



## A Social Problem: Age Discrimination Against Older Adults

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, elderly discrimination has been the subject of scientific research due to the increasing elderly population. Considering the current demographic structure of Turkey, it is possible to say that discrimination against older age groups may become an even more important problem in the coming years. Age discrimination is most often directed at the elderly and it can be defined as different attitudes, prejudices, actions, actions and institutional arrangements shown to a person due to his age. Age discrimination is quite different from other forms of prejudice. It refers to prejudice and discrimination against the group that the individual will join over time. The classification of individuals by age is not static and changes throughout the life cycle. In our society, the elderly are thought to be individuals who need care, have walking difficulties, are not open to change, are sad, isolated and have no environment. Elderly individuals' acceptance of the negative characteristics imposed on them by society, their fear of losing their productivity and being dependent on others to meet their needs and fulfill their basic functions negatively affect their living standards. In order for the elderly to lead a life worthy of human dignity, it is of great importance to socially demolish the supposedly harmless prejudices and negative attitudes that pave the way for social exclusion. In this review, the society's perspective on the elderly and general information about age-based discrimination are given.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Age discrimination is stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory actions or attitudes based on chronological age [1]. Age discrimination is behaviour directed at people based on their age, including actions, practices and policies [2]. Age discrimination is a very serious issue. Although theoretically directed at any age group, the vast majority of studies focus on older adults. Moreover, age discrimination is not limited to being directed towards others, but can also be directed towards oneself [3].

Age discrimination is a type of discrimination that affects individuals of all age groups. It encompasses negative discrimination against all age-related groups, including children, youth, adults and the elderly. Age discrimination against young people can be seen as ignoring their opinions because they are young and emphasising their

inadequacy because they are not experienced. In age discrimination against the elderly; elderly people are seen as a social and economic burden for society due to their withdrawal from production, and as a burden for society in terms of issues such as care costs.

The term ageism was first coined by Professor Robert Butler, a physician and gerontologist and one of the pioneers in the field of ageing. In his classic article 'Age-ism: another form of bigotry', Butler argued that discrimination on the basis of age is the result of prejudices held by one age group against another age group. Although he did not identify a specific age group, he emphasised in his article that systematic discrimination is expressed in attitudes, behaviours, practices and institutional legislation that discriminate against older people [4]. In 1975, Butler expanded the definition and described it as systematic stereotyping and stigmatisation that individuals are

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subjected to because they are older as the third largest type of discrimination after sexism and racism [5]. Age discrimination affects social relations as much as other discriminatory attitudes such as sexism and racism. As a matter of fact, the determining factor in age discrimination is advanced age rather than innate characteristics such as biological sex or skin colour. In this context, it is a type of discrimination that every individual who has the chance to live a long life may face. All individuals will be included in the category of elderly as a component of this category as they get older.

## 2. AREAS WHERE ELDERLY DISCRIMINATION IS OBSERVED

The elderly are isolated from many areas due to their characteristics that develop and change with the old age period. These areas can be listed as the labor market, social life, health and policy areas.

### a. Discrimination of the Elderly in Working Life and Employment

Age discrimination in the workplace is one of the most common areas of age discrimination. This is usually because some employers believe that younger individuals are more effective and a better investment than older ones. In the United States, one in five employees over the age of 55 are subjected to discrimination based on their age, 71% of adults over the age of 55 do not reflect their advertising images or lifestyle, only 10% of individuals aged 65-69 are employed, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) received 18,376 complaints under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act in 2017, it is known that it takes up to three months longer for someone 55 or older to find a job than someone younger [6]. The most important feature of industrial society is mass production. In modern societies, the consciousness that the individual is as valuable as what he produces and the value judgment that old age is a passive period isolate older individuals from working life. Based on the idea that elderly individuals cannot withstand the pace of mass production; the elderly are excluded from mass production processes. [7].

Negative beliefs and attitudes towards the elderly are becoming increasingly widespread, which contributes to the obstacles that the elderly face when looking for a job [8]. The industrial age and technological developments have increased the need for people to work efficiently and quickly in order to remain competitive [9]. These changes are effective in reducing the need for older people to participate in the business world and their visibility

[10]. Because older individuals are seen as less flexible and inadequate than younger individuals, they are either not employed at all or are employed for low wages. They are mostly excluded from employment due to these discriminatory practices [11]. Due to age restrictions in many sectors, older individuals are clearly prevented from applying. Discrimination occurs most often during recruitment. The expression “Applications of those over the age of 35 will not be accepted’ in job advertisements is a clear example of age discrimination [12]. The situation in the world is not without difference either.

