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DARE TO MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

Economic and Social Council - Research Report

Challenging negative stereotypes on ageing and improving the quality of life of the elderly



Introduction of topic:

Ageism is a widely prevalent and prejudicial attitude that stems from the assumption that age discrimination and stereotyping of older persons is a social norm and therefore, acceptable. It is a reality in some form in all societies, and finds expression in individuals' attitudes, institutional and policy practices, as well as media representation. The failure to tackle ageism hinders their contributions to social, economic, cultural and political life, therefore ending ageism is an ethical and practical imperative since the ECOSOC committee strives to improve societies for people of all ages. This demands changing the way older persons are portrayed and perceived, from being seen as a burden to being appreciated for the many positive contributions they make to our human family.

For many elderly people the latter part of their life is not a time to relax and enjoy retirement, but rather a difficult and unhappy period, owing to financial worries, failing health and loneliness. As life expectancy increases, the average person lives well beyond the age of retirement. As a result, the elderly make up an ever-increasing percentage of society, which makes it more important than ever for a real effort to be made in improving the lives of senior citizens. How we improve the quality of these additional years, especially when a significant proportion of them are likely to be spent with a health condition or loneliness, looks set to be one of the key challenges of the next few decades.

Definition of Key Terms:

Ageism: Ageism is the stereotyping of and discriminating against individuals or groups on the basis of their age, especially the elderly.

Stereotype: A stereotype is a preconceived notion, especially about a group of people. Such negative stereotypes on ageing include the belief of the elderly being a burden, unproductive, lonely and poor in health, "past their sell-by date", senile, weak and helpless and unable of making good and right decisions on important issues.

Background Information:

The extension of life expectancy for older people has been one of the great achievements of recent decades. Between 1950 and 2010 it has risen worldwide from 46 to 68 years, and it is projected to increase to 81 by the end of the century. As a result of this, together with the continuous decline in fertility rates, the proportion of persons aged 60 and over is expected to double between 2007 and 2050, and by 2050, 2 billion people, over 20 per cent of the world's population, will be 60 or older.

The increase in the number of older people will be the greatest and the most rapid in the developing world, with Asia as the region with the largest number of older persons, and Africa facing the largest proportionate growth. Despite all of this, societies still

aren't embracing the ageing populations, and therefore, enhanced attention to the particular needs and challenges faced by many older people is clearly required, in order to improve their lives. The fundamentals of ageing with dignity, include having a good health, economic security and an enabling environment, but above all, care, friendship and support, therefore the smallest action can make a difference.

During the last decade, population ageing has led to the introduction of new policies and programmes, in which the social sector has taken centre stage. Many governments in developed and developing economies have implemented and piloted efficient policies and measures in several areas, such as in the health, social security and welfare systems. Furthermore, many policy framework documents, including national plans of action on ageing have been enacted. However, these policies and measures concentrated mainly on reducing ageing populations, instead of seeking to respond and eliminate the challenges faced by older persons, such as negative stereotypes towards them.

Not only are negative stereotypes hurtful to older people, but they may even shorten their lives. Several studies have shown that older adults exposed to positive stereotypes have a longer and better life, since this boosts their mental and physical health, whereas negative self-perceptions contributed to worse memory and feelings of worthlessness. In addition, such discrimination shapes how older persons are treated and perceived by their societies, including in medical settings and workplaces, creating environments that limit older persons' potential and further impact their health and well-being.

The majority of older men and women are able to continue to have an essential contribution to the functioning of society if adequate guarantees are in place, however their marginalization and devaluing is undermining their productivity and experience in the workforce, in volunteerism and through civil engagement while constraining their capacity for caregiving as well as financial and other support to families and communities.

Everybody will grow old, it's now a matter of knowing what kind of future we want to create for the generations of seniors to come. **Ageing is not an identity, but it is a process that can be positively and smoothly experienced** if we find relevant solutions to meet with the seniors' needs both locally and globally. In other words, all the nations present in the ECOSOC committee must come together to adopt measures to improve the life of the elderly and to take a stand against ageism by drawing attention to and challenging negative stereotypes and misconceptions about older persons and ageing.

Timeline of Events:

1982: First World Assembly on Ageing takes place in Vienna, Austria. The “Vienna International Plan of Action on Ageing” is produced in this Assembly.

1990: The “International Day of Older Persons” is designated by the UN General Assembly.

1991: Adoption of the “United Nations Principles for Older Persons” by the General Assembly, enumerating several entitlements for older persons.

1992: International Conference on Ageing takes place to follow-up on the Plan of Action. A “Proclamation on Ageing” is adopted in this Conference.

2002: Second World Assembly on Ageing takes place in Madrid, Spain. A “Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing” is adopted in this Assembly.

2010: The Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing is established by the General Assembly

2014: Resolution is adopted at the Economic and Social Council that recognized ageism as “the common source of, the justification for and the driving force behind age discrimination”.

Possible solutions:

1. Recognition and Education: To reduce ageism, people first need to recognize the ageist stereotypes they hold and work to overcome those stereotypes by treating each person as an individual. Education about identifying and preventing ageist attitudes and practices should also be incorporated into the diversity programs in schools, workplaces and communities to show the diversity of ageing.
2. Media: More positive images of older persons and of ageing in the media would significantly help to reduce ageism worldwide. For example, including healthy, productive, and successful older persons in television programs, newspaper articles and commercial advertising would counteract the negative perceptions many people have about aging and the elderly.
3. Governmental policies: The creation of innovative policies and regulations by international governments to promote the health, well-being and independence of senior citizens around the world, in order to improve their life. These include, for example, strengthening health care mechanisms, attributing welfare benefits to the elderly, supporting intergenerational support systems, facilitating the provision of services by giving priority to the older people and supporting NGOs or other institutions involved in this issue.

4. Infrastructure: The funding and growth of new institutions and organizational structures to fight ageism, through campaigns and social events, and to improve the life of the elderly, by providing care and friendship to them, making them company and organizing social activities to keep them mentally and physically active. Examples of such infrastructures include volunteer associations, community-based centres and senior universities.