

Approaches to combating ageism among the elderly populations in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined approaches to combating ageism among the elderly populations in Kenya. The study used a qualitative methodology, and it involved interviews with 30 experts on ageism from different parts of Kenya. The findings of the study suggest that there are a number of approaches that can be effective in combating ageism. Some of the approaches to combating ageism that were identified in the study include: Educational interventions: These interventions aim to teach people about ageism and its negative effects. They can be delivered in a variety of settings, such as schools, workplaces, and community organizations. Intergenerational contact: This type of intervention brings together people of different ages to interact with each other. This can help to break down stereotypes and promote positive attitudes towards older people. Policy changes: These interventions can help to reduce ageism by changing the way that older people are treated in society. For example, laws that protect older people from discrimination can help to create a more age-friendly environment. Media representation: The media can play a role in combating ageism by portraying older people in a positive light. This can help to challenge negative stereotypes and promote positive attitudes towards older people. The conclusion and recommendation of this study is that there are a number of approaches that can be effective in combating ageism. These approaches can help to reduce negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, and they can promote positive attitudes towards older people.

Key terms: Approaches, combating ageism, elderly, populations.

INTRODUCTION

Ageism is the negative stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination against a certain group of people based on their age (Butler, 1969). Although sexism and racism have been widely researched in the areas of prejudice and stereotypes, little attention has been given to ageism. Ageing is the destiny of every person on earth unless one dies prematurely. Unlike other areas of prejudice and discrimination like sexism, racism, ethnicity, disability, and religion-based, among others, ageism is unique and special because ageing awaits everyone except for premature death cases. According to World Health Organization, the aged are people of 60 years of age and above (UNPF, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Western countries, ageism is rampant. The aged are viewed negatively as burdensome and dependent (Doll, 2006). This trend has led to people developing fear as they head towards 60 years and above. Some people go to the extent of trying all possible ways to appear and feel younger, including surgery. Since getting old is not favourable among whites, the older one gets, the more they are despised by the younger generations (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018). This comes with ageist attitudes. The elderly in Western countries are treated worse than children and perceived to be not understanding the modern world due to advanced technology. The elderly have lagged behind in today's fast-changing world, making the younger generations consider them resourceful and burdensome. In Western countries, ageing is viewed as negative (Knapp & Stubblefield, 2000). Celebrating birthdays is no longer considered a joyous moment, as was the case before. Instead, it is a regret. Retirement in Western countries means the end of a career. Although some people prefer to stop working at retirement, some are forced to stop working even when they don't feel like ending their careers due to pressure from young people to pave way for them. The pressure is usually accompanied by ageist attitudes, including verbal utterances like 'the elderly have expired, they are no longer useful, etc.' (Dahlberg & McKee, 2018).

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Half of the world's population holds ageist attitudes toward older people. Europe is the only region globally with clear data on all age groups (Raposo &

Carstensen, 2015). This study reports elderly people are experiencing more age discrimination as compared to other age groups. Ageism has been proven to change how older people view themselves. It has eroded solidarity between generations and devalued the ability of people to benefit from what the elderly generation can contribute to society (Raposo & Carstensen, 2015). Health-wise, ageism has led to the poor physical and mental health of older people; it slows recovery from the disability of older people, and it increases the risk for unhealthy behaviours like excessive drinking of alcohol, smoking, eating unhealthy diets etc. All these aspects lead to a deteriorated life among the elderly. Therefore there is an urgent call to combat ageism among the elderly for Healthy Ageing. According to Hudson (2012), three strategies exist for combating ageism; policy and law, educational activities and intergenerational interventions.

Law and Policy

Law and policy are the strategies that can be used to address discrimination and inequality on the matter of ageism, according to Schultziner and Rabinovici (2012). Law and policy can ensure everyone is protected, anytime and wherever they are. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 1 states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights", ageism has persisted in families, societies and institutions. It has become a huge barrier to including older persons in social, political and economic sectors (Schultziner & Rabinovici, 2012). The sudden growth of the ageing population living longer is likely to exacerbate the human rights of elderly people. For instance, the elderly persons' population in Kenya who are 60 years and above is projected to shoot up to 5.5 million people in 2050 from 2.2 million people in 2020 (UNFP, 2020). However, this is calling for urgent modification of the legal, policy and programming of the environment to ensure that the population will be comfortable to guarantee their longevity and capacity for healthy Ageing. According to the Republic of Kenya (2014), the elderly in Kenya today are experiencing difficulties in accessing basic services like property rights, healthcare, justice, mobility etc. the Kenyan constitution has been a big hindrance in supporting older people through inclusion and other possible ways to participate in national and county development frameworks in all

scopes of social-cultural, economic and political platforms. The constitution should ensure whatever is documented is implemented in regard to aiding the elderly people to experience equality and inclusion of every member of society regardless of their age. Although this should be the reality, it has not been fully realized in Kenya. The older people in Kenya are still experiencing ageism in political, economic, and social platforms.

