

A guide to
ageism-free
communication
about **older people**



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FOREWORD

1.

It is hard to forget the opening lines of one of the greatest works of Spanish literature, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: “Many years later, facing the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that remote afternoon when his father took him to see the ice [...] “The world was so recent that many things had no name, and to mention them one had to point to them.” Ageism is probably as old as Macondo, the fictional territory created by García Márquez, which at the time of its founding “was indeed a happy village, where no one was older than thirty and where no one had died”. Yet the truth is that we have taken too long to give it a name. Even today, many people are still unaware of the existence of ageism, the injustices it causes and the suffering it generates.

The first step to solving a problem is recognising that it exists. That is why it is so important to talk about ageism and how to fight it. As this *Guide to Ageism-Free Communication about Older People* rightly explains, “social awareness not only brings the dangers of ageism to light, but also creates a solid basis for combating it, as has happened with other ‘-isms’, such as sexism or racism”. This initiative by HelpAge International España will, I am sure, become a very useful tool for journalists and communicators.

The pandemic revealed in the cruellest way imaginable the ageism underlying what happened in nursing homes: first through the massive violation of the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of older people, and later through the constant obstacles placed in the way of uncovering the truth and ensuring justice is done. But the problem goes far beyond nursing homes. Across many areas of society, we can find manifestations of age discrimination against older people: in the workplace, in their interactions with public administrations or financial institutions, and in the digital divide, among many other areas.

To change this reality, the media are an essential ally. The authors of this Guide are right to argue that “it is essential to improve the audiovisual language and the narratives about ageing conveyed by the media”, given that their reach and influence are undeniable.

In her wonderful book *Ella pisó la luna: Ellas pisaron la luna*¹, the author Belén Gopegui reminds us of the importance of language: “We know that some people think words are not important, but we maintain that they are”. The world is no longer as new as when Macondo was founded; there are few things left without a name, and we now know how to define ageism without having to point to it with a finger. Words matter. And they must help us defeat ageism in order to build a more dignified and just society.

Manuel Rico

Spanish journalist

1 She Walked on The Moon, They Walked on The Moon

**Demographic
revolution as a
communication
challenge**

2.

With the social advances and economic progress of recent decades, people are living longer and better lives. In Spain, the population pyramid continues to evolve, with a growing proportion of older people.

In
2022

people aged **65 and over**
accounted for

19,09%

of the total Spanish
population.

Just 60 years ago, this
percentage was 8.2%.

By
2050

this proportion is
expected to reach

30%

representing around 16 million
people (Source: INE).

It is also worth noting
the growing number of
supercentenarians (people
aged 110 or over), which
has increased considerably
across Europe since 1970.

These demographic changes are transforming our society and our understanding of ageing. But...

what do we currently think about it?

MYTH: Older people are dependent, unable to make decisions for themselves, and are a burden on their families and on the economy.

FACT: In many parts of the world, the health status, level of activity, productivity and socioeconomic characteristics of older people have changed significantly in recent years.

This highlights the main problem with **stereotypes**: not all older people are dependent, nor do they all enjoy the same activities such as playing cards or dominoes. Like people in every other age group, older people have diverse needs, interests and lifestyles.

To avoid falling into stereotypes and prejudice, we must first be aware of their existence and of the negative consequences they have on society.



Using language responsibly in communication is key to reaching all sectors of society. For this reason, the role of the media is fundamental. Raising social awareness not only brings the dangers of ageism to light but also creates a solid basis for combating it, as has happened with other forms of discrimination such as sexism or racism.

Journalists must be aware of their role as opinion leaders and shapers of public debate, and understand that the consequences of ageism affect everyone, in all areas of our lives.

Myths and stereotypes about ageing

3.

The social construction of ageing, our cultural and social learning, our beliefs and our personal experiences all influence the way we see, think about and deal with age, ageing and old age.

Ageism can occur at three different levels: macro or institutional, meso or interpersonal, and micro or internalised.

Institutional

This level refers to social, economic or health practices that incorporate discriminatory behaviours towards older people. The effects of these practices are highly negative and are reflected in fewer opportunities and difficulties in accessing certain resources such as financial services, housing or healthcare. Examples include the difficulties older people face when trying to obtain a mortgage, a personal loan, or health and life insurance.

Interpersonal

This level occurs within groups and interpersonal relationships. It manifests itself in many different ways and can have very harmful effects on the lives of older people, including rejection, marginalisation, invisibility and contempt.

Internalised

Finally, the micro level occurs when negative messages and stereotypes are internalised, either explicitly through language or implicitly through the images we see in the media. Internalised ageism affects our thoughts, emotions and behaviour and can be limiting, leading individuals to perceive themselves as less capable.