British and American studies have found that employers are significantly more likely to place older workers in low-paid and low-responsibility positions than younger workers with similar qualifications [13]. Although it is assumed that elderly people are not productive due to their physical or mental illnesses, they do not work as usefully as young people; in studies conducted in the literature, it has been determined that older workers make fewer job changes, suffer fewer work accidents, and show more continuity to work [14]. Although it is thought that young workers work more efficiently; there is no evidence that there is a decrease in productivity with the age of the individual [15]. It is known that age discrimination is experienced by older individuals at any point in the employment process, including job postings, job interviews, recruitment and training process, task assignments, promotions, dismissals and social rights [16]. There are various ways in which age discrimination can be seen in the working environment.

Excluding older people from company activities, customer meetings or other related workplace-related activities, not offering older employees opportunities to learn new skills, making them available only for younger employees, making Deceptive or explicit comments about an employee's age, ignoring promotions and/or raises due to age, giving fewer or easier tasks than younger employees, not giving the same social rights or compensation as younger employees working in a similar position within the company, for example, not being hired for a new job because of their age, not being interviewed because of their age. Also, many employers think that older employees are more costly in terms of employment. In addition, many employers feel that older October workers cost more in terms of employment. For example, an employer may believe that an older employee will require a higher salary or pension compared to a younger employee, and therefore hire a younger employee to save money [17]. In order to increase social integration, to use free time

effectively, to ensure social integration and active and successful aging, it is necessary to maintain the employment of the elderly. In order to ensure the improvement of the well-being and quality of life of elderly individuals, optional retirement, flexible retirement, gradual retirement practices should be maintained [18]. Instead of removing the elderly from social and working life, it is necessary to find ways to transfer their experiences to social life. Due to this, productivity and efficiency can be increased by ensuring self-renewal in the changing social structure [19].

### **b. Elderly Discrimination in Family Life**

In Turkish culture, while respect for the elderly and listening to the word of the elderly is a traditional and fixed idea, the position and value of the elderly in society are becoming different today. Changes in the social structure such as industrialization and migration, women's entry into business life, economic inadequacies, the transition from a patriarchal family structure to a modern family structure have caused significant changes in family structures.

These changes have also revealed problems related to elderly care. With the increasing difficulty of living conditions, elderly people have started to be seen as a burden and obstacle to family members [20]. In parallel with these social changes, it is observed that the views and attitudes of the younger generations towards older adults are more negative than before [21]. A growing number of studies have observed an increase in negative attitudes towards older individuals over the years. Many studies have shown that members of the younger generation have more negative views and attitudes towards older adults than before. Negative beliefs and attitudes towards older adults are becoming increasingly common. As a result, older adults are often seen as just passive recipients of social assistance and may even be accused of being a burden to younger generations [22]. The belief that older adults are less valuable or do not concern society may contribute to age discrimination [23].

### **c. Elderly Discrimination in the Health Care System**

With the aging of society, the needs of the aging population are changing, and there is an increase in health and social service needs. Elderly people often struggle with multiple health problems, and because of these problems, they apply to health institutions more often and have longer hospital stays. It is known that 90% of the group over the age of 65 in our country usually have one long-term disease, 35% of them have two, 23% have three, 15% have four or more long-term

diseases together [24]. Unfortunately, the health system is the most primary place where elder discrimination can be seen in our society. A national study has found that one in five adults over the age of 50 experience discrimination due to their age in a healthcare setting, and one in 17 people regularly experience age discrimination in healthcare settings. Even more worrisome, 29% of study participants who were victims of age discrimination in a healthcare setting admitted to new or worsening symptoms or disabilities over a four-year period.

This is a sobering example of age discrimination in healthcare and its negative impact on a person's overall health and well-being [25]. Elderly discrimination in a healthcare environment can lead to various negative consequences, not only for the individual, but also for society as a whole. For example, Octop Decriminalization, which is often seen due to age discrimination in healthcare, can result in between \$158 billion and \$226 billion in additional medical dollars each year. In addition, old October can lead to over-treatment of certain conditions, which can lead doctors to perform unnecessary and even dangerous procedures on elderly individuals. Doctors are also less patient, responsive, more likely to be busy and more likely to take care of older patients when they discriminate against older patients [6].

