



Exploring systemic ageism

A practical guide for campaigners

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Front cover photo: Older people in South Africa campaigning against ageism

Kierran Allan/HelpAge International

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About this guide

Everyone, everywhere has the right to freedom, equality and a life lived in dignity. But as we grow older we may face stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination because of our age. This can stop us from enjoying our human rights equally with others. The COVID-19 pandemic showed us just how deep-rooted and ‘systemic’ ageism is in our societies, and gives us the opportunity to expose and challenge it.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹

We believe that strengthening our understanding of how ageism works at different levels in society will help us design more effective strategies to counter it. So, we created this practical guide to help campaigners do this. It contains an analytical framework, which you can apply to your own context through guided activities and specially designed worksheets.

This guide is organised into four sections:

1.

What is systemic ageism?

Where we define the issue →

2.

The lily pond – a framework for exploring systemic ageism

Where we introduce an analogy to help you examine how systemic ageism reveals itself in our societies →

3.

Applying the framework in practice: how has COVID-19 exposed systemic ageism?

Where we present a series of guided activities and worksheets to help you explore systemic ageism →

4.

Challenging systemic ageism: next steps in creating a robust campaign strategy

Where we provide practical advice and a case study to help you take your campaigning to the next level →

1. What is systemic ageism?

We often talk about ageism by focusing on negative actions, attitudes, prejudices as well as practices and laws and how these affect older people. Less focus is given to exploring its systemic nature, addressing the different elements that work together to create systemic ageism affecting us throughout our lives and sustaining it in our societies.

A system is a set of elements working together as an interconnected network. **Systemic ageism can be described as the ways in which parts of society, including individuals and institutions, work together to sustain ageist attitudes, actions or language in laws, policies, practices or culture.**²

While ageism is about the discrimination, stigma and exclusion of people based on their age, we are all made up of multiple characteristics, including our sex, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, impairments we may have, our social and economic position and many others.

These characteristics influence how a person or group experiences ageism. For example, older black women will have a unique experience of ageism as a result of the way in which it interacts with racism, sexism and gender inequality in a given context. When looking at systemic ageism, all of these different aspects of a person's identity need to be considered.

“My in-laws and society started to discriminate against me after the death of my husband. They took my husband's land and property and compelled me to leave my village.”

