



# Challenging Ageism

This paper provides an overview of ageism in Australia, examples (language, the media, elder abuse, and workplace discrimination), advice on how to stop it, and further resources.

## A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

Ageism can be defined as a process of stereotyping and discriminating against a person or people, simply because they are older. Ageism is endemic in our society. Older people often feel patronized or 'invisible' and can find it much harder to get or maintain a job, access healthcare, services or housing, or enjoy any manner of things our community has to offer because of how their age is judged. In an Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) [study](#), for example, 71 percent of Australian

adults over 65 reported that they had been insulted or mistreated on the basis of their age. With Australia's – and the global – population getting older, ageism is a serious human rights issue for us all.

Elder abuse is one of the worst manifestations of ageism. Elder abuse is defined as any act which causes harm to an older person and is carried out by someone in a position of trust – most often a family member. The abuse may be physical, social, financial, psychological or sexual and can include mistreatment and neglect. While elder abuse is vastly under-reported, the [World Health](#)

[Organisation](#) estimates up to 10 per cent of older people worldwide experience it.

There are some notional protections for older people in Australia. The [Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006](#) sets out basic human rights, for example, and the [Federal Age Discrimination Act 2004](#) protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of age in many areas of public life, including employment, education, accommodation and the provision of goods and services. There are also some laws and services in place that can respond to elder abuse. However, in practice, the laws are not strongly implemented, do not tackle all forms of age discrimination and do not directly address the ageist attitudes and stereotypes – including those in the media – which underpin so many hurtful actions every day.

Some common stereotypes about older people are that they:

- can't look after themselves
- are slow and incapable of learning new things
- don't know what's best for them
- need to be protected
- lack intellectual and physical capacity
- aren't sexual
- are a burden on society.

Stereotypes such as these fail to recognise the rights, needs, dignity and valuable contribution of older people in our community, and translate into ageist actions. For example, although older people have made decisions all their adult lives, they might suddenly find themselves being told they can no longer do what they want. This might happen, for example, when adult children disagree with their financial decisions, or when they enter residential care for support with tasks of daily living but find themselves treated like children. In reality, incapacity to make decisions is a complex issue and should never be presumed solely on the basis of a person's age. Even when older people do have additional needs, the way those needs are met should be respectful of their rights as human beings.

Paternalistic and derogatory attitudes towards older people are patronizing and disrespectful. They can interfere with basic human rights, such as their right to freedom of movement and association; their right not to have their wishes



and decisions ignored or overridden; their right to privacy, and, not least, their right to dignity. Experiences of ageism often affect older people's mental and physical wellbeing and therefore their quality of life. Ageism can result in feelings of loneliness, sadness, anger and shame – older people who internalize ageism are even said to [die sooner](#) than those with a positive attitude to ageing.

It is important to understand that older people are as diverse a group as any other, with a great deal to contribute to society – lived experience and reflective wisdom, for example, usually come with age. Older people contribute more volunteer hours than any other group and are absolutely vital to the Australian economy as carers, employers, employees, producers and consumers.

We all need to take responsibility for combating ageism and ensure that older people can participate to their full potential in a community that is truly age-friendly. Like racism and sexism, ageism needs to be addressed within a human rights framework, including via a *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older People* that would provide a definitive, universal statement that age discrimination is morally and legally unacceptable, and support basic protections for older people worldwide.

People also need to be educated about older people's human rights at a community level. To truly combat ageism, however, change has to happen at an individual level: we all need to question our own attitudes and behaviour, and learn to challenge ageist stereotypes and assumptions. After all, we will all be older one day!

## Example: language

We've all heard, or possibly made, ageist jokes, but unfortunately they perpetuate negative stereotypes of older people, just as racist or sexist jokes hurt other groups in our community.

As well as jokes, words that people often think, or even say, when they're around an older person include: 'crone', 'senile', 'over the hill', 'decrepit', 'codger', 'cute', 'old biddy', 'fossil', 'geezer', 'little old lady' and 'silly old bag'. All these terms are ageist. If it is necessary to identify someone by their age, the preferred, neutral word is 'older' – not 'old' or 'elderly'.

Professionals sometimes refer to 'elderspeak', a term coined by John Leland in the [New York Times](#). Elderspeak refers to the 'sweetly belittling form of address that rankles older people': the doctor who talks to their son rather than to them about their health; the shop assistant who assumes that an older person needs to be addressed slowly and loudly, the person who addresses an older person as 'dear'.

Speech is powerful: the stereotypes and infantilization of older people through use of patronizing language affects their self-esteem. Society must move on from stereotypes that condition how we react to chronological age.



## Example: the media

The media, including advertising, plays a significant part in forming negative community attitudes towards ageing. The AHRC report found that respondents feel that stories they have seen or read in the media influence their perception that older people are: victims (70%), lonely or isolated (60%), bad drivers (62%) and more likely to be sick (60%).

Examples of ageist headlines:

- 'Ageing time bomb will change the way we live.'
- 'Are we ready for the "grey tsunami"?'
- 'The problem of our ageing population'
- 'Older, dangerous drivers a growing problem'

- 'How Australia's ageing population threatens our democracy'
- 'Our New 'Old' Problem'
- 'Pensions burden top of the list'
- 'Older homeowners staying put make houses scarcer for younger families.'

