

The global campaign to combat ageism

Ageist attitudes towards older persons are prevalent and insidious. It might be time to consider making age discrimination illegal.



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One of the missions of the United Nations is to make this a more just and humane world. Towards this end, the UN has campaigned to combat discrimination against women, racial minorities and persons with disabilities.

The UN adopted the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1965, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. Singapore is a party to all three conventions.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST AGEISM

The UN has been considering the issue of discrimination against older persons for the past three decades. In 1990, the UN General Assembly designated Oct 1 as the International Day of Older Persons.

In 1982, the UN convened the first World Assembly of Ageing in Vienna, Austria. The Vienna International Plan of Action – the first international instrument on ageing, guiding thinking and the formulation of policies and programmes on ageing – was endorsed by the UN General Assembly that year.

The second World Assembly of Ageing was held in Madrid, Spain, in 2002. In 2003, the UN General Assembly endorsed the Political Declaration and the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing. Article 5 of the Madrid Declaration made a commitment to eliminate age discrimination.

In 2010, the UN General Assembly established the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing. The group is considering developing a new UN convention



Despite the Singapore Government's efforts and the Tripartite Guidelines, workers in their late 40s and early 50s find it hard to get a job, says the writer, adding that the same is even more true for older workers. He says it is time to consider enacting a law making it illegal to discriminate against anyone based on age. ST FILE PHOTO

to promote and protect the rights of older persons.

In 2016, the Assembly of the World Health Organisation (WHO) called upon the organisation to lead a global campaign to combat ageism, in collaboration with partners. In fulfilment of the mandate, WHO has been working with the UN, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the UN Population Fund. The four institutions recently published their Global Report on Ageism. This essay is inspired by that report.

WHAT IS AGEISM?

Ageism means holding negative stereotypes about older persons, being prejudiced against older persons, and discriminating against older persons. In other words, ageism affects how we think, feel and act.

Ageism starts in childhood and is reinforced over time. Children pick up cues from those around

them about their society's stereotypes and prejudices, and internalise them.

They are also influenced by the media and popular culture. Both the media and popular culture tend to depict older persons in a negative light. Even academics are guilty of ageism. Many economists describe the trend of the ageing of the global population as a tsunami or disaster.

Attitudes towards older persons, however, differ from culture to culture. In some cultures, older persons are respected. In other cultures, they are despised. In general, the older person is viewed negatively in most societies.

HOW PREVALENT IS AGEISM?

In the preface to the global report, the authors wrote: "This report shows that ageism is prevalent, ubiquitous and insidious because it goes largely unrecognised and unchallenged. Among older people, ageism is associated with poorer physical and mental health,

increased social isolation and loneliness, greater financial insecurity and decreased quality of life and premature death."

In his message, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres wrote: "Ageism is widespread in institutions, laws and policies across the world. It damages individual health and dignity as well as economies and societies writ large. It denies people their human rights and their ability to reach their full potential."

The UN report states that, globally, one in two people is ageist against older people. In Europe, one in three older persons reported being the target of ageism. The report states that, globally, 55.5 per cent of the people hold ageist attitudes towards older people. Regionally, the highest percentage of people with ageist attitudes towards older people is in South-east Asia, at 86.4 per cent. The percentage in the Americas is 41.9 per cent, and 44.2 per cent in Europe.

I find these findings surprising and counter-intuitive. Given the Asian value of respect for older persons, I had expected South-east Asia to be less prejudiced than Europe and the Americas. The conclusion is that the old Asian value has gone and been replaced by a new value that privileges the young and disrespects the old.

What are the objectives of the global report? First, to raise awareness about the problem. Second, to draw attention to the need to prevent ageism. Third, to call for action across sectors and stakeholders.

AGEISM IN SINGAPORE

Does ageism exist in Singapore? I think the answer is yes.

When President Halimah Yacob was the Speaker of Parliament and a member of the People's Action Party Seniors Group, she said: "We are still an ageist society."

She said it was difficult for older workers to find a job. She urged Singaporeans not to "look at an

elderly person and immediately assume that they will not be productive, they will not be adaptable, they can't perform their job... Employment is one area we need to tackle".

Singapore has a retirement age. It is set at 62 and employers are encouraged to re-employ their active retirees until the age of 67. Next year, the retirement age will increase to 63 and re-employment to 68.

The Ministry of Manpower has a Fair Consideration Framework, which sets out requirements for all employers that forbid them from discriminating on characteristics unrelated to the job, such as age.

The Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices has set out guidelines on fair employment practices. The guidelines prohibit age discrimination.

However, in spite of the Government's efforts and exhortations, and the Tripartite Guidelines, the situation on the ground is very bad. Workers in mid-career, in their late 40s and early 50s, find it hard to get a job.

The same is even more true for older workers. Employers in Singapore, with few exceptions, hold ageist attitudes towards older workers. One exception is insurance company Prudential Singapore, which has abolished the retirement age.

Should Singapore have a law to make age discrimination illegal?

Many countries have enacted laws to make discrimination on account of age illegal. These include Australia, Canada, the European Union and the United States. The laws have had a positive impact on the employment of older workers.

LAW AGAINST AGEISM?

Should Singapore consider enacting such a law?

My philosophy is to use the law as the last resort. We should try moral suasion before resorting to the law. My conclusion is that our employers have remained recalcitrant in spite of the Ministry of Manpower's Fair Consideration Framework and the Tripartite Guidelines on fair employment. In view of this, it is time for the Singapore Government to consider enacting a law making it illegal to discriminate against anyone on account of his age.

There is a strong economic argument in favour of such a law. Singapore is short of manpower. At the same time, we are not employing older workers who have experience and wisdom. We should end the discrimination against older workers and make use of this pool of human resource. Most older Singaporeans want to work. We should let them work and be assets, not liabilities.

At the UN, I hope that Singapore will play a leadership role in the Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing. Let us help the UN to develop a new UN convention to promote and protect the rights of older people.

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