# Measure what you treasure: Ageism in Statistics

The last time you completed a survey and were asked about your demographic profile, you might have realized that age groups up to 60 or 65 are typically broken down in relatively small segments and that the last age group of 60+ or 65+ is where it all ends. Yet, this age group represents a large and rapidly growing share of the world population. According to the UN DESA World Population Ageing 2019 Report virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. In 2019, there were 703 million persons aged 65 years or over in the global population. This number is projected to double to 1.5 billion in 2050 . By 2050 one in six people worldwide will be aged 65 years or over, accounting for 16 percent of the world population.

The highest life expectancy at age 65 is currently experienced by older persons in Australia and New Zealand (21 years) followed by Europe and Northern America (19 years). Between 2015-2020 and 2045-2050, life expectancy at age 65 is projected to increase in all regions. Although the survival of men is expected to improve, it is likely that women will continue to outlive men on average. As a result of the gender gap in longevity, older women currently outnumber older men across the age range —in particular, for those aged 80 years or older. Globally in 2019, there were 81 men for every 100 women aged 65 years or older, yet only 63 men for every 100 women aged 80 years or older. With the sex difference in longevity expected to narrow in future years, in 2050 it is projected that there will be 85 men per 100 women aged 65 years or over, and 71 men per 100 women at ages 80 and above (UN 2019, and UNFPA and HelpAge International 2012).

Age-bias in data collection, data disaggregation and demographic concepts

Not collecting data on older persons or not disaggregating available data are concrete ways in which age bias permeates statistics. However, age bias is also manifested in demographic concepts such as the dependency ratio that is commonly used to analyze the implications of population ageing:

- **Broadly defining older persons as a single age group of 60+ or 65+:** Aggregating all data into a single large age group at the end of life, or not collecting data for smaller age groups towards the end of life disguises the diversity among older persons (Kucharczyk 2018; Seltzer and Yahirun 2014). It suggests that older persons are a grey haired, cane carrying homogenous group, even though they are everything but. Symbols frequently used to depict older adults reflect this bias.
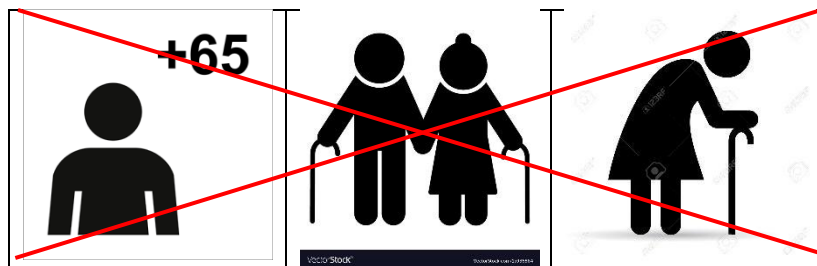
- **Narrowly defining age cohorts.** Many public health datasets focus on women aged 15--49, little information is available to dispel the myth that older persons, particularly older women, are not sexually active. Sexual health and sexual education should address people of all ages. In addition, increasing "sexual longevity" and pervasive myths and misperceptions about older person's sexuality may be partially responsible for rising rates of HIV and other STIs in older adults.

- **Focusing on dependency ratios.** Analysts and policy makers concerned with the implications of population ageing for economies closely monitor shifts in "dependency ratios". The old-age dependents are commonly defined as those from 60 or 65 onward -- as opposed to young-age dependents who are defined as those up to 15 or 25 years of age.[1] However, the concept of the old-age dependency ratio in particular is laden with bias. Even if forced into retirement through mandatory retirement ages, company policies or economic circumstances, older people generally remain active. Older persons frequently offer in-kind or financial support to their children or grandchildren, and engage in volunteerism . Such activities are integral to the economy, and have value for society, even if they are not remunerated in monetary terms. Furthermore, even in countries that have mandatory retirement ages, a notable share of older persons continue to work in formal or informal employment, be it as advisers or Uber drivers or as entrepreneurs. In countries that offer no or small retirement benefits, almost all older persons continue to work for as long as they can.

   In many cases older adults work because they want to, and do not want to be excluded from the so called "productive life". Did you know that in the US those aged 55—64 have been creating more business than those aged 20—34, and that more of their business survived the first 5 years? (Fairlie and Desa, 2020; and Dennis, 2020) In accordance, the old-age dependency ratio, which shows the number of older persons (60+ or 65+) in relationship to the number of working-age adults (15+ or 25), is not only simplistic, but also misleading and stigmatizing.

