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Smart against ageism: an overview of age discrimination in Portugal

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Negative stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination on the ground of age, known as “ageism” have been shown to cause cardiovascular stress, lowered levels of self-efficacy and decreased productivity^[1]. Across the EU, policies and practices still reflect ageist prejudices and deprioritise, disregard, or even exclude older adults in different ways.

Within the scope of the SAA project (Smart Against Ageism)^[2] a short study was developed on the idea of discrimination concerning age within the scope of Portuguese society, with the main aims of reflecting on public policies and legislation; identifying good practices and possible responses to ageism; describing the many organisations at the national, regional, and local levels that are working against stereotypes with the aim to create more inclusive environments which are suited to all generations.

Study Method

The study included desk search on literature and resources and semi-structured narrative interviews to 11 Portuguese older adults that have experienced ageism and provided informed consent to participate.

Despite the attempt to balance gender, the Portuguese partners got only the opinion of one man, being the remaining 10 interviewees women. Among them, 3 aged between 60 and 69 years; 7 aged between 70 and 79 years and 1 over 80 years of age. Among the interviewees, 3 had finished primary school, one is a factory worker, two formal

caregivers in the social care, one is a photographer, one is a cook, one is a librarian, one is volunteer, and one preferred not to answer. The interviews had a duration about 30 to 45 minutes.

Results

The interviewees said that, when passing for ageing discrimination, they felt as if they had been useless, frustrated, very sad, or felt it as a traumatic experience. When asked if they directly opposed to the practice, most answered yes, with only one person stating to have ignored the situation. The detailed results of the interviews were further analysed in detail and divided into three topics combined with the desk search results: family, workplace and social context.

In what concerns families, in 2013, in Portugal, 70.5% of grandparents were part of the direct support network of Portuguese families, either in financial support, in the care of grandchildren or in any other type of support ^[3]. 40% of grandparents in 11 European countries provide care for grandchildren, and in Portugal the provision of intensive care (daily or more than 15 hours per week) is higher than occasional or less intensive care ^[4]. It is important to highlight that caring for grandchildren in full time can also reflect on ageism. The idea that grandparents are totally available people, without the need for a life of their own, needs to be fought ^[5]. However, if a good balance is reached, then intergenerational relationships are enriching, not only for younger people, but also for older people, as both can share knowledge and experiences.

As for the labour market context, the study "Income from Work after Retirement in the European Union", published by Eurofound, suggests that more than 260,000 Portuguese over 65 years of age still work, thus being in an active position before society and themselves. The study also says that more than half of these people are primarily motivated to do things that are not monetary, suggesting that many do so because they are capable, because they like what they do, or to "feel useful", fighting loneliness and social isolation ^[6].

The percentage of population aged 65-69 years that continues to be employed has increased for all Europe, representing 13.2% of that group ^[7]. The delay of the retirement allows to increase financial security, earn more money, accumulate pension rights and divert them to a private pension plan. However, this also implies that ageism in the workplace can have a serious impact on the working environments.

Social participation is a key factor in a successful ageing, however studies pointed to a decrease in social participation and leisure activities with the increasing of age ^[8]. Also, that interaction is dependent on functional capacity and availability ^[9]. In Portugal, the citizen participation in the older population has received little attention.

One relevant data about social participation of older adults in Portugal is in the number of Parliament deputies above 65 years of age: only 21 in 230 members. But this may be also an issue when considering younger ages. In 2022, of the 230 Members of the Assembly of the Republic, only 20 are under 35 years of age, as many as those above 65^[10]. However, the voting frequency is higher in older adults ^[9].

The participation of the Portuguese population with 55 years and more as associate members of "Culture, Education and Recreation" organizations it is not frequent ^[11]. This And only approximately 30.1% of Portuguese people are an associate member of a non-profit organisation, and just over 22.3% do volunteer work in non-profit organisations ^[11].

An active ageing policy calls for greater participation of senior citizens in the social, economic, and political areas. The lack of representativeness can lead to policies not being well-aimed at older people, younger people do not understanding their problems well and more and more concepts of ageism being reproduced.

Despite the low representation in the Parliament and in associations, some good practices are an encouraging starting point for civic participation of older people in policymaking. The municipality of Oliveira de Azeméis ^[12] created the Senior Municipal Council, a body with consultative function, articulation, information, promotion of the rights and protection of the older people to ensure their well-being, dignity, and quality of life. In several Portuguese municipalities (e.g. Grândola, Alfândega da Fé) there is the senior participatory budget, a process of democratic participation in which citizens aged 65 and over can present and decide public investment projects, up to the value of €6,000.00. These public policies demonstrate that older adults' opinions are valuable and that including all in the decision process will lead to a better quality of life.

Contribution in society is a preponderant factor for the wellbeing of the older adults and one of the key pillars of active ageing. Changes in social networks and family relationships resulting from the ageing process led to older people living more alone, as couples, isolated or institutionalized in their last years of life ^[13].

Within this scope, it is worth to highlight the leading work of the SHAFE Network ^[14] and the COST Action NET4Age-Friendly^[15]. Establishing an international and interdisciplinary network of stakeholders from all sectors around these topics is essential to foster awareness, and to support the creation and implementation of inclusive environments for present and future generations where age discrimination is no longer fostered.

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