

Joint letter of the members of the Interest group on solidarity between generations

Speaking about 'older persons': let us stop ageism and stereotypes contained in the word 'elderly'!

Dear colleagues,

The European Parliament, is a strong defender of equality and human rights, and strongly committed against sexism, racism, ableism and many other forms of prejudice and discrimination. As Members of the European Parliament, we know that words have power; when used over time, they become common sense or the default way we think about an issue. Language must help us relate to each other, not reinforce bias, hostility, or even hatred. Shifting away from terms that focus on impairments as individual failures (i.e. 'invalids') has allowed us to truly celebrate citizens with a disability as equals to others.

Similarly, we must stop the use on the term 'elderly'. Mass nouns (ex. seniors, the elderly, the ageing population) obscure the individuals, their rights, diverse stories, preferences, and needs. The term 'elderly' implies a uniform collective, while older persons have each their unique experience of ageing. It is used to split age groups, creating the impression that –'the elderly' and 'the young' are distinct in their rights, contributions and aspirations. The word 'elderly' is lexically close to 'frailty', yet we know that not all older people are frail or vulnerable – and even if they face disease or impairment, they have the same right to fully participate in society as everyone else. Such descriptions disregard older people's potential and contributions and run against our European ideal of enabling healthy and active ageing for all. Most importantly, older persons themselves feel disrespected by this term when applied to themselves.¹ Geriatrics and other scientific disciplines have long abandoned the term.² The United Nations discarded the term in 1995.³

Let us abandon this language that reduces and homogenises older persons in our work - official debates, reports and resolutions, communication with the citizens and other activities pertaining to the function of a Member of the European Parliament - as well. Colleagues, we are all ageing. Describing older persons as 'elderly' tends to frame them as 'others' as opposed to 'us'. We have a responsibility to avoid language that generates distancing by emphasising the differences between human beings rather what we have in common. We should emphasise the fact that no matter our age, we have the same rights. **Let us rather use the more inclusive term 'older persons'.** Beyond

¹ Cf. : Age UK, 'Is "Elderly" Offensive?' <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/northtyneside/about-us/news/articles/2019/offensive-description-of-older-people/>

² Cf. Avers, Dale et al. (2011): 'Use of the Term "Elderly"' In: *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy* No. 34(4) https://journals.lww.com/jgpt/Fulltext/2011/10000/Use_of_the_Term_Elderly_.1.aspx#JCL0-5

³ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *CESR General Comment No. 6: The Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Older Persons*. 8 December 1995. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G96/154/05/pdf/G9615405.pdf?OpenElement> (page 107).

this one word, there is useful guidance about non-stereotypical communication on older persons and ageing, developed by older persons' organisations themselves.⁴

Best regards,

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⁴ AGE Platform Europe, *Short guide to avoid stereotypical communication when talking about ageing and older people*. <https://www.age-platform.eu/publications/short-guide-avoid-stereotypical-communication-when-talking-about-ageing-and-older>