

DR MARISA PATERSON MLA SPEECH
April 2021
Ageism and Gender Discrimination

I draw to the attention of the Assembly the concerns and perspectives of our elderly residents in the ACT.

As Australia's population continues to age, a growing concern is the welfare afforded to older residents. Unfortunately, the erosion of Federal support – and societal perception and attitudes – undermine the ability of some older Australians to enjoy their retirement or ongoing work.

The 2021 Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety found systematic financial, mental, and physical abuse in some aged care facilities. The elderly have been treated as a column on the budget sheet, not a vulnerable group who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

Many older people who I have talked with have expressed a feelings of isolation from wider society, particularly if they are living alone. COVID has magnified these feelings of loneliness and social isolation for many. Further to this, another way that older people are increasingly isolated in our community is through technology. As older people struggle to keep up with technology and smart phones, they fall further behind and become more and more isolated as they are simply unable to engage.

This is why community and government-led initiatives have never been more important.

Taking this a step further, I would like to discuss “Gendered ageism”. Gendered ageism encapsulates the disproportionate effects of ageism which women experience relative to men. We have heard a lot in the media lately about workplace inequality in Australia. What we also know is that women face inequality across almost every aspect of life. This disadvantage accumulates over the lifespan and presents significantly at a later age. Due to career limitations throughout their lives, women retire with less superannuation than their male counterparts; older women find it more difficult to find a job than men; women above the age of 55 are the fastest growing group of homeless Australians; and older women are disproportionately at risk of social exclusion.

Older women also continue to be subject to unrealistic beauty standards – and expense. Subtle discrimination in products labelled as ‘anti-ageing’ re-orient the conversation around the elderly, marking them as undesirable or fading.

Women today, more than ever, feel a growing pressure to conform to a standard not of their own choosing. We cannot stop ageing, but we can stop demonising the ageing process, and in doing so support elderly women in our community, workplace, and families.

To fight inequality in old age, we must strive for equality at every age.

Age discrimination is a very layered and complex issue. We must ensure that the hardship faced by the elderly, and particularly ageing women, is not ignored as the conversation continues.

I was fortunate to meet recently with COTA - the Council on the Aging – a community organisation engaged and invested in this emerging issue. By having these conversations with the elderly, and with stakeholders and advocates, we can all become better informed regarding the issues faced by our constituents. As I have met with community members and organisations, I have been simultaneously humbled and moved by their resilience in the face of adversity.

We can all do our part in recognising and fight against ageism and gender discrimination by considering the impact our actions have on others, and by challenging established societal norms around the process of ageing and the elderly. It is imperative as this policy space continues to evolve in a holistic way.

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