

The 5th ASEM Forum on the Human Rights of Older Persons: Present and Future **Unmasking Ageism: Cultural Realities, Systemic Barriers, and the Case for Change**

20 August 2025

Somerset Palace Seoul, Republic of Korea

Co-organized by ASEM Global Ageing Center (AGAC),
National Human Rights Commission of Korea (NHRCK), and
Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Korea

Overview

The 5th ASEM Forum on the Human Rights of Older Persons, under the theme “Unmasking Ageism: Cultural Realities, Systemic Barriers, and the Case for Change,” seeks to foster cross-regional dialogue to deepen understanding of ageism and its root causes. It also aims to share practical insights, policy innovation, and foster shifts in social attitudes and perceptions toward ageing.

Through three thematic sessions, the forum will explore the historical and normative origins of ageism, present tools and data to assess its ramifications across key sectors, and highlight practical strategies to advance an age-inclusive society.

Background

As global populations experience unprecedented increases in longevity, the average life expectancy worldwide reached 73.3 years in 2024. Projections indicate that by 2054, the proportion of individuals aged 65 and over will nearly double – from 17 percent to 33 percent.ⁱ While this demographic transformation is frequently framed as one of the most pressing challenges confronting contemporary societies, it also constitutes a profound testament to human progress – reflecting advances in public health, medical science, and socioeconomic development.

Ageing should not be understood solely as a demographic phenomenon; rather, it is a universal and continuous process that encapsulates the complexity and heterogeneity of human life. It is shaped by cultural norms, social values, and institutional structures, and it intersects with fundamental principles of equity, justice, and human rights. The critical question is not the fact of ageing itself, but how societies conceptualize and engage with the ageing process.

The term *ageism*, first introduced in 1969 by Robert N. Butlerⁱⁱ - renowned as a pioneer in the field of gerontology - denotes a dual construct: (1) a socially produced set of negative attitudes, stereotypes, and assumptions about older persons and the ageing process; and (2) a structural predisposition to design policies, environments, and institutions around a presumed norm of youthfulness, thereby systematically marginalizing the needs and contributions of older populations. Ageism manifests in attitudinal, behavioral, and institutional forms. Despite its pervasiveness, it remains one of the most insidious and

underrecognized forms of systematic bias in both global and local contexts. The World Health Organization (WHO)'s *Global Report on Ageism* (2021) reveals that nearly half of the global population holds ageist attitudes. These attitudes have measurable impacts on the health, well-being, and safety of older persons. Ageism increases the risk of exclusion, neglect, and abuse, thereby generating substantial social and economic costs. In this regard, tackling ageism is central to ensuring not only the recognition but the fulfillment of rights, dignity, and participation for people of all ages.

The global health crisis of COVID-19 pandemic brought structural ageism into sharp relief. In many countries, assumptions about older persons' vulnerability led to discriminatory practices. In Asia, public health measures such as self-isolation guidelines and mobility restrictions—though well-intentioned and rooted in cultural norms of protection—often undermined older persons' autonomy and exacerbated their isolation.ⁱⁱⁱ In Europe, age-based triage protocols revealed explicit and disturbing forms of age discrimination.^{iv} Surveys show that one in three Europeans experienced age-based discrimination during the pandemic, with Eastern Europe demonstrating higher rates than other parts of the region.^v The hashtag #BoomerRemover starkly illustrates the ageist narratives that emerged during this time.^{vi} These examples highlight how crises can intensify existing prejudices—demonstrating the urgent need for inclusive, age-conscious discourse that challenge structural bias and safeguards the dignity of older persons in times of crisis.

Ageism has become a defining issue of our time, demanding urgent global attention. Over the past decades, global discourse on ageing has shifted from viewing older persons primarily as recipients of welfare to recognizing them as full rights-holders. This transformation was driven in part by the growing visibility of structural age-based exclusion across employment, healthcare, and legal systems, and was formalized through major international milestones.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development commits to “leaving no one behind,” explicitly including older persons. Both the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) call for structural reforms to ensure full inclusion and participation. The WHO's *Report on Ageing and Health* (2016) and *Global Report on Ageism* (2021) jointly identify ageism as a global barrier to health and dignity, calling for action through law, education, and intergenerational contact interventions. Moreover, the recent development of the WHO Ageism Scale, a tool designed to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing ageism, further underscores the importance of an evidence-based approach. In parallel, the UN Human Rights Council emphasized that older persons have historically remained at the margins of international human rights frameworks, prompting the appointment of a dedicated Independent Expert.