The root beliefs and negative attitudes of health workers about elderly individuals cause discrimination against the elderly to be observed in health services as well. In the health system, the health problems and ailments of elderly people are assumed to be normal and an adequate amount of treatment cannot be provided. It has been observed that while healthcare professionals are willing to treat the health problems experienced by young patients, the elderly do not show the same willingness to deal with ongoing diseases. It is also known that health professionals give priority to the acute health problems of young people instead of trying to improve the chronic diseases of elderly people [24]. It has been observed that health workers give more information to young people, treat them with more care, deal with the accompanying person instead of the elderly person at the diagnosis and treatment stage, or communicate with the elderly person in different ways, such as talking loudly and with an enthusiastic melody while communicating. As another evidence of age discrimination in the field of health, it is seen that older people are excluded from health research. It has been found that elderly people are routinely excluded from cardiology, internal medicine, nephrology, neurology,

preventive medicine, psychiatry, rheumatology, oncology and urology studies.

Finally, the ageist measures taken to isolate the elderly during the Covid-19 pandemic also reveal the extent to which age discrimination has increased with the pandemic. On March 21, 2020, rights losses such as banning people over the age of 65 from going out on the streets, situations such as showing individuals over the age of 65 as the most risky group in the media, discriminatory attitudes and hate speech towards the elderly have become dramatically widespread. Indeed, although age discrimination also harbors implicit biases that older adults are less resilient and less able to adapt to challenging events such as COVID-19; older adults have shown remarkable responsibility in this crisis, as evidenced by their willingness to engage in positive public health practices such as social isolation, staying at home, and hand washing. Age discrimination can affect the health services that older adults receive; for example, older adults are less likely to be referred to mental health outpatient clinics after being found to be at risk of suicide in the emergency department compared to young adults. In addition, elderly people receive less treatment even when the severity of the disease is controlled and face more restrictions in life-sustaining treatments [3].

In addition to these; even for diseases that disproportionately affect older adults, such as cancer, the lower likelihood of inclusion in clinical trials compared to young adults leads to knowledge gaps regarding the use and benefit of new treatments in older adults. The most basic indicators of successful aging are related to concepts such as high physical and cognitive functioning, psychological well-being, absence of disease in biomedical terms, active participation in the social environment, feeling economically secure. The successful aging of individuals is closely related not only to their individual efforts, but also to the psycho-social, health and economic support services that will be provided to them at the macro level. In health policies, it is considered extremely important to base the accessibility of health services, the quality of health services and the utilization rate of each group on the basis of equality for individuals in all age groups in the fight against discrimination against the elderly.

#### **d. Elderly Discrimination Due to Psychological Changes**

Age discrimination is increasingly recognized as a risk factor associated with increased stress, anxiety, depression and low life satisfaction [26] At the individual level, age discrimination causes older people to live a shorter life span, poor quality of life,

poor social relationships, risky health behaviors, mental illness, cognitive impairment, and physical illnesses It has also been found that age discrimination affects the onset of psychiatric conditions and causes an increase in depressive symptoms over time [27].

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 6 million cases of depression worldwide may be a result of age discrimination [28]. It has been found that age discrimination causes harmful effects on the psychological well-being of older adults, leading to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety [23]. In a study conducted on American veterans; it has been proven that suicidal ideation, anxiety and PTSD are less likely in older people who successfully resist negative age stereotypes [29]. Internalized age stereotypes can lead to low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence and negatively affect the health of older adults, especially in terms of mental health and well-being. An individual who believes that he is too old may be more sensitive to the negative consequences of age discrimination, such as a decrease in self-efficacy and an increase in negative emotions [30]. The opposite may also be true, because positive perceptions and attitudes about aging can have beneficial effects on psychological well-being. Older adults who are discriminated against based on their chronological age may be more exposed to stress factors and depression that harm their mental health [23].

#### **e. Elderly Discrimination Due to Physiological Changes**

As expressed in the media“ ”wage a war against aging, challenging the years is completely in your hands, say goodbye to wrinkles, anti-aging foods," etc. discourses transform our social and individual perceptions of old age and the ways we experience aging and lead to the development of negative attitudes towards old age [31]. Women who are reduced to the appearance of their bodies in neoliberalism are pushed by the anti-aging industry to make efforts to stay young, youth is obsessed, signs of aging in the body are considered shameful, people's aging naturally, not trying to prevent aging are criminalized. In the patriarchy, where the masculine gaze makes older women "not visible", women are directed to the anti-aging industry to delay their aging by exploiting their fears and insecurities. It is said as a compliment to women, 'you look younger than your age', 'you don't show your age', 'you look great for your age', 'you don't look old', etc. words are problematic, they are associated with the exclusion of old age, age discrimination and sexism [32]. Despite the fact of age discrimination; In the study conducted by



Deangelis, the percentage of older adults who participated in the statement “Experiencing health problems is part of aging” was 83%. Another encouraging finding in the study is that the higher a person's reported age discrimination score, the more likely they are to report that their physical or mental health is poor [25].

