

Upholding Human Rights by Ending Ageism



**EveryAGE
Counts**

The logo features a stylized green graphic of three human figures of varying heights connected by a wavy line, positioned above the text 'EveryAGE Counts'.

www.everyagecounts.org.au

EveryAGE Counts Policy Directions

EveryAGE Counts is a broad-based coalition campaign to end ageism towards older Australians. It is a long-term commitment. We aim to shift narrow and negative generalisations about older age and older people, and the damaging impacts that flow from them, towards more realistic, fairer and healthier perspectives on ageing and later life.

To do this it is crucial we have our own policy positions to guide our work. We need to be clear about where and what the problems are and what changes we want to see in particular areas of life. Our policy positions help to guide our own work in the campaign – especially our advocacy and communications – but just as crucially, identify the priority areas of government policy in particular that we wish to influence.

Our priorities policy areas in the early stages of our campaign are:

- **political leadership**
- **work**
- **health**
- **aged care**
- **human rights**
- **disability care and support**
- **elder abuse**
- **human rights**
- **housing**
- **digital inclusion**
- **economic security**
- **media representation**

Our policy stance will evolve as the campaign unfolds and we turn our attention to specific expressions of ageism, and as we engage with opportunities within political cycles, such as elections, legislative programs and government inquiries.

Our policies develop through the engagement and input of individuals, communities and civil society organisations; as our grassroots, social movement for change strengthens; and as the research and evidence base on ageism and the opportunities presented by an older population expands and deepens.

EveryAGE Counts is committed to the active involvement of diverse older Australians in all aspects of our campaign.



Our policy to uphold human rights by ending ageism

Why this matters

Human rights advocates around the world have long argued that ageism – negative stereotypes, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours towards older age and older people – is a barrier to older people enjoying general human rights protections.¹

Human rights belong to all of us by virtue of being human – at any life stage and in any circumstances. But in contravention of this basic principle, in practice, our guarantee of rights is often contingent on an assessment of the contributions we make. Ageism stops older people from exercising their rights to make important contributions to society and participate as full members of it. It also overlooks and underplays the contributions that the diversity of older people make and have made over a lifetime and across the lifecourse.

The stereotype of older people as social and economic beneficiaries or dependents is an important justification underlying denial of their rights and dignity as full citizens – their human rights. The diminishing status of people as they age pushes them to the margins as rights holders.

Older people are often invisible within or excluded by ageism from basic human rights norms that contribute to fairness, inclusion and dignity across our society – for example, in the rights to work, equal treatment, privacy, freedom from cruel and inhumane treatment and, sometimes, even in the rights to life and health. This goes beyond societal attitudes and prejudices and is often embedded deeply within our economic, social and care systems.²

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has given the Australian community and political leaders insight into the way in which older people's human rights can be denied, with greater social acceptance and impunity than allowed for other age groups

In Australia and elsewhere, there have been important attempts to protect the health and rights of older people during the complex crisis of the pandemic. For example, segments of communities have tried to reduce the isolation of older people during lockdowns and many staff members in hospitals, aged care facilities and other services have often gone far beyond the call of duty, placing their own health at risk, to safeguard older people.

However, during the pandemic older people in many parts of the world³ (including in some instances in Australia⁴) have also experienced: age-based medical triage; neglect, abandonment, isolation and/or lack of equal protection from the virus in some aged care facilities and sometimes the community; and being blamed for lockdowns and the economic impact of the pandemic in some mainstream media and more widely in social media.

Internationally, this was recognised by the UN Secretary General who in a 2020 statement on the treatment of older people during COVID said

“No person, young or old, is expendable. Older people have the same rights to life and health as everyone else... We need a surge in global and national solidarity and the contributions of all members of society, including older people. As we look to recover better, we will need ambition and vision to build more inclusive, sustainable and age-friendly societies that are fit for the future.”⁵

¹ Report of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, Claudia Mahler, Human Rights Council Forty-eighth session 13 September–1 October 2021 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/215/63/PDF/G2121563.pdf?OpenElement>

² Ibid

³ UN Secretary General's Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Older Persons, May 2020 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/COVID-Older-persons.pdf>

At the heart of this call by the UN Secretary General is the foundational Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). The UDHR has no use-by date and no entry conditions for individual persons. Yet older people scarcely feature in it, other than as one of many groups entitled to an adequate standard of living (Art 25). Most tellingly, under the Declaration, ageism is not identified as a form of discrimination that undermines rights.

As advocates for children, people with disability, and those who experience racial or gender discrimination have already found, general human rights protections are often not enough. Human rights law and principles need to recognise and address the specific grounds for denial of rights experienced by particular groups of people who, in practice, are treated as being outside or only marginally attached to general human rights guarantees. Over more than a decade, advocates for older people have argued the similar need for a separate human rights instrument internationally and nationally covering the diversity of older people, as older people, and securing protection against the scourge of ageism.