At the cultural and regional levels, rapid population ageing has also triggered a shift in how ageism is understood and discussed. East Asian societies, often shaped by Confucian traditions that emphasize respect for elders, are no exception. Despite enduring cultural values such as filial piety, rapid demographic change, urbanization, and the breakdown of extended family structures have exposed new forms of marginalization affecting older persons. These developments challenge the assumption that collectivist cultures tend to be inherently resistant to ageism and highlight the need for more context-sensitive, cross-cultural approaches to understanding its roots and persistence.

To effectively address ageism, it must be recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon that shapes how individuals experience ageing throughout their lives. Ageism intersects with other forms of inequality, such as those based on gender, disability, or socioeconomic status. These intersections are not static; they accumulate and compound, shaping each person's experience of ageing in unique and unequal ways. Given this complexity, ageism must be examined through an intersectional and life-course lens—one that examines how structural inequalities and personal histories converge across the lifespan. Only through such a multidimensional approach can we develop truly inclusive policies and narratives that respect the diversity of ageing experiences.

Building on the recognition of ageism's complexity, a shift toward rights-based and age-inclusive frameworks is essential to drive meaningful and lasting reform. This shift entails reframing public discourse, reforming institutional structures, and embedding age sensitivity across all levels of governance. Rather than settling for symbolic gestures of inclusion, efforts must aim for structural transformation that fully realizes and upholds the human rights of older persons.

Importantly, ageism affects not only today's older persons but individuals of all ages, shaping how we perceive ageing and envision our future selves. It influences societal norms, institutional practices, and personal expectations throughout the life course. Challenging ageism, therefore, is not only a matter of justice for older persons; it is a long-term investment in creating societies where everyone can thrive at every stage of life. A rights-based, age-inclusive approach is not merely a policy option; it is a societal imperative. It requires reframing public discourse, reforming institutions, and embedding age-sensitivity into governance at every level.

In this broader context, **ASEM Global Ageing Center (AGAC)** serves as a regional connector, policy catalyst, and collaborative platform. AGAC fosters dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe to advance rights-based and age-inclusive approaches. It supports governments and stakeholders in mainstreaming age-sensitive perspectives, challenging negative stereotypes, and fostering a more empowering and positive vision for ageing.

To further this mission, AGAC is convening **the 5th ASEM Forum on the Human Rights of Older Persons: Present and Future**, under the theme "Unmasking Ageism: Cultural Realities, Systemic Barriers, and the Case for Change." The theme highlights the Forum's commitment to bring to light the often-overlooked nature of ageism—exposing how it is woven into cultural narratives, institutional frameworks, and policy structures across societies.

At a time when ageism continues to shape policies, perceptions, and lived experiences worldwide, challenging its hold is both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity. In response to this critical challenge, the Forum offers a vital platform for cross-regional dialogue—enabling stakeholders to exchange insights, confront entrenched challenges, and co-develop strategies that are culturally rooted yet anchored in universal principles. By connecting normative, institutional, and lived dimensions of ageing, the Forum advances a shared vision: to build inclusive societies in which older persons are not left behind, but recognized as essential contributors to social cohesion, development, and shared prosperity.

Session Details

The Forum will be structured around three interrelated sessions, each addressing a key dimension of ageism. Each session will be moderated and will feature three presentations, followed by a professional panel discussion (with one to two panelists) and an open Q&A segment.