The way forward

According to the UN (2017) an increasing number of countries have voiced major concerns as regards population ageing, and over the past years an increasing number of these countries have turned to UNFPA with requests for assistance. In collaboration with partner UN agencies, national statistical offices and academic institutions, UNFPA has been working to counter ageism in statistics. It does so by supporting a more comprehensive collection of population data, including through its long-standing support to censuses, as well as other methods of data collection. Furthermore, UNFPA supports the efforts of statistical offices to rigorous disaggregation data, and works with countries to rethink the life course. Recognizing that older persons are a diverse group of individuals with diverse abilities, is an important step towards a rethinking of dependencies and dependency ratios.

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[1] The term is also interchangeably used with "support ratios". For examples of the old-age dependency ratio, the child dependency ratio, and the total dependency ratio using different age groups, see for example the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019, Online Edition. Rev. 1: https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/

Rigorous data collection and disaggregation

In her report for the 45th session of the Human Rights Council (14 September - 2 October 2020) the Independent Expert on the Enjoyment of All Human Rights by Older Persons, emphasizes the need to address data gaps on older persons. It notes: "*To date, there is a serious gap in the data available to capture the lived realities of older persons and the enjoyment of their human rights. This lack of significant data and information on older persons is, in itself, an alarming sign of exclusion and renders meaningful policymaking and normative action practically impossible. […] Comprehensive, meaningful and reliable data plays a key role in enhancing the understanding of global ageing and the impact of age-structural change. It fosters essential knowledge about the needs of older persons and creates the conditions for assessing the effectiveness of existing measures. It also provides the evidence base required to identify concrete gaps, to improve the formulation of targeted measures, to monitor their implementation and to report on progress. Data is necessary to reflect how the accessibility of the built environment, income adequacy or social protection enable or restrict older persons' autonomy. The inclusion of older persons in public data, disaggregated by age, sex and relevant socioeconomic characteristic, is essential to effective public policymaking that is inclusive of older persons*"(UN, 2020a, pp. 6-7; also UN, 2020b).

While there is none of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dedicated exclusively to the wellbeing of older persons, many of the SDG targets are of direct relevance to older persons. The principle of leaving no one behind in the progress towards these targets suggests, calls for a rigorous disaggregation of data by persons with different characteristics. To this end, the Statistical Commission of the United Nations has for instance created the Titchfield Group Ageing-related Statistics and Age-disaggregated Data.[2] and the UN Economic Commission for Europe has produced Recommendations on Ageing-related Statistics (UNECE, 2016). The objective of these endeavours is to promote the collection and disaggregation of data by age. The efforts of this group are inter-alia also important for the monitoring of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), as well the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), and national strategies and policies on ageing.

Population data is essential for the measurement of progress to 109 of the 169 indicators included in the monitoring framework for the SDGs, and much of this population data is drawn from the population and household censuses. The censuses record the exact age and date of birth of respondents and allow for a much more refined breakdown of age groups.

Rethinking the life course and dependency

Traditionally, most researchers have used measures and indicators of population ageing that are mostly or entirely based on people's chronological age, defining older persons as those aged 60 or 65 years or over. This provides a simple, clear and easily replicable way to measure and track various indicators of

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[2] For an overview of the objectives of the Titchfield City Group, see: https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/unpd_egm_201902_s2_storeyangele.pdf

population ageing. However, there has been increasing recognition that the mortality risks, health status, type and level of activity, productivity and other socioeconomic characteristics of older persons have changed significantly in many parts of the world over the last century, and, in particular, in the last few decades.

This has led to the development of alternative concepts and measures to offer a more nuanced perspective of what population ageing means in different contexts. New measures and concepts of population ageing have significant implications for assessing the living conditions and living arrangements of older persons, their productive and other contributions to society and their needs for social protection and health care. Two of the most important steps forward is the use of perspective age, as opposed to chronological age, and the use of economic dependency ratios, as opposed to the use of demographic dependency ratios. A focus on economic dependency of older persons also helps to put the spotlight on contributions of older persons. Even if many of them turn economically dependent at some point, many are making important contributions to societies.

- ***From a focus on chronological to perspective age.*** Instead of using a "chronological" perspective (starting at birth) to define old age when a person reaches the age of 60 or 65, Sanderson and Scherbov (2005 and 2020) for example use a "prospective" perspective (starting with life expectancy) to define old age when a person is 15 away from the average life expectancy.[3][7] Thus, in the developed countries where the average life expectancy is about 79 years, old age would start at age of 64, for example, whereas in world's least developed countries where the average life expectancy is 65, old age could be said to start at 50 years. This approach is more coherent with economic and health data – the majority of people are more likely to be economically or otherwise dependent if they are only a decade away from their probable death – and thus offers an important step forward in re-defining age and dependencies. It shows that age and being old is a relative concept, which varies across time and space, and that older persons are in fact a very diverse group. While some are economically and otherwise dependent; others continue to be active and engaged until late in life.

