

# CIVIC EXCLUSION IN LATER LIFE: AGEISM EXCLUDES EVERYONE AND HARMS OUR SOCIETIES!

## **The ROSEnet Civic Exclusion Working Group**

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# Introduction

This Policy Brief is authored by members of the civic exclusion working group of the COST-action network ROSEnet (CA 15122). **The key message is that ageism is at the very core of the attitudinal prejudices that affect the lives of older people and their opportunities to participate fully in society.** Ageism matters because it is a pervasive ideology that reinforces exclusion, not only in symbolic terms but also in practical ways. It influences institutional patterns and policy directions, and inhibits the vindication of civil and political participation and rights.

## What are ROSEnet messages for policy makers?

The following therefore are the policy messages that ROSEnet would like to share with policy makers in the hope that we can enlist their help in combating old-age social exclusion that is driven by ageism.

1. Ageism has exclusionary power even when the social exclusion of older people is not intended. Governments should take a leading role in initiating and coordinating activities that raise awareness of ageism and age discrimination.
2. In taking a leadership role, we call on governments to educate policy makers and public servants at all levels about the ways in which attitudes about ageing affect all areas of the public sector.
3. Governments should also launch specific campaigns to educate practitioners in different health and social sectors about the ways in which stereotypes about ageing and old age can impact how they address older people and their needs. Governments should also start initiatives that raise the public's awareness of the heterogeneity of older people, and the fact that many of them experience exclusion in later life.
4. When formulating law and regulations, policy makers should consider whether these legislative structures have the potential to exclude older people. That is, old-age policy proofing ought to take place when laws and regulations are being formulated.
5. Legislation against discrimination on the basis of old age needs to be formulated to complement discrimination laws on the basis of gender and ethnicity.
6. In order to be able to effectively improve the situation for older people it is imperative that all countries collect statistics on all age brackets associated with the ageing population so that older people's social, economic, and civic realities can be assessed and so that policy-makers are able to address the ageing of Europe's population in an adequate manner.
7. Older people should be involved in the formulation and implementation of policy in general, as well as policy of relevance to ageing and older people at the local, national and European level.
8. Governments should develop tools and platforms to enable older people's civic participation including political participation.

***“Old-Age Social Exclusion is a complex process that involves interchanges between multi-level risk factors, processes and outcomes. Varying in form and degree across the older adult life course, its complexity, impact and prevalence are amplified by old-age vulnerabilities, accumulated disadvantage for some groups and constrained opportunities to ameliorate exclusion. Old-age exclusion leads to inequities in choice and control, resources and relationships, and power and rights in key domains of neighbourhood and community; services, amenities and mobility; material and financial resources; social relations; socio-cultural aspects of society; and civic participation. Old-age exclusion implicates states, societies, communities and individuals.”***

**Walsh, Scharf & Keating, 2017, p.93**

We deem these policy messages to be important and would like them to inform national and European policy irrespective of whether this policy is meant to cater specifically to the needs of older people or not. This Policy Brief focuses specifically on two aspects of old-age social exclusion: symbolic and civic exclusion. Although the term social exclusion entered the vernacular of European policy making three decades ago (cf. Peace 2001) in order to bring attention to the needs of disadvantaged people in our continent, this Briefing Paper focuses specifically on old-age social exclusion because cumulative disadvantage through the life-course poses specific challenges to the older segments of our populations. These challenges require policy makers' attention.

## What is symbolic old-age social exclusion?

The symbolic dimension of old-age social exclusion relates to the ways in which public discourses and imagery – conveyed through a variety of channels – promote in explicit or implicit ways the exclusion of older people from wider society. Scholarly discussions about the role that symbolic discourses on ageing and old age play in social exclusion tend to allude to ageism, which is “the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years” (Comfort 1977 as cited in Bytheway & Johnson 1990).

According to the World Health Organization it can be understood that “ageism is the stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age ... (that it is) a widespread and an insidious practice which has harmful effects on the health of older adults (and that) for older people, ageism is an everyday challenge” (<https://www.who.int/ageing/ageism/en/>). In addition, because it can be argued that ageism is the most socially normalized form of discrimination, it takes many forms, ranging from disparaging treatment, through patronizing and infantilizing actions and dialogue, to simply homogenizing discourse. Thus, when we speak about or treat older people in these terms, in effect we engage in ageist behavior even though we may not intend to do so.

According to Duncan (2003), the reason why awareness of ageism needs to be raised at the level of policy and practice, is that old age is, as yet, not effectively incorporated into policies and practices meant to guarantee equal opportunities for all. This is one of the many reasons why we are proposing that all policy – irrespective of whether it targets older people or not – is subjected to old-age proofing, and why this Brief Paper has been entitled *Ageism Excludes!* It is our contention that symbolic and civic exclusion can result even when the messages being conveyed, and the practices engaged in, are not intended to be ageist. Even concepts such as active ageing, successful ageing or healthy ageing, which are usually regarded as positive concepts, could be deemed to become exclusionary where they implicitly marginalize older people whose social and material conditions preclude such forms of activity, health or success. The fact is that these concepts disregard the realities of disadvantaged older people and for this reason critical scholars have spent considerable energy problematizing them (e.g. Ranzjin 2010; Rudman 2014; van Dyk 2014).