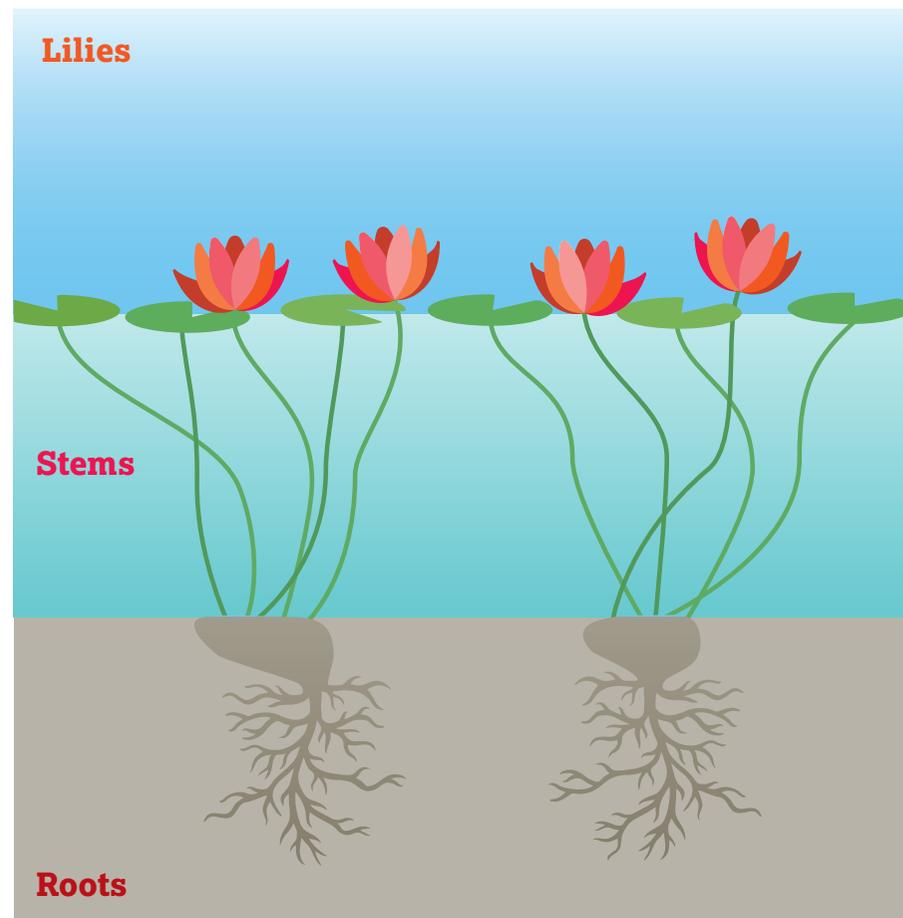
Older woman, Nepal³

2. The lily pond – a framework for exploring systemic ageism

Focusing on systemic ageism challenges us to consider its root causes and look at how ageism is produced and reproduced. We use the analogy of the lily pond to help us analyse how this happens.

The lily pond image shows the different parts of the plant. Each element of the plant is important and they are all connected. The roots provide nutrients from the soil that feed the plant. The plant's health depends on the quality of the soil, water and the sun – all of which are part of a wider ecosystem.

The lily pond



The flowers and lily pads on the surface

The stems in the water, feeding and sustaining

The roots in the soil

The lily pond represents society

The lily pond analogy is similar to how we describe elements of society. Language, actions, events and formal rules are visible elements 'on the surface' that are shaped by what is going on 'below the surface', where feelings and thoughts shape and inform the visible actions. However, it is the values and beliefs

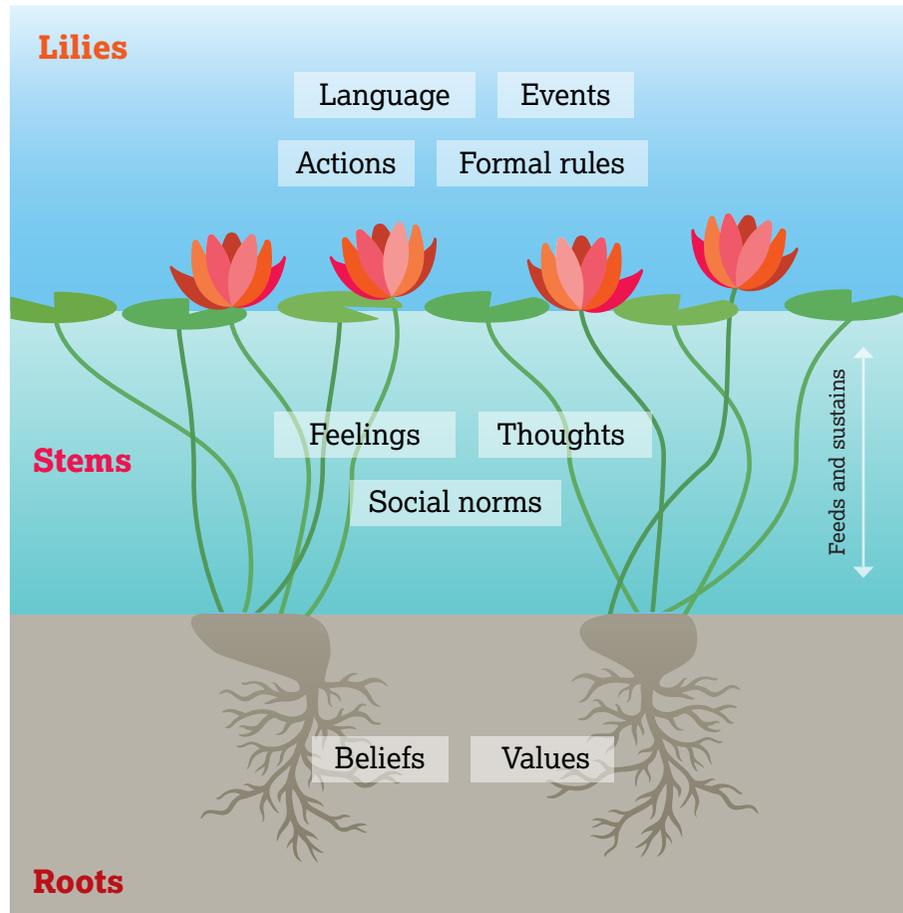
we hold, that shape our thoughts, feelings, social norms and customs. These are often unconscious and even where they are conscious, we don't easily question them. They are deeply rooted within us. As with the lily plant, all the elements of society interact, feeding and sustaining each other. External factors are also

important in shaping society – including political, social, economic and environmental contexts.

