keating as a collaborator. The data from this article have not been presented at any meetings/conferences.

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