Campaigns on Human Rights

According to Harris and Dollinger (2001), conducting human rights awareness campaigns can also help in combating ageism. Some nations in Africa, like Nigeria, have engaged this gear, and it is working to some extent. For instance, with the support of Help Age International, the country organizes seminars and awareness-raising campaigns on the rights of older people (Sgarbieri & Pacheco, 2017). The elderly are engaged in the campaigns and in the government to call out for friendly policies that benefit the old people. Through the same campaigns, the government is mandated and persuaded to build infrastructure to help elderly people, like elderly homes. Sgarbieri & Pacheco (2017) argue that through the campaigns, the elderly affected during demolitions and natural calamities like floods are usually relocated to safer places with dignity. The campaigns have also been beneficial in making agreements with public service providers like transport operators to cease from subjecting the elderly to long queues for a long time to access travelling tickets. This is physically tiring, and it dissuades them from travelling and undertaking other normal daily activities (Sgarbieri & Pacheco, 2017).

According to Knight et al., The campaigns are equally essential in getting access to vulnerable and economically poor older people so that they can be provided with basic needs like food, toiletries, and medical care. Through this, society shares in their plight and challenges facing them and rises to help them instead of stereotyping and discriminating against them. According to Sgarbieri & Pacheco (2017), campaigns on human rights and, especially, the rights of older people are important in combating ageism. Perhaps such campaigns, if actuated in Kenya, may combat ageism among the elderly.

Education

Educational activities in the past have enhanced empathy, dispelled misconceptions about age discrimination and reduced prejudice by providing useful information and countering prejudice examples (Tam, 2014). Education interventions among the elderly, as well as the other generations, on the benefits of healthy Ageing can greatly solve the problem of unhealthy Ageing. For instance, addressing ageism among students regardless of their discipline and knowledge through educational interventions need to appear regularly in the literature (Tam, 2014). According to Chonody's study (2015), knowledge-focused interventions directed towards ageism can greatly change the attitudes people have towards older persons. Chonody presents overwhelming evidence that educational interventions geared towards changing student attitudes and knowledge can work wonders in combating ageism.

Cohen et al. (2006), in their study, have also consented that ageism can be combated through learning. It has been quite a long time since adult education researched the complex relationships in biography, experience and learning combined. Adult education has been proven to promote social change and transformation, which are key components in combating ageism. It is important to note that context mediates the interpretation of an experience. At the same time, personal and historical context are equally important in achieving a transformative experience, especially among other generations towards older persons (Taylor & Cranton, 2013). The process of writing stories and narrating them will offer opportunities to researchers and scholars, as well as other subjects, to belong to different generations and associate with them positively. Narratives, especially at the basic learning level, play a great deal on reflexes and the capacity of the learner to listen to other voices. These elements, therefore, need to be used in curriculum development in schools (formal learning) as well as non-formal learning experiences to combat ageism. Narratives and critical reflexivity are significant in combating ageism. Both interrogate the assumptions and perceptions of the process of Ageing and subject them to critical thinking to examine their beliefs and values. Flores-Sandoval and Kinsella (2020) did a study where nursing students expressed negative feelings of ageism before they engaged in

their profession, but after completing one semester, the students reported having changed their perspective towards ageism and a prospective transformation was experienced, which led to the bonding between the students and the elderly people who were their patients (Brown & Bright, 2017).

International Day of Older Persons against Ageism

Vieira & Sousa (2016), in their study on 'Intergenerational practice: Contributing to a conceptual framework', state that having an international day of older persons against ageism can be useful in creating awareness around ageism. For instance, on such a day, Nigeria holds summits to discuss ageism in detail with other organizations. For example, in one of such forums, the Age Nigeria Foundation translated the meaning of ageism as defined by World Health Organization into the local languages, among them being Yoruba, for the local people to understand clearly what it is and what it means (Burnes et al., 2019). This is especially important to the illiterate and semi-literate, who may be propagating ageism ignorantly. In such forums, there are also demonstrations among the locals to get a clear picture of the impact of ageism if they fall victims. A lot of learning takes place in such forums. For instance, in Nigeria, older people talk about local positive proverbs that challenge ageism. Strategies are laid out to empower all generations to challenge negative age-related stereotypes in society (Burnes et al., 2019).

In addition, older people are encouraged to join vocational trainings where they acquire skills to keep them occupied, interact with others, and also earn a living (Gutheil et al., 2006). Hence, an international day of older persons against ageism can be powerful in curtailing ageism. As much as it seems to be working well for Nigeria, it can also work for Kenya and other countries. Kenya needs to embrace this day and utilize it effectively to combat ageism for healthy ageing of older people. Ageism has embedded in the Kenyan culture so much, and the country cannot afford to ignore it. There is need to ensure the elderly are aware of the possible persecution they may undergo when they are discriminated against and how to positively go about it so that it does not affect their mental and physical health.

