

Israel Journal of
SOCIAL POLICY

Ageism during the Covid-19 era

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Published by

THE NATIONAL INSURANCE INSTITUTE OF ISRAEL

November 2022

No. 118

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Typesetting: Onit Computer Services Ltd.

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Summaries of the main articles

Expressions of ageism and human rights abuses of elderly people during the Covid-19 pandemic - insights from the first and second waves

Rabia Khalaila¹, Carmel Shalev², Nadav Davidovitch³, Nihaya Daoud³, Nurit Guttman⁴ and Etienne Lepicard⁵

Background: The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected the health of the elderly both worldwide and in Israel. In addition to the health hazards that prey on the elderly during the coronavirus period, the harm to their mental well-being and their basic rights cannot be ignored. Ageism and human rights abuses of elderly people are negative social phenomena which have been exacerbated by Covid-19. This article is based on a report (October 2020) by the Israel Institute of Equality and Human Rights (The Zulat Institute) on the human rights issue of the elderly during the coronavirus pandemic whose authors are among its signatories.

Aim: To describe the manifestations of ageism in relation to the elderly during the first and second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, based on a human rights approach.

Method: This was a qualitative study, based on consultation with a multidisciplinary group of independent experts in a joint process – a modified Delphi process – of a structured discussion around an open questionnaire on the treatment of the elderly in Israel during the first and second coronavirus waves. During the discussion, the group focused on three major human rights relevant to the elderly at this time: the right to respect, the right to participate in decision making and the right to health.

Findings: Government policy regarding the elderly in the first months of the outbreak of the pandemic was characterized by paternalistic overprotectiveness, ageism and violation of the human rights of elderly people to dignity, participation and health. In both geriatric and protected

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housing institutions, human rights violations of the residents were due to physical isolation and prolonged social distancing from their relatives. Even within the community, where 94% of the elderly live in Israel, many cases of severe bodily and mental health harm were observed resulting from isolation and exclusion. These vulnerabilities are the result, inter alia, of structural failures in the public system to support the elderly in Israel, including decentralization of governmental responsibility, chronic shortage of geriatric-nursing personnel, and privatization of community services for the elderly. In addition, patronizing and ageist attitudes to the elderly were discussed, as were their needs and what to do about them.

Conclusions and recommendations: Policies that will lead to the eradication of ageism and the prohibition of age discrimination through legislation should be promoted, and the rights of the elderly to dignity, participation and health should be maintained. In addition, the social standing of the elderly should be strengthened, as should responses to the needs of the elderly in the community and geriatric institutions. Information suited to digital capabilities and language and cultural groups should be made accessible to encourage open and respectful dialogue with the elderly and their families about their wishes regarding the medical care they receive and where it will be provided. In this way health and social services for the old in the community can be strengthened.

Covid-19 and discrimination against senior citizens in labor market

Hadara Bar-Mor⁶ and Gil Sharon⁶

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the phenomenon of discrimination against senior citizens in labor market. These citizens were classified by the World Health Organization as “high-risk” for developing serious complications because of the Covid-19 virus, therefore the restrictions on their freedom and wellbeing were severe. These also affected their ability to

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work, although some were forced to continue working due to a poor economic situation.

Traditionally, senior citizens were perceived as a group with “special needs” only because of their age as criteria for discrimination. The ageism phenomena affected senior citizens even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, but during the Covid-19 period the narratives expressed by the media and the government regarding the third age group were over-vulnerability and burden on the health care system.

This complexity is also clearly reflected in our research results conducted among 18 government ministries regarding the adoption of Government Decision 592 that was made in November 2020, to promote the employment of senior citizens in the government ministries service. Research findings indicate a very low rate of senior citizens’ employment expansion in government ministries service since the date of Government Decision 592 was made, and in sharp contrast to the government statement of succession pilot of senior citizens absorption in the government ministries service.