Session 1. Understanding Ageism across Cultures: Historical, Normative, and Rights-based Perspectives

This session explores how ageism has evolved as a deeply rooted form of social bias—shaped over time by historical transformations, cultural narratives, and institutional norms across different societies. Drawing on comparative perspectives from Asia and Europe, it examines how perceptions of ageing have shifted—from roles of respect and authority to experiences of marginalization and dependency—under the influence of industrialization, modernization, and changing family structures. The session also investigates how ageism takes distinct forms across regional contexts, reflecting tensions between traditional values and evolving socio-economic realities. By analyzing both philosophical and legal dimensions of age-based discrimination, it highlights the importance of culturally sensitive, rights-based responses and calls for a reframing of public discourse and policy to promote more age-inclusive societies.

Session 2. Evidence-based Approach to Ageism: Global Evidence and Sectoral Realities in Health Care and Employment

Building on the cultural and structural roots of ageism explored in Session 1, this session underscores the growing need for reliable tools to measure ageism and assess its impact across societies. Drawing on recent advances—most notably the launch of the WHO Ageism Scale in 2025—it emphasizes the value of evidence-based approaches to understanding how age-based bias operates across different levels and settings. With a particular focus on the health and employment sectors, participants will examine how both structural and implicit forms of ageism affect older persons' access to care, autonomy in the workplace, and broader socioeconomic inclusion. By exploring region-specific data and comparative insights from Asia and Europe, the session aims to identify pathways for translating measurement into actionable, age-inclusive policy action.

Session 3. From Awareness to Action: Strategies for Combatting Ageism

Building on the insights from previous sessions, this discussion will explore how increasing awareness of ageism can be translated into effective and sustainable action. Framed by global efforts such as the Decade of Healthy Ageing and guided by the WHO Global Report on Ageism (2021), the session will examine three key pathways for change: policy and legal reform, educational initiatives, and intergenerational engagement. Participants will share good practices, legislative models, and public engagement strategies that have proven effective across diverse cultural and institutional contexts. The session will also identify opportunities to advance collaborative action at the ASEM level, with the aim of fostering rights-based, age-inclusive societies across Asia and Europe.

Provisional Programme

TIME	PROGRAMME DETAILS
09:00-09:30	[Registration]
09:30-10:40 (70)	[Opening Session] [Keynote Speech] - MAHLER, Claudia (Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, United Nations) (pre-recorded)
10:45-12:15 (90)	Session 1. Understanding Ageism across Cultures: Historical, Normative, and Rights-based Perspectives
12:15-13:35	Luncheon
13:35-15:05 (90)	Session 2. Evidence-Based Approach to Ageism: Global Evidence and Sectoral Realities in Health Care and Employment
15:05-15:20	Coffee Break
15:20-16:50 (90)	Session 3. From Awareness to Action: Strategies for Combatting Ageism
16:50-17:00	[Closing Session]

Endnotes

ⁱ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2024). *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Result*.

https://population.un.org/wpp/assets/Files/WPP2024_Summary-of-Results.pdf

ⁱⁱ ASEM Global Ageing Center. (2020). *A Foundational Study to Develop an Ageism Index for ASEM Partners*.

https://asemgac.org/board/view?bd_id=pb02&wr_id=41

ⁱⁱⁱ HelpAge International. (2020). *COVID-19 and Older People in Asia Pacific. 2020 in review*.

<https://www.helpage.org/silo/files/covid19-and-older-people-in-asia-pacific-2020-in-review.pdf>

^{iv} Daniali SS, Rahimi M, Salarvand S.(2022). *Age Discrimination in Delivery of Health Services to Old People During COVID-19 Pandemic: a Scoping Review Study*. *Journal of Gerontology and Geriatrics* 2022; 70:68-82.

<https://doi.org/10.36150/2499-6564-N415>

^v World Health Organization. (2021). *Global Report on Ageism*.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240016866>

^{vi} Formosa, M. (2021). *COVID-19 and Older Persons: Reflections on Human Rights, Ageism, Isolation, Dementia Care, and Gender*. *International Journal on Ageing in Developing Countries*. 6(1), 5-19.

<https://www.inia.org.mt/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/6.1.1-COVID-19-and-older-persons-Reflections-on-human-rights-ageism-isolation-dementia-care-and-gender-.pdf>