Ageism is often trivialised, overlooked or subtly “accepted” through what is now known as **micro-ageism**. This refers to behaviours, expressions or attitudes that are habitual, widespread and socially normalised. These include automatic gestures or behaviours such as speaking differently to older people, raising one’s voice, using diminutives, or speaking more slowly. They also include expressions such as:



Under the umbrella of micro-ageism we find a wide range of **everyday behaviours, comments and actions** that, although subtle, perpetuate prejudice against older people.

Ageism is particularly **visible in the media** and in everything they project. Media narratives influence the lives of many people and are one of the most powerful tools for creating and spreading ideas and messages, as well as for informally shaping social attitudes and values.

Ageing is a complex and deeply subjective process in which older people's own perception of themselves plays a fundamental role. In this sense, it is important to remember that stereotypes arise not only from our personal experiences but also from the content we consume through the media. If ageism is repeatedly reproduced in the media, as many studies have shown over the years, it becomes essential to improve both the audiovisual language and the narratives about ageing that they convey, given their enormous reach and influence.

To some extent, we are all ageist,

Living in a long-lived society is not the same as living in an ageing society.

Although the underlying reality is the same, the meaning and social resonance of the words we use can change the way we perceive reality and shape our understanding of it. Language reflects, through words, metaphors and images, the ideas that have been constructed around ageing. Words matter. Language is never neutral. Terms such as ageing, old age, old or elderly are often socially loaded with negative connotations and can unconsciously reproduce stereotypes, contributing to their persistence and, in some cases, reinforcing them.

and all of us may experience age discrimination at some point in our lives. In this sense, it is important to recognise that ageism affects us all directly.

Often this happens unconsciously, without ill intent, and sometimes even with what people believe are good intentions.

However, ageist comments can have serious consequences, which is why it is essential to learn to use appropriate language and behaviours.

In this context, the media enjoy broad social trust and have enormous capacity to shape public attitudes. Just as happened previously with racism and later with sexism, society as a whole must become aware of the problem of ageism. From that awareness, a broad social commitment must emerge that involves all types of institutions in the fight against it. At the centre of this effort should be the media, promoting responsible positioning and the use of appropriate language so that these changes can gradually be internalised at an individual level throughout society.

Older women and the media

4.

Women have a longer life expectancy than men, but they often experience a lower quality of life and face a higher risk of poverty, violence, discrimination and loneliness in older age.

In other words, women live longer, but often under worse conditions. Although older women represent a significant proportion of the population, the specific barriers they face — both because they are women and because they are older — remain largely invisible. Older women face discrimination in multiple areas, including employment, healthcare, financial services, development programmes and property rights. These practices are particularly prevalent among widowed or single women, older women with disabilities, rural women and migrant women.



There is still limited research examining the intersection between gender discrimination and age discrimination, and older women are frequently overlooked in awareness campaigns against gender-based violence and in initiatives aimed at promoting equality, both nationally and internationally.

If we look at the media, older women rarely appear as protagonists of stories,

and when they do, these stories are often directed at a niche audience. In general, when older women appear in the media, they tend to be portrayed in secondary roles in which their sexuality is erased, their social value depends on their role as caregivers or grandmothers, and their needs, concerns and life projects are ignored. These stereotypes shape how society perceives older women: they may be treated as incapable or unintelligent, subjected to paternalistic attitudes, or have their desires, concerns and opinions undervalued. These attitudes are linked not only to age and ageing, but also to gender.

Moreover, this invisibility leads to serious shortcomings in the support available to older women experiencing gender-based violence. As a result, older women are often less aware of existing inequalities and less likely to seek support services when facing situations of gender-based violence.

**Language
matters**

5.

The way we address older people is important because it can influence both attitudes and behaviour.

Language should be used consciously and responsibly in order to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and myths surrounding older people. We must avoid terms and expressions that overgeneralise and homogenise all older men and women under a single, simplified image.

The most widely accepted terms when referring to this group, as they are considered more neutral and objective, are “older people” or “older adults”. By contrast, other expressions should be avoided because they carry negative connotations and simplify, depersonalise and homogenise the diverse ways in which people experience ageing and older age. Examples include:

~~The elderly~~

~~Elderly woman / Elderly man~~

~~Retirees~~

~~Pensioners~~

~~The Third Age~~

~~Grandma /~~

~~Grandpa /~~

~~Gran / Granny~~

These terms should not be used to refer to the entire age group, but only when they are strictly necessary and appropriate to a specific context. **The diversity of older people must be recognised**, and this cannot be achieved through the generalised and inappropriate use of such terms.

