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An examination of manifestations of ageism among the elderly populations in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined the manifestations of ageism among the elderly populations in Kenya. Ageism is a form of discrimination that is based on age. It can manifest in many ways, including negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Ageism can have a significant impact on the lives of older people, leading to social isolation, decreased self-esteem, and poorer health outcomes. The study used a qualitative methodology, and it involved interviews with 30 elderly people from different parts of Kenya. The findings of the study suggest that ageism is a widespread problem in Kenya, and it manifests in a number of ways. Some of the manifestations of ageism that were identified in the study include: Negative stereotypes: Older people are often stereotyped as being frail, dependent, and a burden to society. Prejudice: Older people are often treated with prejudice, and they are often excluded from social and economic opportunities. Discrimination: Older people are often discriminated against in employment, housing, and healthcare. The findings of this study conclude that ageism is a serious problem in Kenya, and it has a significant impact on the lives of older people. The study recommends that there is a need for interventions to reduce ageism and to promote positive attitudes towards older people in Kenya.

Key words: Ageism, elderly populations, examination, Kenya, manifestations.



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INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a process characterized by the accumulation of various molecular and cellular damage in one's life over time (Sgarbieri & Pacheco, 2017). The impact of the process on an individual is slowly declining physical and mental health, prone to diseases due to weakening body immunity and eventually death comes in. These changes are not obvious or automatic to individuals; instead, they are loosely associated with one's age in years. The ageing process is relative to individuals. For instance, some 65-year-olds enjoy extremely good health and normal functioning.

In contrast, other 65-year-olds are feeble and depend totally on others to support them in moving around, feeding, bathing, and sometimes even answering call of nature (World Health Organization, 2018). Ageing also comes with other changes in one's life, like retirement from formal employment, some relocating to rural areas, death of partners due to old age and pursuing long-neglected passions, among others. From a public health response perspective to ageing, it is necessary to not just focus on the approaches that ameliorate losses associated with ageing but also focus on approaches reinforcing recovery, adapting and psychosocial growth of the elderly people. Globally, statistics on ageing people depict a sharp rise in the number of older persons in recent decades, and future projections also indicate a steady increase (Teerawichitchainan & Knodel, 2018).

In the African continent, ageism is not exceptional. In the last few decades, Africans had high regard for elderly people. They were treated with much respect, and they were accorded every possible care. However, in recent times, things have drastically changed. The elderly are no longer cared for and respected, as before. This can be attributed to many factors, which include; the changing trends of life where women have been empowered. Most have risen to high-ranking jobs like political leaders, Chief Executive Officers, managers and many others (Nortje, 2013). These women were in the past confined to household chores as well as taking care of young ones as well as the elderly. Today things are different. Women and men are equally competing in the working world. Any profession is equally attributed to both genders. This shift has led to women rising economically, socially and politically (Ermer et al., 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ragan and Bowen (2001), this can be attributed to the fact that today there are few children born in nuclear families today. Unlike in the 1980s to 1990s, when children born in most families were at least five or more, in today's families, most families bear one or two children; if they are three, that could be the maximum number. Many children in the family, as depicted in the 1980s and 1990s, were useful in caring for the elderly. A family or two could send one of the children to live with the grandparents as they helped them with house chores like cooking, fetching water, laundry, and even cleaning the very old ones. In today's families, the case is different because the child is one or two, and the parents are unwilling to give them out because they will be lonely (Kimamo & Kariuki, 2018).

Beard et al. (2016) argue that another possible factor is modernization and urban lifestyle. Unlike in the 1980s and 1990s, when most families lived in rural settings, today, most families live in urban areas. In the past, when families lived in rural areas, caring for the elderly was easy because they lived in the same setting and, in some cases, the same compound. Today most young families (nuclear) live in urban areas leaving behind the elderly in rural areas. These families visit rural areas occasionally during holidays like Christmas, which is just one week or sometimes; they do not go at all. This leaves the old helpless and vulnerable. Although some elderly people receive financial aid from their children in urban areas through mobile money transfers like M-pesa, though the money alone without physical help is insufficient (Martins, 2019).

Kenya's population ageing pace is rapid compared to the past years. For instance, in 2020, the number of elderly persons (60 years and above) outnumbered the number of children of 5 years and below. It is projected that between 2015 and 2050, the world's proportion of the population aged 60 years and above will likely double, i.e. from 12% to approximately 22% (Martins, 2019). The elderly in some African countries like Nigeria are not given a fair chance in employment opportunities. For instance, in Nigeria, anyone 45 years and above is not recommended in public service as a new entrant (Rowe & Kahn, 2017)). In Kenya, the case is different because the elderly dominate the public service sector. Although the government has tried to give young people an

opportunity in the public service sector, older people dominate still 50% of the public service sector in Kenya. It is no wonder there is a slogan in Kenya that goes by "kazi kwa vijana, pesa kwa wazee" (young people work, but the elderly get the money/payment). This is one aspect in Kenya that has created an ageist attitude from young people toward the elderly. The elderly dominate every area in the employment sector while young people

are jobless. In politics, the picture is not any different. This study will recommend interventions to reduce ageism against the elderly for healthy ageing in Kenya. As the table below shows, Kenya has approximately 1,926,051 elderly people as per the Kenyan census 2019 (KNBS, 2019).