## What is civic old-age exclusion?

Civic exclusion refers to the lack of enjoyment of civil rights in old age: rights to life, speech, cultural expression, religious practice and association, assembly as well as rights to personal autonomy. It also refers to the lack of political rights, which is about equal participation in all aspects of governance, voting and candidacy in elections, and engagement in deliberative, bargaining and collective decision-making processes that affect us all as individuals. Our message is that the stereotypical and prejudicial notions about ageing and old age that circulate in our societies have an impact on older people's possibilities to realize their civil and political rights, and that this leads inadvertently to them not being able to actively participate in society.

## How extensive is ageism?

Abrams and Swift (2012) – who have studied how prevalent ageism is within Europe – defined ageism as “the stereotyping of, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age” (ibid: 3). They found that more than 300 million people have experienced ageism. Using the European Social Survey (ESS) for 2008-2009 – which taps into the European residential populations aged 15 and over in 27 countries – they showed that 35% of those who answered this survey, reported unfair treatment on the grounds of age – much more than on the grounds of gender or race, which was experienced by 24% and 16% respectively. This survey found also that 37% said that they “had felt a lack of respect because of their age”. A total of 44% of these survey respondents thought that age discrimination is a serious or a very serious problem, with respondents aged 50-64 years were slightly more likely than other age groups to take this view (Abrams et al. 2011: 40). Moreover, the findings revealed that “people in their 40s were perceived to have the highest status, followed by people in their 20s. People over 70 were perceived to have the lowest status (ibid: 83) and were least likely to be attributed with “competence” (ibid: 55).

It is because of findings such as these that we at ROSEnet regard ageism as a “significant source of inequality and unfairness in society”, with a “detrimental impact on performance, productivity and social cohesion” (Abrams & Swift 2012: 7). Ageism excludes everyone, in other words, and significantly harms our societies. This is why the help of policy makers is needed if we are to combat the inequality and inequity that old-age symbolic and civic exclusion entails. Ageism, as a widespread ideological bias, reinforces the exclusion of older people in everyday life. By questioning ageism rigorously it becomes easier to bring about changes in institutional patterns of old-age exclusion that this ideology legitimizes.

## Key Messages

It is on the basis of this analysis, that we derived the six policy messages for policy makers in the hope that we can enlist their help in combating old-age social exclusion that is driven by ageism. Recapping on these messages, these include:

- 1.** Ageism has exclusionary power even when the social exclusion of older people is not intended. Governments should take a leading role in initiating and coordinating activities that raise awareness of ageism and age discrimination.
- 2.** In taking a leadership role, we call on governments to educate policy makers and public servants at all levels about the ways in which attitudes about ageing affect all areas of the public sector.
- 3.** Governments should also launch specific campaigns to educate practitioners in different health and social sectors about the ways in which stereotypes about ageing and old age can impact how they address older people and their needs. Governments should also start initiatives that raise the public's awareness of the heterogeneity of older people, and the fact that many of them experience exclusion in later life.
- 4.** When formulating law and regulations, policy makers should consider whether these legislative structures have the potential to exclude older people. That is, old-age policy proofing ought to take place when laws and regulations are being formulated.
- 5.** Legislation against discrimination on the basis of old age needs to be formulated to complement discrimination laws on the basis of gender and ethnicity.
- 6.** In order to be able to effectively improve the situation for older people it is imperative that all countries collect statistics on all age brackets associated with the ageing population so that older people's social, economic, and civic realities can be assessed and so that policy-makers are able to address the ageing of Europe's population in an adequate manner.
- 7.** Older people should be involved in the formulation and implementation of policy in general, as well as policy of relevance to ageing and older people at the local, national and European level.
- 8.** Governments should develop tools and platforms to enable older people's civic participation, including political participation.

We deem these policy messages to be important and would like them to inform national and European policy irrespective of whether this policy is meant to cater specifically to the needs of older people or not.

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## ROSEnet CA15122 COST ACTION

*ROSEnet aims to overcome fragmentation and critical gaps in conceptual innovation on old-age exclusion across the life course, in order to address the research-policy disconnect and tackle social exclusion amongst older people in Europe.*

### Research Objectives

- Synthesise existing knowledge from regional, disciplinary and sectorally disparate dialogues, forming a coherent scientific discourse on old-age exclusion;
- Critically investigate the construction of life-course old-age exclusion across economic, social, service, civic rights, and community/spatial domains;
- Assess the implications of old-age exclusion across the life course within economic, social, service, civic rights, and community/spatial domains;
- Develop new conceptual and theoretical frameworks that can be practically applied in understanding and combating the exclusion of older people in European societies;
- Identify innovative, and implementable, policy and practice for reducing old-age exclusion amongst different groups of older people and in different jurisdictional and regional contexts.

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