The lily pond analogy is effective because it recognises that there are elements in society that are more visible – or 'on the surface' – as well as elements that are less visible and exist 'below the surface'. These less visible elements may be difficult to identify but they are central to how ageism becomes embedded in our societies.

The lily pond⁴ framework can help us unpack how ageism occurs in our families, communities, culture and institutions. Exploring how ageism is created and sustained will help us identify possible entry points for influencing change.

Elements of society and their interaction



The flowers and lily pads on the surface = 'visible' aspects of society that we can see or observe clearly, including language, actions and events; also formal rules that exist in society, including policies and laws

The stems in the water = people's thoughts and feelings, as well as social norms and customs – the informal or unwritten rules shaping what is generally considered acceptable or 'normal' behaviour

The roots in the soil = beliefs and values that we hold as individuals as well as those that are most dominant in our context

3. Applying the framework in practice: how has COVID-19 exposed systemic ageism?

In this chapter, we will ask you to use the lily pond analogy to explore systemic ageism in the context of COVID-19.

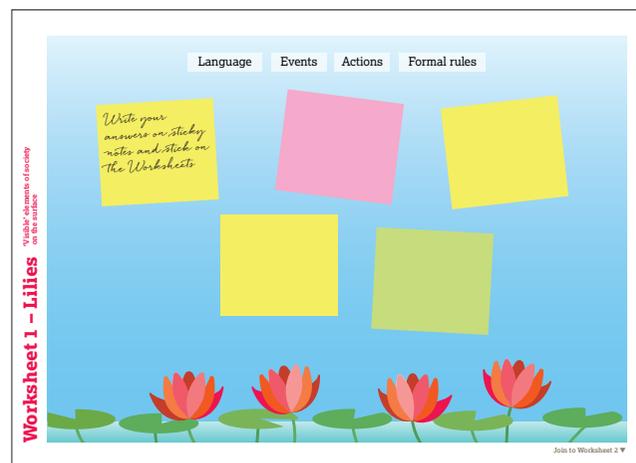
A lot has been written about incidents of ageism during the pandemic, which have highlighted the widespread nature of systemic ageism against older people. Yet over the course of almost a year, very little has changed. In fact, ageist stereotypes and practices continue to be reinforced.

This is why understanding the root causes and tackling them is so vital to changing attitudes, behaviours, practices, policies and more.

This chapter contains four guided activities. Use the three worksheets provided to consider the questions asked, reflecting on how they relate to your own context.

Activity 1: Identifying visible examples of ageism during COVID-19

In the lily pond analogy, visible examples of ageism relate to the flowers and lily pads on the surface, as shown on Worksheet 1.



1

A4 Worksheet available in Annex →

During COVID-19, we have seen many examples of ageism in people's language and actions, in events, and in formal rules, such as laws and policies. These visible manifestations of ageism occur, in part, because many countries do not yet have strong human rights frameworks that would protect and promote our rights as we age. The following are some common examples of ageism observed during COVID-19. As you read them, think about whether you have seen similar examples where you are.

COVID-19 presented as an older person's disease

Evidence shows that older people are among those most at risk of complications from COVID-19. However, the virus is a challenge facing us all and no one is immune to its effects. Despite this, we saw policy makers, the media, and the public talking about COVID-19 like it is only an older person's disease.⁵

"It has been said repeatedly that this virus only kills older people, but this is a big mistake because it can harm all people."

Older man, Jordan⁶

Age-based lockdown measures

In some countries, governments have introduced age-based lockdown measures, which discriminate against older people and are unlawful under international human rights law.⁷ These include making people over a certain age stay at home and preventing them from going to work or engaging in other public activities like taking public transport.⁸

In a time of public emergency, governments are allowed to introduce health measures that may partially restrict people's rights. However, they are not allowed to discriminate. Discrimination occurs when people are treated differently with the intention or result of stopping them from enjoying their human rights equally with others.

In some places communities and families, rather than governments, have imposed harsher restrictions on older people.⁹

“Despite the issuance of guidelines allowing older persons to go out if deemed ‘indispensable’, many older persons are still complaining that they have been barred from getting out to do economic activities or buy essential needs.”