On aging in the Covid-19 age: the discourse of elderly in the mass media

Rachel Hillel Avraham⁷ and Yehuda Shohat⁷

This study researched the representation of elderly population in the mass media during the First year of the Covid-19 pandemic. The aims of the study were: (1) to reflect the discourse on the elderly in the media and to crack the sense of dissonance between caring for the elderly and their exclusion, and defining it as dangerous only to the elderly, to keep the sense of threat away from us; (2) to bring up to academic and public discussion and to increase public awareness of the ways in which older people are portrayed in the mass media and the importance of eradication of ageism.

⁷ Ono Academic College

The study was based on an analysis of the topics of the articles, headlines and photos selected by the editors of the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper for items related to adults in Israel during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the day the pandemic broke out until the end of January 2021. The categories around which the texts were analyzed were the “voice”: we examined whether and when the elderly’s voice was heard, and when it wasn’t or others spoke on their behalf; the “image”: which image is chosen next to the title, produces a narrative that shapes attitudes and opinion of elderly life; and the “message”: we sought to analyze, throughout these articles, how the elderly were reflected in the editors’ choice.

The study shows a setback in the delicate achievements made in the last three decades in the context of social and medical perceptions towards the older population. This setback during the research period was also expressed in criticism of the institutional care policy, upon its proposal of herd vaccination, also at a price that the elderly population in Israel will surely pay.

"In the frame for a moment": changing Israeli media representations of age and aging during three Covid-19 lockdowns

*Sharon Ramer Biel*⁸

This study seeks to expand the discourse on the construction of old age as a social phenomenon in times of health crises. The study focuses on the changes that took place in media representations of old age between the first wave of the Covid-19 in Israel and the following two, considering the decline in morbidity and mortality among the elderly on the one hand, and the continuation of social distancing policy on the other hand.

Theoretically, the study deals with the nature of the representation of elderly from two perspectives: gerontology and communication studies .

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Methodologically, the corpus included media texts of three types: 267 news items, 25 opinion columns published in the daily printed and online press alongside 13 sketches from two satire programs that used various rhetorical tools to deal with the situation. The texts were published during the first three Corona waves. Content analysis was done using a model of 'circles of belonging' (Remer Biel and First, 2013) through which images of aging were used in a media discourse: the first circle, 'group affiliation', addressed the boundaries of the old-age category and the characteristics of belonging to it; the second, 'belonging to a family', concentrated on intergenerational relations; the third, 'belonging to work', focused on the interrelationship between old-age identity and professional identity; the fourth, 'belonging to the community', traced the link between isolating the elderly living at home and in institutional frameworks and social and community organizations.

The model based on these four circles of belonging revealed ageistic and paternalistic news representations of elder population promoting the policy of closure, and only later challenged these perceptions. In contrast, opinion columns and satire programs indicated established institutional ageism as a social oversight mechanism. That is, the subordination of biological age to social and occupational closure. Despite the decline in morbidity in the next two waves, the framing remained similar and the discussion on the elderly declined and became limited to reports of outbreaks of infection centers only. The opinion columns debated with the news discourse and suggested additional and sometimes alternative images.

Manifestations of ageism during the Corona pandemic: interventions of the Israel Gerontological Society (IGA) in support of the rights and status of the elderly in Israel

Yitzhak Brick⁹

This article describes the way the Israeli Gerontological Association (IGA) addresses the challenges of ageism and the practical measures it took to protect senior citizens' rights and provide assistance to seniors during the Corona pandemic. Ageism was evident already at the outbreak of the pandemic. Although this was indeed a preexisting phenomenon in the Israeli society, it gained in intensity at the time of the pandemic. The way policy makers, the media and even senior level physicians, related to the elder population was characterized by ageistic, paternalistic, and aggressive attitudes.

The overall orientation and approach were based upon chronological age criteria alone, without any understanding of the vast diversity and differences among people, regardless of their chronological age.

IGA's position was that aged people should be treated with equality without distinguishing nor discriminating among individuals based on their chronological age. Hence, the IGA firmly advocated against this ageist approach and published a policy paper advancing this view, launched a petition among the general public and joined a coalition of organizations to tackle the ageism phenomenon. Early manifestations of ageism during the initial months of the pandemic included an attempt to order a physical lockdown of aged citizens preventing aged adults from returning to work after the lockdown period, and steps to prevent aged individuals from unemployment insurance benefits. Alongside the public campaign against ageism, the IGA helped provide direct assistance to isolated elderly facing difficult mental health crises and offered current and easily accessible information to both field practitioners and the general public about aging and its manifestations.