Media professionals need to be educated to present older Australians in a more accurate, contemporary and diverse manner, to more realistically reflect their value, capabilities and experiences. Information on where to make complaints about ageism in the media may be found here: <https://www.communications.gov.au/what-we-do/television/media/voicing-your-concern>



## Example: elder abuse

***Margaret was in her late 80s and had been living with her middle-aged son Steven for a number of years, following his divorce. Steven received a carer's pension but did not provide his mother with any real care or financial or domestic support. He would also abuse his mother verbally, calling her a 'stupid, weak old bag' and sometimes take money from her purse.***

Elder abuse in Australia is most commonly financial and psychological, most commonly affects women and is overwhelmingly perpetuated by family members – often adult sons. As with all forms of family violence, where there is an imbalance of power in a relationship there is a risk of abuse occurring from the

dominant person or persons. Countering ageism, by promoting the dignity and inherent value of older people, and empowering them, is crucial to stopping elder abuse.

Older Victorians experiencing elder abuse can get help by calling Seniors Rights Victoria on 1300 368 821 Monday to Friday, from 10 am to 5 pm. Services include a Helpline, specialist legal services, short-term support and advocacy for individuals and community and professional education. Seniors Rights Victoria is supported by the Victorian Government.



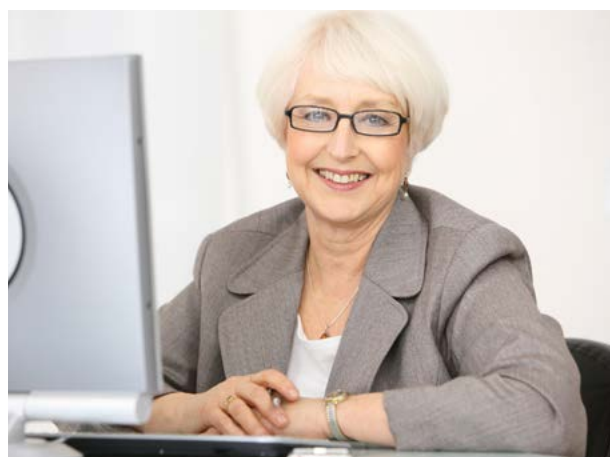
## Example: workplace discrimination

***'Their faces just dropped because they were expecting someone in their thirties and here was this old crone'***

***'I've got forty years of experience and all of a sudden that means nothing at all'***

A [study](#) by the AHRC revealed four main experiences of age discrimination in the workplace:

1. Shut out...older people unable to get an interview or secure a position
2. Pigeon holing...older people becoming stuck or constrained in their roles



3. Structural...older people being targeted for redundancy or restructure
4. Cultural...older people subject to discriminatory cultural or management practices.

In many instances, the discrimination was more subtle and indirect, for example:

- The interest expressed in an applicant which fades once their age is apparent
- The passing comments, made in jest, that implied the worker was old or out of touch
- The assumption that the older worker would not be able to understand technology
- Not being considered for training opportunities, new projects or promotions.

The AHRC found that 27 per cent of people over the age of 50 had recently experienced discrimination in the workplace. Ageism in employment has profound financial and emotional impacts on older workers, and prevents their contributing to our nation's productivity. Nearly a third of the people who are long term unemployed are over 50 years and are on the inadequate Newstart Allowance. Many of them face poverty, unable to find employment and unable to get the pension until they are 65.

## Example: gender discrimination

Ageism can affect any older person but it tends to affect women more. Studies show that, because of gender inequity, older women experience elder abuse and workplace discrimination more than men, as well as more sexist and ageist representation in language and the media.

Women tend to be viewed as less valuable as

they age because they have different traits than those considered desirable in a woman: reproductive ability and conventional 'attractiveness'. Mainstream body positivity often tells women to embrace their curves, but hardly ever their wrinkles, and the majority of females we see in the media are still young.

We all need to fight ageism because it is one of our society's most glaring results of sexist standards. See the COTA Vic paper, *Voices of Older People: Older Women on Gender Equality*.



## WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Examine what goes through your mind when you're with an older person – check your own ageism
2. Step in when you see or hear something wrong. Complain to the relevant bodies when you see workplace discrimination, media stereotypes or other forms of ageism happening
3. Spend time with and value the special older people in your life
4. Contact COTA to find out about its workshop program on ageism, designed for staff and community
5. [Join Age Demands Action](#) and other global campaigns that challenge age discrimination and fight for the rights of older people.



## Who we are

[COTA Victoria](#) is the voice of older Victorians, the primary organisation representing their interests for 65 years. [Seniors Rights Victoria](#) is a program of COTA and the key state-wide service dedicated to stopping elder abuse in our community.

Ageism, based on negative age stereotypes, restricts the participation and inclusion of older people in all aspects of life. Both COTA and Seniors Rights Victoria support initiatives that recognise the decision making, capacities and contributions of older Australians and actively combat ageism and age discrimination.

## Further resources

### Australian

- **Seniors Rights Victoria**  
<https://seniorsrights.org.au>
- **COTA Vic**  
<https://cotavic.org.au>
- **COTA Australia**  
[www.cota.org.au](http://www.cota.org.au)

- **Australian Human Rights Commission**  
<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/>
- **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission**  
<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/>
- **Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (Australia)**  
<http://www.rightsofolderpeople.org.au/>

### International

- **Ageism Hurts**  
<http://ageismhurts.org/>
- **World Health Organisation**  
<http://www.who.int/ageing/en/>
- **HelpAge International**  
<http://www.helpage.org/>
- **International Federation of Ageing**  
<http://www.ifa-fiv.org/>
- **The Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People** <http://www.rightsofolderpeople.org/>
- **The Frameworks Institute – Reframing Ageing**  
<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/reframing-aging.html>



Telephone (03) 9654 4443  
[www.cotavic.org.au](http://www.cotavic.org.au)



Helpline 1300 368 821  
<https://seniorsrights.org.au>



Seniors Rights Victoria acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government, Victoria Legal Aid and the Commonwealth of Australia Attorney-General's Department.