The international human rights system has over the last four decades seen the specific rights of other excluded groups progressively codified in respective conventions, and mechanisms for their enforcement created in additional protocols. These embed an accepted human rights foundation and accountability framework to design and test policy and practice that is generating positive and lasting real-world change for all those groups. A Convention on the Rights of Older Persons would contribute to similarly significant lasting change.

⁴The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Aged Care and COVID-19: a special report. Commonwealth of Australia 2020 <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/aged-care-and-covid-19-a-special-report.pdf>

⁵The UN Secretary General. Video message to launch Policy Brief on Older Persons. New York, 1 May 2020 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/05/SG-video-Older-people-1.pdf>

What needs to happen?

Two key responses to build on the raised awareness of ageism's impact on human rights guarantees are urgently needed.

Firstly, political and community leadership and public education are required to:

- **drive a society-wide conversation challenging ageism and promoting positive narratives about ageing, an ageing society, increased longevity and social cohesion across the life course**
- **embed a human rights approach in a reformed aged care system**
- **include older people in implementation of the human rights principle of the right to work**
- **strengthen the human rights of older people in healthcare systems and practices**
- **strengthen understanding of and commitment to human rights principles and practices for all ages across our society.**

Secondly, the Australian government needs to drive the creation and implementation of an International Convention on the Rights of Older People:

- **maintaining its unbroken record of leadership in the United Nations for extending specific protections to those groupings of people facing marginalisation and exclusion from access to general human rights protections**
- **supporting broad participation from civil society as well as governments in the development and implementation of a new Convention**
- **signing, ratifying, implementing, educating the community about and promoting the operation of a new Convention in Australia.**



Priorities for action

- 1. A stronger, explicit, funded human rights approach within all aspects of the aged care system, which**
 - a. has at its core the inherent value of every human life**
 - b. is aspirational in relation to the fulfilment of the full complement of human rights**
 - c. is in line with the World Health Organization principles of human rights and health and the UN Principles of Older Persons (especially Principle 14)¹**
 - d. is reflected in aged care policy and program design, implementation and accountability measures**
 - e. is underpinned by a new Aged Care Act built around a coherent, rights-based approach to the purpose, principles and application of the legislation, and introduces the rights-based principle that society should make living conditions available for people who have impairments that are as close as possible to those without impairments.**
- 2. Australian commitment to a UN Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, with**
 - a. Australian representatives to the UN actively championing the progress of a Convention through the UN system**
 - b. the establishment by Ministers-responsible of a multistakeholder group in Australia comprising older Australians from diverse backgrounds (including First Nations and non-English speaking) and circumstances (such as aged care service users) and civil society advocacy groups to inform Australia's contribution to the UN Convention drafting process**
 - c. commitment by Australian Governments to sign and ratify the Convention and any additional Optional Protocols, update Australian law and regulations to support the realisation of the Convention in Australia and undertake a community education campaign to promote the reasons for and benefits of the Convention and how it will operate in practice.**

EveryAGE Counts Campaign

Ageism against older people is stereotyping, discrimination and mistreatment based solely upon age. It comes from negative attitudes and beliefs about what it means to be older and impacts on older people's confidence, quality of life, job prospects, health and control over life decisions.

Ageism has loomed larger in policy and practice as Australians live longer and our population ages. Longevity coupled with falling birth rates has resulted in steady growth in both the number and the proportion of the population who are older, giving rise to a public narrative around older people as a burden and cost to society.

EveryAGE Counts is Australia's national coalition and grassroots social movement to end ageism.

The purpose of EveryAGE Counts is to positively change thinking about ageing, to re-imagine getting older and to set the foundations for current and future generations to age well.

To do this, we work collaboratively and co-operatively with governments, political parties, employers, unions and community sector stakeholders, based on the strong engagement of diverse older people themselves.



At its heart EveryAGE Counts respects and acknowledges the inherent worth of each individual and their right to choice, control and dignity regardless of their age or health. The campaign is aiming for an Australia where older people:

- **are valued and their contribution is acknowledged;**
- **have opportunities to learn, grow and live purposeful lives;**
- **participate in work for as long as they want to;**
- **are visible and represented in media in all their diversity;**
- **are connected with their community and contact between generations is fostered;**
- **have a voice and are part of all major policy decisions that affect them;**
- **have equal access to goods and services and consumer protections when they need them;**
- **get the right care and support which maintains their dignity and autonomy when needed.**

To achieve this impact, EveryAGE Counts is in for the long haul. We recognise that change can take time to grow and embed in individual and collective attitudes, interpersonal relationships, community behaviours, media representation, professional practices and government policies, programs and laws. We also recognise that it will only be achieved through collaboration between the generations and across different groups in society.

EveryAGE Counts wants to be a partner with and a supporter of governments, policy-makers, employers, unions, learning institutions, service providers and community groups to achieve a positive future for older Australians.



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