Table 1: Kenyan Population by Sex and Age Groups

Age group	Female	Male	Male + Female Total
0-4 Years	2,938, 867	3,000,439	5,939,306
5-9 Years	2,765,047	2,832,669	5,597,716
10-14 Years	2,469,542	2,565,313	5,034,855
15-19 Years	2,045,890	2,123,653	4,169,543
20-24 Years	2,020,998	1,754,105	3,775,103
25-29 Years	1,672,110	1,529,116	3,201,226
30-34 Years	1,262,471	1,257,035	2,519,506
35-39 Years	1,004,271	1,004,361	2,008,632
40-44 Years	732,575	743,594	1,476,169
45- 49 Years	637,469	635,276	1,272,745
50-54 Years	477,860	478,346	956,206
55-59 Years	352,487	359,466	711,953
60-64 Years	298,581	295,197	593,778
65-69 Years	207,612	183,151	390,763
70-74 Years	179,000	160,301	339,301
75-79 Years	118,675	99,833	218,508
80 + Years	224,576	159,125	383,701
TOTAL	24,014,716	23,548,056	47,564,296

Source: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ageism is a very serious concern in today's society. Nelson (2005) argues that while ageism can hypothetically be directed towards any age group, most studies concentrate on the elderly being the victims. Although ageism can be manifested in terms of positive stereotypes or attitudes, many times, it has been associated with negative attitudes. Brown and Bright (2017) outline that ageism can manifest implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly, ageism is manifested by unconscious thinking, feelings and behaviours. Explicitly, ageism is manifested by acting intentionally or expressing verbal words while consciously aware of what you are doing. Frequent exposure to ageism leads to the internalization of ageist attitudes and stereotypes, as described in the embodiment theory (Levy, 2009).

Elderly people tend to internalize ageism's negative stereotypes that are continually perpetuated in society nowadays. This trend has exposed many people in society to negative age-related stereotypes, especially towards older people, which have, in turn, rendered them weak, unhealthy and less able to accept positive changes like learning opportunities (Levy, 2009).

Ageism against the elderly manifests in many ways. For instance, the elderly are portrayed as disparaging, expendable people in almost every sphere of life; for example, Nelson (2005) argues that the way the media portrays the elderly in society leads to enormous detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of these people. Cohn-Schwartz and Ayalon (2020) concurs with these sentiments by arguing that the media manifest

ageism by portraying the elderly as weak, vulnerable, worthless and burdensome to society (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2020). The media does this through advertisements, opinions, and language use. Once ageism is triggered in elderly people, it accelerates physical and mental health symptoms like depression and isolation. If these symptoms are not managed on time, they will likely lead to premature deaths. Cohn-Schwartz and Ayalon (2020) analyzed online studies on ageism during the COVID pandemic (2020-2021) and concluded that ageism intensified during the period. For instance, terms like 'ancestors' used to refer to the elderly were widely and sarcastically used in social media to portray older people as invaluable. Cohn-Schwartz and Ayalon (2020) further argues that ageism has grown widely in Western countries. For instance, the elderly in long-term care settings in these countries have, over time, lost their voice to their caregivers because of age. The caregivers determine everything for them; they must comply like little children. Although varied policy measures have been implemented by various countries, including Western and African countries, to protect elderly people, the policies have failed terribly.

In some cases, the policies have been accused of being ageist. For instance, during the COVID pandemic, the elderly were encouraged to avoid unnecessary movements and contact with other age groups due to their vulnerability to the virus. Cohn-Schwartz and Ayalon (2020) argues that this method is ageist simply because it uses age to contain the pandemic. He argues that instructing the elderly people to isolate and remain at home. At the same time, the other age groups continue with their normal life is an insinuation that the elderly people cannot make proper decisions to protect themselves and are insignificant in the economy and social fabric of society. The COVID-19 lockdown affected every part of the world, and the elderly were highly encouraged to remain indoors due to their vulnerability. Unfortunately, young people used the situation to intensify ageism by categorizing the aged as invaluable and burdensome (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2020). In Kenya, for instance, most youths have remained jobless for a long time. At the same time, the older people have continually worked in the public service sector to the extent that a common phrase came up around 2018 'kazi kwa vijana, pesa kwa wazee'. The hatred and bitterness that youth have held for decades

due to this matter was manifested during the pandemic through talks and actions towards the elderly.

