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Editorial

Reducing the Burden of Ageism, Mentalism, and Ableism: Transforming the Narrative for Older Persons With Mental Health Conditions and Psychosocial Disability

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Older persons represent the fastest growing and the most heterogeneous groups of the global population. Part of this group are older persons with disabilities and the highest number are persons with cognitive impairments. e.g., dementia.

Framing is everything. Ageism and ableism intersect to generate multiple disadvantages. Ageism frames them in a generalized way built on assumptions and stereotypes. And ableism discounts their humanity as well as abilities. As such, the intersection of ageism and ableism leads to age and disability discrimination and hinders older persons from the full enjoyment of their human rights (For further information, see Office of the High Commissioner for Human

Rights (2021), Update to the 2012 Analytical Outcome Study, p. 42).

Both ageism and ableism and their many negative effects were sharply brought to light during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and caused many negative impacts and violations of the human rights of older persons especially to those who are in need of support and care.

There are many causes why older persons were affected disproportionately. One is that older persons are not part of the priorities emergency planning. Another is that the current human rights framework does not sufficiently protect the human rights of older persons. Given the disproportionate impact on older

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persons, the COVID-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on the gaps in human rights protections of this chronically invisible segment of the population and magnified existing violations of their rights. The first report of the IE on older persons to the GA on Impact of the COVID-19 on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons (Independent expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons (2020), Impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). <https://undocs.org/A/75/205>) found that, in many instances, response plans failed to include the specific needs of older persons and policies put in place to address the pandemic reiterated discriminatory approaches which were not as visible or apparent before the pandemic.

A similar research paper by the UN SR on the rights of persons with disabilities vividly demonstrated that, in times of crisis, ableism came back to the fore. Services were removed, isolation was enhanced, healthcare was rationed and persons with disabilities—especially older persons with disabilities—had heightened exposure to the disease due to congregated or institutional living arrangements (Gerard Quinn, 'COVID-19 and Disability: a War of Two Paradigms,' in Kjaerum, Davis & Lyons (Eds.) COVID-19 and Human Rights, (Routledge 2021)).

Thankfully, there is now a growing awareness of the negative impacts of ageism—whether considered separately from, or alongside, those of ableism. Ageism also entered the sphere of WHO and we are grateful that a cooperation of UN Agencies under the

leadership of WHO released a global report. The reports say: “ageism has far-reaching consequences for people’s health, well-being and human rights. Ageism pervades many ways institutions and sectors of society, including those providing health and social care, the workplace, the media and the legal system. Healthcare rationing on the basis of age is widespread and older adults tend to be excluded from research and data collection efforts” (World Health Organization (2021), Global Report on Ageism XVI).

Robert Butler who coined the term already in 1969 noted that prejudice against age is a prejudice against everyone since as longevity increases, we strive to become its ultimate victims. The current human rights framework does not combat ageism at any stage and furthermore age is not mentioned as a ground for discrimination. This is one out of many issues why the international human rights framework has failed to deliver to older persons clear, comprehensive, and effective protection of their human rights. We are in need of a comprehensive human rights instruments to insure the best protection through a binding convention.

We look forward to the day when older persons can enjoy a similar level of protection as persons with disabilities. COVID-19 has shown that this is not an abstract aspiration but a glaring necessity. We commend this work as a valuable contribution toward a recognition of the human rights of older persons including those with disabilities.