Ageing and longevity should not be associated with the negative stereotypes linked to the idea of 'oldness' as something worn out, spoiled or no longer useful. Until very recently, these meanings were still reflected in the definitions provided by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) when looking up the word 'old'. These beliefs remain deeply rooted in our social imagination, and changing this vision requires changing the words we use.

Similarly, the terms '**grandfather**' or '**grandmother**' excessively homogenise older people, defining an entire age group through a family role that may not even exist. The same occurs with the rigid association between age and the labour market through terms such as '**senior citizens**', '**retirees**', or '**pensioners**'.

Work patterns and social needs are evolving, as is the retirement age itself.

The use of paternalistic or infantilising language when addressing older people reinforces negative stereotypes, such as assumptions of incompetence or dependency.

To ensure respectful communication, the following practices should be avoided:

Adjusting the tone or rhythm of voice unnecessarily when addressing older people (often referred to as 'elderspeak').

Using diminutives or nicknames that undermine a person's adulthood (e.g., calling a man named Robert 'Bobby' without his consent).

Expressions using possessive pronouns, such as "our elders" or "your elderly", which imply that older people are the property of others.

Overly affectionate or patronising terms of endearment, such as "sweetheart", "love", "dearie", or "my lady/gentleman", especially when used by strangers or healthcare professionals..

Expressions that marginalise older people from the main action, such as using indirect constructions like "we let him go out" or "he doesn't really know what he wants", which strip them of their agency.



Older people are neither deaf nor incapable of understanding. Speaking to them excessively slowly, raising the volume, or oversimplifying language shows a lack of respect and ignores the diversity of the ageing process.

Furthermore, the widespread use of possessive and patronising language not only infantilises them but also conveys a sense of overprotection. **People should be addressed by their preferred name and spoken to using the same tone and rhythm used with any other age group.** Terms of affection should never be used in a generalised way unless there is a genuine, close, and personal relationship.

The language we use shapes social beliefs and behaviours. Incorrect or inappropriate language when describing a social group can therefore become a form of discrimination. For this reason, **it is essential to use accurate, respectful and non-stereotypical terms** when referring to older people.

YES

"Grandson gets hole-in-one while golfing with grandfather in The Villages".

Villages News, 15 March 2026.

NO

"Nebraska grandfather killed in 'freak accident' at McDonald's drive-thru".

Fox News, 26 December 2025.

The term "grandfather" or "grandmother" is not advisable because not all older people are grandparents and not all grandparents are older people. Although the term may express sympathy or closeness, it can also imply a discriminatory way of referring to older people.

YES

"Older women 'disappear' from BBC presenting roles, review finds".

BBC, 30/01/2026.

NO

"'Silver Tsunami' poses problems for Wisconsin Hospitals".

WJFW, 24/02/2026.

The term 'Silver Tsunami' should be avoided because it frames population ageing as a destructive natural disaster rather than a social triumph, dehumanising older people by presenting them as a threat or a burden to society.

YES

"Older people worry about rising energy bills, rent and food costs".

BBC, 27 May 2025.

NO

"Boom in 'Boomer' care".

Healthcare Today, 17 March 2026.

The term 'Boomer' should be avoided as a generic label because it often carries ageist connotations, reducing a diverse generation to a monolithic stereotype and fuelling intergenerational conflict through dismissive tropes like 'OK Boomer'.

YES

"Calls for major free bus travel change for older people across the UK".

The Mirror, 11/06/2025.

NO

"The best advice our elders ever gave us".

The Wall Street Journal, 20/12/2020.

The expression "our elders" suggests uniformity in terms of gender and group. Moreover, the use of the possessive reduces their autonomy. Although it may be intended as a sign of respect or affection, it can reinforce a paternalistic view of older people as a fragile and unprotected group that requires constant protection.

Images and older people

6.

Not only words matter. The images used to represent age, old age and ageing also shape realities and convey powerful social meanings.

To promote a current, realistic and non-stereotypical image of older people, it is essential to show and make visible the many different ways in which the various stages of ageing can be lived and experienced. Images selected to illustrate media content should therefore be chosen carefully and thoughtfully so that they support and reinforce the messages being communicated.

On the one hand, it is recommended to:



Avoid hiding faces or showing only parts of older bodies.



Avoid overusing stock images that are overly generic, homogeneous or stereotypical.



Avoid images of pathological ageing that associate age with dependency, fragility, loneliness, unhappiness or depression. This type of narrative is deeply rooted in society and should be challenged.