Ageism, transference and counter transference in psychotherapy with older adults

Liora Bar-tur¹⁰

The purpose of this article is to discuss two intertwined issues that occupy gerontologists. The first issue is ageism, and society's negative attitude

towards older adults. This issue creates a shortage of mental health services for the elderly and deters young people from studying and specializing in gerontology. Ageism is also prevalent among many older adults themselves.

The second issue is transference and counter-transfer in psychotherapy of older adults. The prejudices and ageism of both young and older adults shape the relationship that is formed between the older patient and the therapist, the latter being often many years younger than the former. It also affects the expectations of both sides from therapy.

Where will we take old age? – Thoughts in the aftermath of Covid-19

Haim Hazan¹¹

The socio-anthropological study of old age has been captured by the concept of ageism that accords values of discrimination and inequity to the attitude towards and the treatment of the elderly. This reflects cultural sentiments of modern liberal values of the desire for the equality of human rights alongside the recognition of shame and guilt as guiding principles in the construction of the social status of the old in a youth oriented milieu. The underlying narrative generating this stance is the overview of the life cycle as a continuous developmental process that stretches from cradle to grave in a cumulative manner of yielding life overview and temporal build-up of memory and identity. The fight against ageism is thus an attempt to avoid disjuncture and interruption in the integral conception of ageing, hence denying the boundaries that divide life stages from one another.

This endeavor is underpinned by the assumption that cultural categories are bound to be mixed and hybridized as part of the spirit of globalization that is conditioned upon exchange, transformation and conversion. The emergence of the third age is an example for such hybridized phenomenon consisting of once separated age classes. The fourth age, however, defies the notion and possibility of blended categories as it is an undecipherable, irreversible and

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existential space beyond understanding, translation and temporality. Thus, the modern bound, mobility geared conceptual language of social gerontology is ill equipped to tackle the properties of the fourth age, hence confounding the two into one indivisible epistemological unit of old age. The thrust of the Covid-19 era catalyzed a critical change in the social standing of the old, separating and excluding it from the rest of society while rendering it a race apart. The globalization of the pandemic exiled the whole elderly category to an island of the disenfranchised, the condemned and the contaminated who are subject to compassionate demonization as less than humans.

Ageism toward older people living at home and in out-of-home frameworks during Covid-19

Esther Hertzog¹², Yossi Korazim-Kőrösy¹² and Ala Heidar¹²

The article discusses ageist perspectives of the Covid-19 period for the older population, whether living at home or in out-of-home frameworks, as they emerged from older people's reported experiences. Analyzing the interviews revealed that ageism connected to the imposed isolation was more accentuated in out-of-home frameworks. They were sometimes described as "closed institutions" or even as "prison". Ignoring the tenants' representatives' voice further implies further this implication. Nevertheless, despite the strict restrictions imposed in these frameworks it appears that the tenants and their representatives complied with this control.

Analyzing the interviews indicated that the ageist attitude was also found in relation to the older people living at their homes. Ageism was revealed through the children's latent control over their older parents' mobility and their decision-making ability. Some of the interviewees suggested that due to the political and media discourse ageism deepened during Covid-19. The interviews also clarified that during this period Arab older people tended to cling harder to faith and religious rituals.

¹² Zefat Academic College

Latent ageism that is not openly discussed, but which is transferred through compassionate righteous attitude, and through ignoring or silencing the elderly, also emerged from the analysis. It is connected, apparently, to the fear and anxiety in referring to the “carriers of death” on the one hand, and to their care on the other.

The article’s contribution consists in comparing the older people’s experiences in the various frameworks, living at home and out of home. Another contribution is the focus on the interviewees’ descriptions of their own experiences during Covid-19, perceiving them as the basis of the research.

The research used the qualitative-narrative method. It was conducted during the months of August-October 2020 and March-May 2021. 30 interviews were carried out with both Jewish and Arab elderly people (all of them over 75), living at home or in out-of-home frameworks, as well as 7 officials within these frameworks.