NGO, Philippines¹⁰

Older people denied their equal right to health and to life

Some governments have introduced age limits on access to healthcare, which have denied older people their right to health.¹¹ Where these limits have resulted in avoidable deaths, they have also violated older people's right to life.¹²

“Some older people could not get through to the ambulance service. Some even had to say they were younger than they were so the ambulance would come quicker, but it still only arrived after five hours. During that time, you could die twice and get a stroke twice.”

Older woman, Kyrgyzstan¹³

“It should be clear that not only are these ageist ideas and actions blatantly discriminatory, but that taking away the rights, privileges, and lives of one social group to benefit another is a human rights violation.”¹⁴

Some response measures may not discriminate on the basis of age but still affect older people's rights. These include disruptions and reductions in health and care services, which has had an impact on older people's health and wellbeing.¹⁵

“I’m a heart patient myself. I was unable to find a doctor as most of the clinics were closed. Only telephone communication was available.”

Older man, Pakistan¹⁶

Where governments and others in power have denied older people the right to access health services on an equal basis with others, they have caused pain and suffering amounting to inhuman or degrading treatment – another violation of older people's rights.¹⁷

Older people excluded from response efforts and their voices ignored

In some places, older people have been excluded from policies and interventions during the pandemic. Examples include:

- economic and social recovery measures that do not include older people
- humanitarian responses that do not address older people's risks and needs
- failures to provide older people in care homes or in the community with enough personal protective equipment (PPE) or
- access to testing and omitting older people from official data on COVID-19.¹⁸

Not having information on older people is likely to affect the extent to which governments and other actors can design age-inclusive responses.

Older people have been excluded from decision-making processes during the pandemic in some places.¹⁹ Although older people are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19 alongside others identified as high risk, governments and other power holders have not made efforts to consult with them.²⁰

“There are various levels of committees that are being initiated by government from grassroots to top-level but there are no older people representatives on them.”

NGO, India²¹

Making information or services only available online or through mobile phones during COVID-19, has also excluded some older people, particularly in many low- and middle-income countries where older people have less digital access.²²

Increased violence, abuse and neglect

Increased violence, abuse and neglect towards older people have been reported during COVID-19.²³ We know certain groups of older people are at more risk, including older women and those who receive food, money or personal care and support from others, as well as older people in institutional settings who have been cut off from family, friends and other visitors during the pandemic.²⁴

“The reported numbers of older people affected by abuse during the COVID-19 pandemic do not reflect the reality as many don’t know how to report incidents or even if they do, they may not have a telephone and they are scared. Often abuse is perpetrated by family members that they are dependent on; they have no means to support themselves and they fear they would be threatened or worse if they asked for help.”

NGO, Jordan²⁵

Ageist language

We have seen and heard politicians, the media and the public using vilifying, stigmatising and discriminatory language when speaking about older people. Older people have repeatedly been labelled ‘vulnerable’, ‘weak’, ‘helpless’ and ‘frail’.²⁶ Hashtags such as #BoomerRemover have been adopted on Twitter and the pandemic has been described as a welcome opportunity for ‘culling elderly dependents’.²⁷ In Kenya, a Member of Parliament singled out legislators above the age of 58 in parliament and, as a joke, asked that they be allowed to leave as they were vulnerable to COVID-19.²⁸

“With the coronavirus crisis, we have found many cases of bullying against older people. Social media users are disregarding the feelings of older people.”

Older man, Jordan²⁹

Activity 1: Your analysis

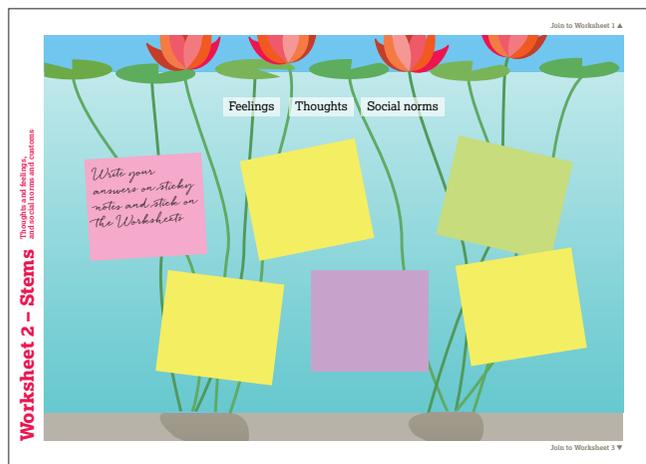
- What visible examples of ageism have you witnessed or experienced during COVID-19?
- Which of the examples provided have you observed?
- What other examples have you seen?