- ***From a focus on demographic to economic dependency.*** Whereas a demographic dependency ratio defines all those as dependents who fall outside working age – are below or above a certain age – from an economic perspective it makes more sense to define all those as dependents who do not have a job. Equating economic dependency with not having a job is considerably more accurate, but it is not entirely correct. Underemployment and working poverty remain widespread phenomena and therefore having a job is not necessarily synonymous with an adequate income and economic independence.

  A further refinement of economic dependency is offered by National Transfer Accounts, which are available for an increasing number of countries.[4] National Transfer Accounts use labor

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[3] For a summary of the arguments and methodology, see: https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/events/pdf/expert/29/session1/EGM_25Feb2019_S1_Serg eiScherbov.pdf

[4] Over the past years, UNFPA has been lending support to the construction of National Transfer Accounts around the world, and to date a total of 96 countries have National Transfer Accounts, covering about 84 per cent of the

income and consumption expenditures to define dependencies, rather than employment status (Lee and Mason, 2011; UN, 2013). In accordance, everyone whose consumption expenditures exceed his or her labor income is considered a dependent. Children are dependents because they do not have a labor income but do have consumption expenditures (mostly for education); older persons are identified as dependents when their labor income becomes inadequate to cover their consumption expenditures (mostly for health care). While today, the majority of people still derive the largest share of their income from labor, the far-reaching changes in economies that are associated with the 4th Industrial Revolution, platform economies and digitization mean that an increasing number of people are deriving an increasing share of their income from other sources. They have income from renting or selling real estate or other assets, or income from capital investments. In short, not everyone who has a job has necessarily adequate labor income to be independent, but not everyone who has an inadequate labor income is necessarily dependent. Therefore, the most accurate way to identify economic dependency is to compare the income of persons from all sources with the necessary consumption expenditures of persons for all essential goods and services, including food, shelter, energy, health and education.[5]

- ***From a focus on dependency to participation.*** As noted by the Report of the Independent Expert of the UN, it is essential to portray older persons as active participants in society rather than as passive receivers of care and assistance or an impending burden on welfare systems. (UN, 2020a). A step in this direction is offered by National Transfer Accounts which show transfers between people of different ages. These accounts show that far from being only recipients of transfers from lounge generations, older persons also frequently transfer resources to younger generations. In addition to receiving financial support, younger persons are recipients of in-kind support such as child caring.

   At an aggregate level, National Transfer Accounts help to dispel the myth that population ageing necessarily implies a net economic cost. National Transfer Accounts can be used to show a first and second demographic dividend that countries can realize as their age structures change. In addition to realizing a first demographic dividend, which is associated with an increasing number of younger persons entering the labor force, countries can potentially realize a second demographic dividend, which is associated with the ageing of the population. Indeed, according to some estimates, the second demographic dividend is commonly larger than the first (Lee and Mason 2006). However, realizing either dividend critically depends on adequate policies. For countries to realize a second demographic dividend requires productive investment in the economy and people -- which contribute to a rise in labor productivity and active and healthy

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world population. National Transfer Accounts are consistent with the national accounts of countries, and the Republic of Korea has made national Transfer Accounts part of their official statistics.

[5] However, not all countries have comprehensive data on the various sources of income by person, and even if they have this data, there is not necessarily a consensus on the definition of essential goods and services. For a discussion on what constitutes essential goods and service, see for example Maslow (1943), Sen (1985), Nussbaum (1992), as well as Nussbaum and Sen (1993).

ageing -- as well as policies that enable older persons to fully participate in economic, social and political life for as long as they are willing and able.

In short, demographic dependency ratios that juxtaposes static age groups are arguably one of the starkest expressions of ageism, and the consequential use economic dependency ratios is one of the most important ways to counteract this phenomenon. Complementing the focus on economic criteria of dependency, the prospective ageing methodology puts the spotlight on health. Furthermore, ageism is counteracted by breaking down the group of older persons into smaller segments, including those 85+, and by a breakdown of the group of older persons by other characteristics. Other characteristics that are essential include sex and location -- being old in a remote village with a weak infrastructure is different than being old in a city -- as well as other social and economic characteristics. Finally, more research is needed on older persons, including their needs and wants, as well as their behavior and attitudes to dispel myths about this population group.

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