

A GLOBAL CALL FOR INTER-GENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY – Message from the International Youth Day 2022

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We recently observed the International Youth Day on 12th August.

The objective of International Youth Day 2022 is to amplify the message that action is needed across all generations to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and leave no one behind. It will also raise awareness on certain barriers to intergenerational solidarity, notably ageism, which impacts young and old persons, while having detrimental effects on society as a whole.

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age. An ever-growing social evil, ageism is not just restricted to older people. Casual comments like, “*Oh he is a cricketer in 30s?*” or “*How did she think of bearing a child at 45!*” or “*A kid like him has no chance among the veterans*” – all point to our ageist attitudes.

The clutches of ageism

Ageism continues as an insidious and often unaddressed issue in health, human rights and development, and has bearings on both older and younger populations around the world. In addition, it regularly intersects with other forms of bias (such as racism, sexism, ableism, mentalism) and impacts people in ways that prevent them from reaching their full potential and comprehensively contributing to their community.

The recent **GLOBAL REPORT ON AGEISM** launched by the United Nations and World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2021 highlights the alarming scenario. Every second person in the world is believed to hold ageist attitudes – leading to poorer physical and mental health and reduced quality of life for older persons, costing societies billions of dollars each year. In sheer numbers, this data amounts to billions of “stereotyped thoughts towards ageing” that create a global environment unsafe for older people.

The ongoing pandemic has in addition been a staring eye-opener. The response to control COVID-19 has unveiled just how widespread ageism is – older and younger people have been stereotyped in public discourse and on social media. In some situations, age has been used as the sole criterion for access to medical care, vaccination, triage, lifesaving therapies and for physical isolation.

Ageism has serious and wide-ranging consequences for people's health and well-being. Among older people, ageism is associated with poorer physical and mental health, increased social isolation and loneliness, greater financial insecurity, decreased quality of life and premature death. An estimated 6.3 million cases of depression globally are estimated to be attributable to ageism.

India, with its rapid demographic transition towards ageing population, shares a similar picture. Even though our nation traditionally boasts of solidarity, joint families, generational bonds and respect towards elders – data shows otherwise. Based on the GLOBAL REPORT ON AGEISM 2021, India is among several low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria and Yemen, that account for the highest prevalence of ageism.

Examples of institutional ageism include discriminatory hiring practices or mandatory retirement ages; interpersonal ageism includes disrespecting or patronising older and younger adults, ignoring their points of view in decision-making or avoiding contact and interactions; and self-directed ageism refers to ageism turned against oneself, like older individuals hesitant to learn new skills later in life or people in their twenties who think that they are too young for a job and maybe reluctant to apply.

HelpAge India in their report released during 2021 mentioned increasing ageism and elder abuse during the pandemic, unanswered cries for help, limited digital literacy among older people and reduced media awareness towards this social issue.

Connecting generations

In this context, the International Youth Day this year carries a special significance themed on “intergenerational solidarity”. *We celebrate the younger and older people together – what can be better than that to combat ageism!*

Bringing seniors and children or young adults together through planned, mutually beneficial activities and programs is one way to help seniors feel connected to others and provide much-needed stimulation.

One key to successful youth and older-adult relationships is investing in quality time. Fostering generational connections assists in valuing a different generational perspective and building a stronger overall community.

Establishing intergenerational relationships allows both groups to learn about each other's differences and similarities while building relational capacity and a sense of fulfilment.

There are several ways to engage youth and establish meaningful connections with older adults, who are important and major contributors to the growth and development of youth because of their life experiences. Hence, the inter-generational dynamics assume tremendous importance in protecting the rights of older people.

Youth interaction and support can be mutually beneficial to the emotional livelihood of the aging population.

Some ways to engage generations are:

- Providing family stories, rituals, and genealogical history (share first-hand family history).
- Preparing a favorite meal (cook a traditional family dish together).
- Teaching each other a new skill (knitting or how to use a new tech gadget).
- Spending time reading together (picking up a book at the local library, read and discuss it together).
- Playing board games (setting aside time and playing your favorite board/card game/online game).
- Exploring common and mutual interests and commonalities, discussion to respect opposing opinions
- Eco-activities including gardening
- Cultural exchange (sharing life experiences)
- First-person narratives from both generations to support healthy and dignity-based aging as well as human rights in older people

Other examples include older adults serving the young through mentorship programs—seniors volunteering in schools as reading assistants, tutors and resources for career and parenting guidance. There are also examples of programs where younger generations visit senior centers and communities for service learning projects; elementary schools may encourage young students to become pen pals with a local senior, or visit a senior community to collect oral histories and tap into seniors as a resource in their learning. There are even examples of older adults and the young sharing settings: daycare centers that house both adult care and childcare programs are a growing trend.

Age and ageing are unfortunately equated with ‘weakness’, ‘frailty’, ‘loss of beauty’, ‘disease’, ‘death’, etc. Older people are deprived of their rights, privacy, confidentiality, and autonomy. This is further compounded in those who stay in assisted living facilities and those with mental health conditions and dementia.

These narratives need to change early and the youth can be the flag-bearers for the same.

Inter-generational bonding can go a long way to create ties within families, respect for values and opinions, fostering age-friendly societies. This will be in line with the ongoing United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing 2021-2030. The Decade calls for a global battle against ageism and integrated care for older people.

This International Youth Day is a big shout out to protect human rights and dignity of older people in our country. Rarely does any particular day or event call for such intergenerational bonding. All stakeholders need to strongly support and utilize this opportunity to promote awareness and sensitivity in protecting human rights and dignity in older people. Only then

can an age-friendly environment be created free from stigma, discrimination and elder abuse.

Solidarity across generations is key for sustainable development. As we navigate the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is especially important to nurture societies that we would all like to live in when we inevitably age.

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