1 Now go to [Worksheet 1](#) →

Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them above the flowers on Worksheet 1.

Activity 2: Exploring the thoughts, feelings and social norms 'below the surface' that have influenced ageism during COVID-19

Here we consider thoughts, feelings and social norms, which may have influenced the visible examples of ageism outlined in Activity 1. In our analogy, this section relates to the stems in the water, as shown on Worksheet 2. Read the questions and explanations that follow, and think about whether you have noticed these examples in your context.



2

A4 Worksheet available in Annex →

What do we think and feel about older people?

To answer this question, we need to examine stereotypes. **Stereotypes are widely held, fixed and generalised ideas we have about a type of person or group.** Although stereotypes may be immediately visible in images and other portrayals, they really reflect how we think and feel about certain groups. We have therefore put them 'below the surface'.

“Older people in Kyrgyzstan, although considered and respected, are still not recognised as an active part of society. There is a stereotype that older people are passive, frail and dependent.”

NGO, Kyrgyzstan³⁰

A stereotype common to many countries is that older people are warm, good-natured, trustworthy and friendly.³¹ However, older people are also often stereotyped as lacking competence, ability and independence.³² Stereotypes of older people being 'warm but incompetent' have been linked to protective feelings towards them. Sometimes, protective feelings can lead to people being over-protective and paternalistic towards older people, resulting in behaviour that denies them their autonomy and freedom to make decisions for themselves.

Some of the ageist language and actions we have seen during the pandemic have revealed other stereotypes that people hold. For example, in the West older people have been grouped as Baby Boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964) and stereotyped as selfish, greedy and rich.³³ These qualities tend to be connected to thoughts and feelings of contempt, which can sometimes express themselves in actions of violence and abuse towards older people.

Activity 2.1: Your analysis

- What stereotypes of older people have you been aware of during the pandemic?
- Which of the examples provided have you observed?
- What other examples have you seen?
- What do you think these stereotypes say about how we think and feel about older people? Remember to include stereotypes related to other characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, disability, income and other characteristics.

2

Now go to Worksheet 2 →

Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them around the stems on Worksheet 2.

How do we think and feel about age and ageing?

The visible examples of ageism we have seen during the pandemic also suggest how people may think and feel about ageing itself and how this gives rise to a **cycle of ageism**, which we explain below.

Stereotyping older people as frail, weak and vulnerable suggests ageing is linked primarily with ill health, disability and dependence. These types of negative views of ageing make us feel anxious about getting older. This anxiety is also linked to deeper fears we all have about death and dying. These feelings may result in people of all ages – including older people themselves – distancing themselves from reminders of ageing, and thinking about ‘being old’ as something that only happens to others. However, this ‘othering’ is only likely to lead to more ignorance about later life and more negative emotions towards it. It can also lead to serious consequences for people’s health and wellbeing.³⁴ This cycle of ageism not only affects how we feel about other older people but also how we feel about ourselves as we age.³⁵

Activity 2.2: Your analysis

- What thoughts and feelings about age and ageing do you think may have contributed to the examples of ageism you have seen during the pandemic?
- Also consider how thoughts and feelings related to race, ethnicity, gender and other characteristics have contributed.

2 Now go to **Worksheet 2** →

Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them around the stems on Worksheet 2.

Which social norms shape how we respond to age, ageing and older people?

Some of the visible examples of ageism we have seen during the pandemic are likely to be influenced by social norms, which are operating ‘below the surface’.

Social norms

Social norms can be described as the unwritten rules and standards within a social group or society that define what is acceptable or appropriate. Social norms can be seen in actions and behaviours which are visible ‘on the surface’, but they also relate to less visible elements in society that shape what is considered ‘normal’ and what is expected. These operate ‘below the surface’ and are connected to the values and beliefs we hold.

Examples of social norms include unwritten rules that dictate how we behave when we first meet someone. In one setting, it might be considered rude to make direct eye contact, in another it might be considered rude not to. Another example is what is considered the ‘normal’ age at which people have children, the age at which a child or young adults is expected to leave the home of their parent(s) or that it is the children’s responsibility to make decisions for their parents when they get older.

