

Combating Ageism is Combating Abuse

This World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD), we at NCALL are highlighting ageism and its connection to elder abuse and abuse in later life. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently released its [Global Report on Ageism](#), which examines the pervasiveness and impact of ageism across the globe. NCALL's Sara Mayer outlined the report's findings and offers some steps you can take to confront ageism [here](#). In this blog post, I will take a closer look at the ways ageism creates a culture that not only tolerates and ignores elder abuse, but allows it to flourish. I'll also discuss ways we can work towards a world that respects the dignity and safety of people across the lifespan, including some resources and action steps for WEAAD.

Understanding Ageism in the Context of Abuse

Ageism refers to how we think, feel, and act towards ourselves or others based on age. Ageist ideas are often ingrained and systemic, inhibiting people's objectivity and influencing decisions at the micro (individual/family), meso (organization/community), and macro (government/societal) levels of human interaction.¹ As such, the impact of ageism is pervasive. In 2018, bias against older workers cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$850 billion in gross domestic product (GDP).² Ageism negatively affects older adults' ability to access health care, and leads to poor outcomes in mental and physical health, including a shorter life expectancy.³ And, perhaps most importantly, ageism intersects with and exacerbates other forms of oppression, including those related to sex, race, and disability.⁴

1 <https://www.lco-cdo.org/en/our-current-projects/a-framework-for-the-law-as-it-affects-older-adults/older-adults-funded-papers/ageism-and-the-law-emerging-concepts-and-practices-in-housing-and-health/ii-ageism-concepts-and-theories/>

2 https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/econ/2020/impact-of-age-discrimination.doi.10.26419-2Fint.00042.003.pdf

3 https://www.upi.com/Health_News/2020/01/31/Age-discrimination-affects-people-world-wide/2441580502597/

4 <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>

While the micro-level risk factors for abuse in later life are well known—social isolation, poor physical or mental health, and dependence on others for care, among others—the macro-level impact of ageism is harder to quantify. Negative attitudes and stereotypes towards older people dehumanize them in a range of ways. Studies have shown that both younger and older people have negative ideas about what aging means.⁵ When we spend our lives being bombarded by cultural messaging that equates youth with beauty, success, and worth, it seems impossible not to start to internalize it at some level.

Perpetrators of abuse rely on ageist assumptions and beliefs to justify their behavior. They rationalize abusing, neglecting, or exploiting an older adult because “they’re going to die soon anyway.” They assume older adults have dementia and don’t understand—or can’t report—what is happening to them. They may view older adults as less worthy of respect or dignity if they have physical limitations or rely on others for care. Instead of seeing older adults as fully human, they are viewed as disposable, inconvenient, and irrelevant.

Ageism also impacts society’s ability to detect and respond appropriately to abuse. Assumptions about their cognitive abilities can prevent older adults from being believed when they report being abused. What comes to mind when you read the words

“domestic violence victim”? Do you think of someone in their 70’s, 80’s, or 90’s? You were more likely to think of a younger woman with children. The fact is the majority of elder abuse cases involve female victims with spouses as perpetrators.⁶ When we don’t ascribe the full range of human experiences to older adults, we limit society’s ability to keep older victims safe and hold perpetrators accountable.



Photo by Nishant Aneja from Pexels

⁵ <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/77067146.pdf>

⁶ United Nations (2013). Neglect, Abuse and Violence Against Older Women, <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/age-ing/neglect-abuse-violence-older-women.pdf>

Until recently, it has not been widely recognized that older adults are victims of sexual assault.⁷ There exists a pervasive and damaging misconception that sexual abuse is about lust or passion, rather than power and control. Society's fetishization of youth creates an environment where older people are viewed as unattractive, and thus unlikely to be sexually assaulted. Societal attitudes and responses to those who experience sexual violence, still largely characterized by shame and silence, are compounded by ageism that portrays older people as asexual and therefore outside the accepted boundaries of concern as survivors of sexual violence.⁸

Addressing Ageism in Our Work with Older Adults

So what can we do about ageism in the context of abuse? First, we can begin by confronting our own attitudes about aging, because we can't challenge bias until we can identify it. We can also be mindful of the language we use when we talk about older adults and be willing to confront others who perpetuate ageist tropes or make ageist assumptions. There are some great self-reflection tools and conversation starters available to help jump start your efforts like [Who me, ageist?](#) by This Chair Rocks and the WHO's [Initiating a conversation about ageism](#).

Second, we must start by believing older adults when they tell us about what is happening to them. Be alert for "coded disclosure," which is a way for someone to communicate in a roundabout way that they are in a bad situation. Many older adults feel shame or embarrassment that prevents them from reporting abuse in an explicit manner. Instead, they may say things like "He sure has a temper" or "She doesn't like me to have company over." Such oblique disclosures should be a cue that the speaker may have more to say, but needs to feel safe about doing so.



Photo by Ghen Mar Cuaño from Pexels

7 Burgess, A. & Clements, P. (2006). Information Processing of sexual abuse in elders. *Journal of Forensic Nursing*, 2 (3), 113-120.

8 Bows, H. (2018). Practitioner views on the impacts, challenges, and barriers in supporting older survivors of sexual violence. *Violence against women*, 24(9), 1070-1090.

It is not uncommon for people to question why someone in an abusive situation doesn't "just leave." The reasons are as complex as humans are diverse. A commitment to anti-ageism requires us to understand the choices made by older survivors who are not acting in what we believe to be their best interest. Leaving a relationship that is many decades old may have ripple effects that impact every facet of one's life, including loss of a home, caregiver, access to other family members, and a lifetime of personal effects. Some older survivors have cultural, generational, or spiritual beliefs that are incompatible with ending a marriage. When someone is being abused by a child or grandchild, there can be shame or embarrassment associated with bringing attention to their behavior.

And last, but not least, we must stop the erasure of older adults. When describing services and supports for survivors, it's important to include images of older adults and ensure that the images we use and messages we send about older adults portray them in a way that respects their diversity, resilience, and life experience.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day: End Ageism | End Abuse

Please join us right now, as we countdown to World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD), in amplifying the message [End Ageism | End Abuse](#). This campaign is a call to action—until we collectively confront the ageism in our systems, in our communities, and in ourselves, elder abuse will continue—underdiagnosed, underreported, and overlooked. Head over to our [WEAAD webpage](#) to find tools, educational resources, graphics, and sample social media to use in your WEAAD efforts.

With appreciation for your commitment to ending abuse across the lifespan,
Ann

*Ann Laatsch, J.D., Justice System Coordinator,
National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life (NCALL)*

