

Colorful Gray: We All Deserve to Live Life to Its Fullest

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lisa LaFlamme, the 58-year-old star presenter of Canada's most watched news broadcast at CTV News, had to forgo regular hair dyeing, and her mahogany brown hair faded to its natural silver. The journalist has kept her gray hair ever since. Too bad.

"Who approved Lisa's decision to keep her hair gray?" said one of the news channel's executives after seeing the TV presenter on the air. LaFlamme was unceremoniously dumped from her role at CTV after 35 years in the industry. The firing of the journalist in June 2022 shocked many across the country. While LaFlamme's case is an example of age discrimination, it has also shown that the aging of women and men is often perceived differently in our societies. One could argue that George Clooney's gray hair, on full display in his 50s, did not hamper his career. On the contrary — he remains one of the most famous and respected actors in Hollywood.

Age discrimination toward a famous TV journalist is a media story. However, LaFlamme's story is not an isolated case. Famous or not, millions of people worldwide can tell tales of age discrimination not only in the workplace but also when accessing goods and services, such as car rentals or travel insurance, or when facing

neglect, maltreatment, and abuse at home or in institutional care settings. Often the provision of care can be restricted in the context of limited resources and budgetary cuts, even if in practice that means restriction of the older person's autonomy or, worse, inhumane treatment. In a 2010 case in the UK¹, an older woman who had reduced mobility because of a stroke was forced to use incontinence pads and absorbent sheets at night because it was considered more cost-efficient than paying a caretaker to help her use the bathroom.

All these stories are blunt illustrations of *ageism*, a term that was coined in 1969 by American gerontologist Robert N. Butler. Ageism, according to Dr. Butler, "reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged — a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death."² Butler questioned the assumption that later life was a period of deterioration or loss and, equally important, insisted that ageism affects various age groups since "the young may not trust anyone over 30; but those over 30 may not trust anyone younger."³ Over 50 years later, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines ageism as the stereotypes (how we think),

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prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) toward others or ourselves based on age.⁴ Ageism negatively affects every aspect of older people’s lives: health, work, participation in society, individual autonomy, and well-being. Everyone can be a victim of ageism and age discrimination, regardless of gender, skin color, religion, or socioeconomic status, as LaFlamme’s case proves. In Europe, more than one in three people over age 65 reports having been a target of ageism.⁵

Ageism can be either interpersonal or institutionalized. Take the example of statistics on population aging. “When I’m Sixty-Four,” sang the Beatles in 1967 about a man talking to his lover about their plans to grow old together. Since then, life expectancy has been constantly increasing worldwide and so has the number of centenarians, from 20,000 in 1965 to a projected 19 million by 2100.⁶ People over age 60 will represent more than 22 percent of the world population in 2050.⁷ Yet many states stop collecting data for people over 74, while large differences exist between the living conditions of people between ages 65 and 74 years, 75 and 84 years, and older than 85. Without adequate data on population aging, we cannot develop inclusive and tailor-made policies to address the situation of specific target groups.

Statistics have the power to put urgent issues on the political agenda; therefore, they must cover all old-age subgroups and be further disaggregated by gender identity. Our politicians, researchers, and statisticians must be reminded that human rights apply to all ages and that statistics need to get older as well while we will be singing “When I’m Ninety-Four.”

A substantially prolonged longevity is one of humanity’s greatest achievements, but we still need to address the question of how to capture the inestimable potential of this success story. Older people contribute to society and the economy, sharing their skills and knowledge through various means of paid and volunteer work, informal care, and political participation. We need to enable the growing number of older people to live full, healthy, informed, and independent lives, even in old age — in short, to enable everyone to be treated equally as they age.

At AGE Platform Europe (AGE), the European network of self-advocacy organizations “of older people” and “working for” people ages 50-plus, we believe that to seize the potential of longer life, we need to create a society for all ages. Our vision encompasses an inclusive society based on well-being for all; solidarity between generations; and full entitlement to enjoy life, participate in,

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and contribute to society. We work toward an ideal of the just society where young and old live, contribute, participate, and are protected on equal bases.

The vision of a society for all ages is the driving force behind our advocacy work. To make it a reality, we influence relevant policymaking processes on aging. Our advocacy efforts focus primarily on the European Union and its commitment to respect the rights of older people as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.⁸ Where necessary, we propose and launch new initiatives to fill gaps in age equality provisions (e.g., our 2021 proposal for an EU Age Equality Strategy).⁹ We work closely with national governments to create age-friendly policies, scrutinizing their implementation.

In June 2022, we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the UN Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). Although not conceived as a human rights instrument when it was adopted at the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002, the MIPAA has a great potential of upholding the full spectrum of civil, political, social, economic, and cultural rights of older persons. The review of the plan's objectives for the period 2022–2027 should focus on mainstreaming these rights into national strategies and policies on aging. Moreover, the renewal of our governments' MIPAA commitments should build on the developments of the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing (OEWG) to advance and protect the rights of older people through an international convention on the rights of older persons. While the OEWG has

an exclusive mandate to promote the respect of the rights of older persons, MIPAA provides a comprehensive policy framework on aging based on human rights. We urge national governments to use the complementarity of the two processes to uphold the rights of older people.

As older people and organizations, we could be discouraged and doubt the relevance of our efforts to build fair and inclusive societies where all people live life to the fullest and where our rights are effectively protected. Does our work to promote and create societies for all ages still matter in this appalling global context? More than ever. When looking at the horrors of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the lack of a binding international instrument to protect the rights of older people sadly takes on a concrete meaning. Ukraine is among the fastest-aging countries in the world with more than 7 million people age 65 and older, representing 16.7 percent of the total population.¹⁰ At the same time, they are too often overlooked in humanitarian aid and emergency response. For the time being, older people are covered only by existing human rights standards, such as those in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 11. AGE's long-standing effort is to get our states to support a UN Convention on the rights of older people. There is no time to waste.

As older people, we are not claiming new rights; we are simply asking for the same treatment, opportunities, and, if needed, protection and support. Our wish is to live as equal members of societies where gray is simply another color. ●

¹ R (McDonald) v Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (2010) EWCA Civ 1109. Available at: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/mcdonald-v-united-kingdom>

² The Gerontologist, Volume 9, Issue 4_Part_1, Winter 1969, Ageism: Another Form of Bigotry, Robert N. Butler. (pp. 243-246)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Global Report on Ageism, World Health Organization, 2021, Preface IX. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/340208/9789240016866-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁵ Ibid. (p.34).

⁶ The long, Good life, Longer, more productive lives will mean big changes to the old rules of aging Andrew Scott, IMF, Finance & Development, March 2020. (p.11) Available at: <file:///C:/Users/Maciej%20Kucharczyk/Downloads/the-future-of-aging-guide-for-policy-makers-scott.pdf>

⁷ World Health Organization, Ageing and health, Key facts, October 2022. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>

⁸ Under the article 25, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognizes that "The Union recognises and respects the rights of the elderly to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life." Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

⁹ Available at: <https://www.age-platform.eu/sites/default/files/2page-EU-Age-Equality-Strategy.pdf>, AGE Platform Europe.

¹⁰ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Ageing 2019. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf>



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