Do some social norms disempower older people?

Social norms may shrink our power and agency as we age. For example, the social norm of people leaving work once they reach a certain age in many places, enforced by national laws or by company policies, denies us the right to make our own decisions and choices about our lives when we are older. It also violates our right to work and our ability to support ourselves in older age, especially in countries where we have no access to pensions.

The disempowerment of older people intersects with the acceptance (or normalisation) of the disempowerment of others, including women, people from different ethnic or racial backgrounds, or people with a disability. This can lead to certain sections of the population being more disempowered in older age than others. For instance, an older person with a disability who requires care and support for independent living may be disempowered if this support is not available or accessible, or if they do not have a choice in how it is delivered.

During the pandemic we have seen examples of people accepting that older people should have less agency and choice. For example, the acceptance of age-based lockdown measures has denied older people the power to make informed decisions about their own lives and denied them equal enjoyment of their rights. These are likely to have been influenced by existing social norms in our societies as outlined above.

Do some social norms exclude certain people within society?

Exclusion is connected to disempowerment. Exclusion can take many forms, including economic, social, cultural, political or spatial exclusion.³⁶ As with disempowerment, our experience of it depends on the way age interacts with other characteristics we have.

One example of a social norm that can contribute to our exclusion as we age is the practice of ‘institutionalisation’. This can happen when a person decides – or is forced – to live in a care, residential or nursing home. Institutionalising older people and/or people with a disability is a common practice in some places.

It results in the segregation of certain people in society so they can no longer enjoy the right to participate, the right to a private and family life, or to live life in line with their own will and preferences. When care homes are cut off from services or operate beyond the view of authorities, residents may experience violence, abuse and/or neglect, with limited or no recourse to justice. We have witnessed this type of exclusion in an extreme way during COVID-19 when residents of care homes have been denied their right to family life, their right to health and, in some places, their right to life and to freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment.³⁷

Activity 2.3: Your analysis

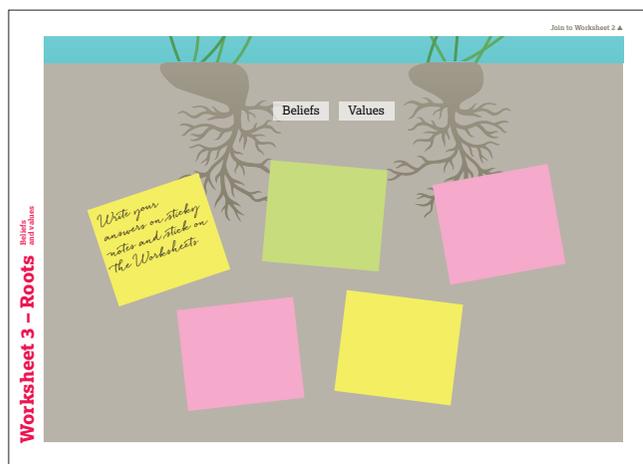
- Which social norms in your community or country contribute to the exclusion and disempowerment of different groups of people?
- Which of them have been present during COVID-19?
- Which other social norms can you identify that may have contributed to ageist thoughts, feelings and actions during COVID-19? Remember to consider social norms related to race, ethnicity, gender and other characteristics.

2 Now go to **Worksheet 2** →

Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them around the stems on Worksheet 2.

Activity 3: Unearthing the beliefs and values that affect how we think, feel and act towards older people and ageing

The values and beliefs we hold are powerful influences on how we think, feel and act. Ageism during COVID-19 has raised serious questions about the values and beliefs underpinning our societies. In our analogy, this section relates to the roots in the soil, as shown on Worksheet 3. Read through the questions and examples that follow and think about how they apply to your own context.



3 A4 Worksheet available in Annex →

Does everyone in society believe that all people are equal?

Everyone, everywhere has the right to freedom, equality and a life lived in dignity. But the examples of ageism we have seen during COVID-19 make us question the extent to which individuals and institutions truly believe this. Language that portrays older people as ‘disposable’ and actions such as age-based lockdown measures reveal the extent of negative thoughts and feelings that some people have towards older age. These, in turn, make us question if some individuals and institutions in our societies actually value us less as we age – or if we are only valued when we are young.³⁸ Also we question whether people with a disability or those who have a health condition are seen as less valuable than people who do not.