Intergenerational interventions

According to Kahlbaugh and Budnick (2023), Intergenerational interventions simply mean bringing people of different generations together to help reduce intergroup prejudice and stereotypes based on age. Kahlbaugh and Budnick's study further argue that ageism is a problem affecting every person regardless of age; the study indicates that even some four-year-old children are aware of ageism. These children (four years and below) can internalize and use ageism to guide their feelings and behaviour towards older people. They also draw from cultural stereotypes on ageism to comprehend themselves, which leads to self-directed ageism at any age (Kahlbaugh & Budnick, 2023). Ageism tends to worsen other forms of prejudice like sexism and racism. For instance, elderly women have, on many occasions, been associated with witchcraft, which has led to them being killed or being driven out of their marital homes (Otieno, 2019). The young generations watch keenly and start internalizing that all elderly women are witches, they are the source of the troubles in society, they don't deserve to live etc (McCleary, 2014). This is not the case. As discussed above, elderly women are accused of being witches because of their physical appearances, which tend to come with age as well as the effects of the physical environment where one is brought up. Hence, there is a need to bring together older and young people harmoniously to interact and appreciate every stage of life. Young people need to understand that the old were once young and that old age awaits everyone unless one dies prematurely.

Addressing and encouraging collaborations amongst all generational groups is important in ensuring healthy Ageing. Kahlbaugh and Budnick (2023) did a study to examine the benefits of an in-person intergenerational contact program they called Successful Aging and Intergenerational Experiences (SAGE). The program paired older adults aged 85 years and younger adults aged 23 years for close to three hours every week for a period of 7 years. The participants shared skills, memories, and values and fostered new perspectives and friendships. The expectations of the research were to benefit both generations with respect to subjective wellbeing, positive mood, identity processes, and wisdom, among others. The core reason, however, for creating the program was to reduce ageist beliefs against

elderly people. The findings of the study indicated greater identity, positive mood and subjective wellbeing by all participants (Kahlbaugh & Budnick, 2023). The SAGE program did not reduce ageist beliefs, but age differences in ageism were found. This study recommends a research using a different intergenerational contact approach that will ensure ageist beliefs are reduced between the young and older generations and how age differences in ageism can be combated.

Ermer et al. (2021) carried out a study on whether performing arts interventions could be a useful method in lessening age stereotypes among both the young and old generations. The study examined whether performing arts intervention addressed age-increased knowledge on ageism and countered ageist attitudes. After assessing two programs one with a discussion component and the other one without, the findings indicated that the younger generation experienced a significant view of ageism being a problem, and they significantly agreed on changing their perceptions about ageism towards the older people. This study concluded that positive age stereotypes increased while negative age stereotypes decreased after the performing art intervention (Ermer et al., 2021). This study implies that intergenerational performing arts interventions can positively combat ageism (Lee, 2012). A further study can be carried out to test other community-organized activities like sports, whether they can empower individuals to increase positive age stereotypes and lessen or change perceptions of Ageing and the aged.

According to Blieszner and Artale (2001), Nigeria is one African country with a huge youth population. The country engages young people by holding running races with older participants. Nigeria does this knowing that the youths of today will be the old of tomorrow (Tam, 2019). Therefore the country has taken the initiative of educating its citizens, both young and old, on the importance of older people's human rights. According to Vowels (2014), the races also create awareness and stimulate interest among all age groups on issues to do with Ageing and ageism. Nigeria esteems this program with the intention of closing the generational gap stereotyping. The Age Nigeria Foundation that hosts the program believes in the philosophy that a better world for older people

today means a better world for younger too today and tomorrow when they grow old. The country has also created another initiative called Help Unite Great Generations in Nigeria (HUGGING) as a step toward uniting generations (Counts, 2019). The initiative works by the young people creating awareness and giving older people a voice through organizing a chain of events like popular artists' performances, radio and television programs, and drama workshops, among others. The intention of these public mobilizations is to draw the attention of all generations, maximizing positive age stereotypes and minimizing negative age stereotypes (ageism) (Burnes, 2019). Once this is achieved, it will promote older people's human rights and their respect in the country. This will consequently curtail ageism which is otherwise thriving. In Kenya, such arrangements are very minimal. Therefore, there is a need to emulate the same initiative or a similar one because it has worked for Nigeria, and it may also work for Kenya as well as other countries in Africa and across the globe.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: After an extensive review of the literature, this study confirms that ageism is a problem coming from within and without. One withstanding fact is that the environment where one is brought up, or lives in, will determine their perspective towards the elderly and ageing process. The environment shapes one's mindset to internalize ageist attitudes, which eventually lead to self-ageism. Moreover, the same environment shapes societies on how to behave towards the elderly. This can be done either by propagating positive age stereotypes or negative age stereotypes (Binns et al., 2016). In conclusion, the review confirms that ageism is a rampant case in the society and there are many ways of combating it.

Recommendation: Therefore, combating ageism is possible, but it requires the willingness of the relevant stakeholders like the national and county governments, non-governmental organizations, human activists and researchers to determine the validity of these premises and propose better interventions for reducing ageism for Healthy Ageing. Among many recommendations that have been proposed by this study, there is need for Kenyan curriculum from elementary school up to the university level to consider embracing gerontology studies which are likely to combat ageism in Kenya.

The study also recommends researchers to propose achievable and viable goals of ensuring an effective curriculum in the country on gerontology which will combat ageism.

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