Moreover, the same case applied during the onset of disseminating the vaccines for the virus. The elderly were given the priority due to their vulnerability to the virus. Regardless, some people took it as an opportunity to mock the elderly and show ageist attitudes (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2020). Although the general discourse and policy measures during the pandemic seemed or were quite ageist attitudes, the underlying fact is that the advisories from medical departments concerning the elderly were for good intentions and for their protection (Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2020).

Media

The media is another channel through which ageism is propagated in society. Since most media channels are accessible to all generations, even very young children, ageism, once portrayed in these avenues, starts taking root in very young children who watch television and listen to the radio etc. These children begin picking up on the idea that ageing is an unpleasant process that renders one useless, troublesome and burdensome to others (Burnes et al., 2019). These messages are common in our television shows. The messages are depicted through adverts or television shows. After consuming this content, the ageist messages are passed in the form of jokes and casual comments to the elderly people in society, the result is exposing them to low self-esteem, unacceptance, isolation, and the result is unhealthy ageing and premature deaths (Burnes et al., 2019).

Witchcraft Accusations

Kramkowska (2019) in his study, often argued that older people and, more especially, women are accused of being witches just because of their age and gender. Some have been forced out of their homes, and some murdered. This aspect has been documented around the globe. It is not limited to a specific region. Regardless, African countries have recorded extreme cases of the same. For example, recent media reports have highlighted the problem in Burkina Fasso, Ghana, India, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Nepal, among others. In most of these countries, belief in witchcraft is common. Individuals from all sections have the same mind-set regarding witchcraft regardless of education level,

religion, socio-economic status etc. (Lance, 2021). Witchcraft in most communities is associated with the elderly because they are unable to defend themselves from verbal and physical attacks, making them an easy target.

Moreover, the elderly are considered less valuable to society, hence a burden to everyone (Schuldberg, 2005). These accusations of the elderly being witches originate from the problems experienced in society, like sicknesses, limited knowledge of nature, natural calamities etc. for instance, a sickling child who might have been infected during birth by an HIV-positive mother might be attributed to an elderly woman living nearby her home (Otieno, 2019). This results from a lack of knowledge of HIV/AIDS from her relatives and society. When rains delay, 'older people are accused of holding the rains' due to a lack of knowledge of climate change and weather patterns. To make matters worse, when traditional healers are asked by those who experience misfortunes like sickness and death in the family to tell them the source of their problems, they point out elderly vulnerable women in the village. Sometimes the reason why elderly women are accused of witchcraft, is due to their physical appearance, like reddish, watery eyes (Zhang et al., 2016). This is a common trend in Tanzania, where elderly women have been attacked or threatened by the rest of the community based on their physical outlook.

In most cases, these physical outlooks, like reddish eyes, emerge from the lifetime of working over smoky cooking fires like the use of firewood. Most elderly women have spent much of their lives cooking using firewood compared to today's sophisticated fuel used for cooking, like gas and electricity. This has improved in the last few decades due to technological improvements. Regarding this matter (Zhang et al., 2016), community-based programmes have been created to curb the menace. Although they have reduced the nuisance by 90%, there is a need to employ more strategies to reduce ageism and eliminate it to ensure the elderly are ageing healthy.

Deteriorated Physical and Mental Health

According to Bryant et al. (2012), internalized age stereotypes among the elderly have led to low self-esteem and loss of self-confidence. Consequently, this has affected the elderly people's mental and physical health negatively. An older person who views themselves too old is vulnerable to the negative consequences of ageism, which is not limited to high negative emotions and low self-efficacy (National Gender and Equality Commission, 2014). The contrary is also true because positive complements, attitudes and perceptions of the elderly are likely to positively impact the general well-being of these people (Eibach et al., 2010). Elderly people who have undergone ageism are likely to be stressed and depressed. These factors are detrimental to their mental health, contributing significantly to their well-being. (Ayalon et al., 2019) has diversely recognized ageism as the number one risk factor leading to increased stress, depression, anxiety and lower life satisfaction among older people.

Nevertheless, most studies on ageism have generally taken the conceptual or hypothetical approach, and investigated the causes and consequences of ageism. Minimal empirical studies have been carried out to investigate how ageism manifests in society and to what extent. It is important that an empirical study be carried out to examine the harm ageism has caused to the physical and psychological well-being of elderly people.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: As discussed in the literature review above, there are many avenues through which ageism manifests in society. Older people tend to mechanize ageism, compelling them to clinch to social norms which devalue and marginalize them.

Recommendation: Researchers need to focus on education and methods that can dispel myths and stereotypes associated with ageism while raising awareness of the effects of ageism. Intergenerational interventions can work well in creating cooperation and empathy between older people and the younger generation. This can be achieved by implementing laws and policies to reduce inequality and discrimination.

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