#### **f. Elderly Discrimination in Sexual Life**

Elderly sexuality is not sufficiently included in the list of concerns and issues related to health and well-being in old age. Traditionally, our society has always seen sexuality as a privilege of youth [25]. Sex life is more often associated with youth, and there are beliefs that it should not be experienced in old age. It is accepted by people in society -including elderly individuals- that sexuality in old age does not exist or should not exist. Contrary to these Deceptions, it has been stated in the study that more than 65% of women and 80% of men between the ages of 40 and 80 have experienced sexual penetration in the last year. Although the frequency of sexual intercourse decreases due to age; aging male and female individuals report that they feel sexually active. Despite the taboos in society, it is believed that the protection and maintenance of sexual health is also associated with psychological well-being and a positive evaluation of other areas of an individual's life.

#### **g. Elderly Discrimination in Social Life**

Age discrimination in social life is a discrimination that harbors the idea that older people cannot or should not participate in social activities because of their age. The belief that older adults are less valuable or do not concern society at all may contribute to age discrimination [2]. As a result of industrialization and modernization, significant decreases in social and cultural status have been observed in older adults over the past century [32]. Aging is generally considered as a challenging process in which older individuals lose their self-confidence and experience loss of productivity [33]. It is believed that the elderly are timid, fleeing from society, individuals who live in the past and are resistant to innovations and cannot adapt to innovations. For this reason, elderly individuals are isolated from their surroundings, their communication with their surroundings is weakened. These judgments hinder social integration and prepare the ground for the exclusion of the elderly from society. In addition, the perception that the elderly want to live in a nursing home causes them to be excluded from social life and not to participate in social activities [34]. Contrary to these general conventional Deceptions, it is assumed that there is a linear relationship

between the sustainability of an individual's quality of life and well-being and the socialization process.

### **3. Conclusion**

In the 1950s, racism was the most well-known type of discrimination, the most documented and reported in public and academic discourse. Subsequently, feminism, sexism and heterosexism have become the subjects of social discussions and research. Although it is of great importance for the entire population, age discrimination has remained out of the limelight [35]. The first significant change, which began with reports on age discrimination, began in 1969 when Butler coined the term 'ageism'. Thus, Butler has taken an important and necessary step towards making age discrimination known to the public [36]. Future initiatives should prioritize the care of the most vulnerable people, including older adults, and encourage efforts to combat systemic age discrimination to transform negative attitudes and mitigate the harmful effects of negative stereotypes about aging on the health and well-being of the elderly population [37].

Social policies and social rights in our country should be aimed at improving the quality of life and social well-being of the elderly. Social strategies should be planned to ensure a complete state of well-being not only from the point of view of health, but also from the social and psychological point of view, and for each individual to undergo a successful aging process. In order to evaluate the elderly person in a multifaceted way, to maintain the planned treatments, to plan individualized care, to create solutions to the health problems and needs of the elderly person, multidisciplinary team such as physician, nurse, physiotherapist, psychologist, social worker, dietitian should be worked in coordination with in the provision of services. In addition, in order to provide psychosocial counseling and support that addresses the adaptation of the elderly and their family to the disease and planned treatment; the number of social workers and psychologists who can provide professional care and psychological support to the elderly both at home and in institutional care should be increased. Ageist language use and social perception are concepts that are influenced by each other and intertwined. Our language is one of the biggest factors perpetuating discrimination. The use of ageist expressions makes a great contribution to the secondariness and marginalization of older individuals.

For this reason, discourses and attitudes that negatively encode elderly individuals, especially in the media, should be persistently avoided. In addition, in order to increase the awareness of

society, positive examples of the elderly should be brought to the fore more through the media. Active or passive violence against the elderly is being experienced extensively all over the world. Despite the existence of serious concerns about the extent of violence and abuse suffered by the elderly both within the family and in society; statistical data on this issue are not sufficient. For this reason, the problem is not made visible and leads to an awareness problem. In order to activate the rights-seeking mechanisms of elderly individuals, field studies aimed at collecting data should be increased in order to make the violence and abuse they experience visible [38]. The weakening social relations of the elderly and unstructured leisure time are another important issue that should be addressed. The pleasant passing of the leisure time and the continuation of the productivity of the elderly person will contribute to the increase of the quality of life and life satisfaction by increasing self-esteem. In order for individuals of all ages to exist freely in society, rights-based age-friendly centers should be implemented with the cooperation of the government and local governments.

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