**On the other hand,
it is recommended to show:**



Diverse and realistic images of older people.



Older people in intergenerational contexts.



Images that reflect positive stories and situations linked to an active physical, mental, social and relational life.



Positive and respectful representations of real bodies, including natural wrinkles, white hair and diverse body types, promoting the idea of healthy physical diversity throughout the ageing process.



Images that, from an intersectional perspective, challenge multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation or race.



Images of diverse older people exploring, learning and enjoying new situations, knowledge and environments.

**The voice of
older people**

7.



Due to age discrimination and social inequalities, older people's voices are often unheard and their rights, wishes and needs are overlooked.

Having a voice means being able to claim one's rights, make decisions and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes in all areas of life: personal, family, social and political.

The concept of *voice* encompasses much more than simply speaking. It also includes participation, empowerment, agency, autonomy and responsibility. Voice is a fundamental part of who we are, shaping the opinions we hold, the decisions we make and the actions we take. Having the capacity to choose and act is essential for dignity, well-being and self-esteem, and for ensuring a rights-based approach to ageing.

Age discrimination and inequality often result in older people being denied a voice. Supporting older people to have a voice means addressing and transforming power relations — empowering older people in their homes, communities, workplaces and in public decision-making processes.

Including the voices of older people in the media — through first-person testimonies, interviews and direct sources — contributes to more responsible, respectful and inclusive communication.

**HelpAge
International
España**

8.



HelpAge International España works to ensure that older people can claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty so that they can enjoy a dignified, safe, active and healthy life.

We are part of the global HelpAge International network, which brings together

**more
than 200
organisations
across 100
countries.**

Through HelpAge International España we carry out advocacy, training and awareness-raising initiatives aimed at promoting a society that is inclusive of and responsive to the realities and rights of older people. In addition, we work nationally and internationally with partner organisations to promote the adoption of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Older Persons.

Our areas of work focus on:

The International Convention on the Rights of Older Persons, the SDGs and Agenda 2030, Human rights, Gender equality, International cooperation and humanitarian emergencies, Awareness-raising and advocacy and Climate change.

This guide forms part of the main lines of action of the Observatory on Ageism, a project developed by the Fundación HelpAge International España. The Observatory aims to contribute to reducing ageism

**by tackling
prejudice**

prejudice through data collection, research, analysis of laws and public policies, and educational initiatives designed to foster empathy and challenge misconceptions about older people and their rights.

Glossary

9.

FOURTH AGE:

A person aged 80 or over.

Source: World Health Organization.

DISCRIMINATION:

Actions, practices or policies applied to individuals because of their perceived or actual membership of a particular social group, resulting in some form of disadvantage (negative discrimination) or advantage (positive discrimination).

Source: World Health Organization, *Global Report on Ageism*.

AGEISM:

The World Health Organization defines ageism as “stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against people because of their age”. In a discussion organised by HelpAge, in which older people themselves participated, it was defined as “direct or indirect actions through which someone is excluded, treated differently, ignored or treated as if they did not exist because of their age”.

Source: World Health Organization.

AGEING:

A gradual process that unfolds throughout the life course and involves biological, physiological, psychosocial and functional changes with diverse consequences, associated with dynamic and ongoing interactions between the individual and their environment.

Source: Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons.

ACTIVE AGEING:

The process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age.

Source: World Health Organization.

HEALTHY AGEING:

The process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables well-being in older age.

Source: World Health Organization, *World Report on Ageing and Health*, 2015.

STEREOTYPES:

Cognitive structures that store our beliefs and expectations about the characteristics of members of social groups. The attribution of stereotypes refers to the process of applying these generalised beliefs to individuals.

Source: World Health Organization, *Global Report on Ageism*.

OLDER PERSON:

A person aged 60 years or older, unless domestic legislation establishes a lower or higher base age, provided that it is not higher than 65 years. This concept includes, among others, that of an older person.

Source: Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons.

PREJUDICE:

An emotional reaction or feeling, positive or negative, towards a person based on the perception that they belong to a particular group.

Source: World Health Organization, *Global Report on Ageism*.

SUPERCENTENARIAN:

A person who is 110 years old or older.

Source: Real Academia Española.

THIRD AGE:

This concept should be avoided when referring to the whole population of older people. When it is used, it should refer to people between 60 and 79 years of age. The same applies to the term fourth age, which should only be used to refer to people aged 80 or over.

Source: World Health Organization.

OLD AGE:

The final stage of a person's life, following maturity, during which they are of advanced age..

Source: Inter-American Convention on the Protection of the Human Rights of Older Persons.

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