Do our societies place economic value above our inherent value as human beings?

People are often spoken about in terms of their economic contribution. When we are not seen to be earning an income or being economically productive for whatever reason, including where social norms contribute to our economic exclusion as we age, we may be treated as expendable. Often people who are not working or who receive financial support are treated with disdain. Work that does not directly lead to income, such as care work in the household, tends to be overlooked.

During the pandemic, this has been highlighted in arguments that prioritise saving the economy above saving the lives of those more at risk of COVID-19, including older people.³⁹ We can also see a tendency to place economic value above human life when our

ageing populations are described as a ‘demographic tsunami’ or ‘apocalypse’.⁴⁰ Rather than celebrating the extraordinary achievement of fewer people dying at younger ages and being able to enjoy longer lives, population ageing is spoken about negatively by those who argue it may harm economies.⁴¹

Activity 3: Your analysis

- Which beliefs and values in your country have influenced other elements of ageism operating ‘below the surface’ during COVID-19?
- Which have influenced incidents of ageism witnessed ‘on the surface’ during the pandemic? Remember to include beliefs and values related to race, gender, ethnicity, disability and other characteristics.

3 Now go to Worksheet 3 →

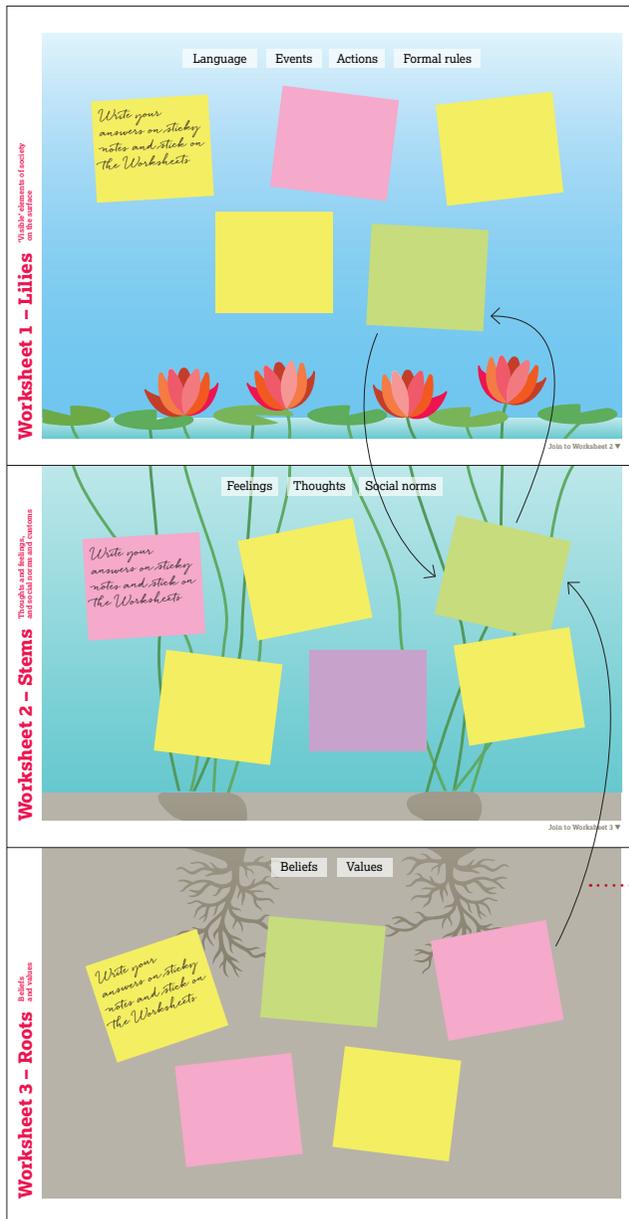
Write your answers on sticky notes and stick them below the roots of the lilies on Worksheet 3.

Activity 4: Exposing the links above and below the surface that perpetuate ageism

For this section, you will need all three of your completed worksheets. Take a look at them. You will notice that the examples of ageism we have seen 'on the surface' during COVID-19 have not taken place in isolation. They were influenced by powerful elements in our societies that exist 'below the surface'.

For example, age-based lockdown measures, which discriminate against people because of their age, are influenced by incorrect stereotypes and assumptions that all older people are weak, frail, and vulnerable, and therefore need protecting. These might have been expressed in ageist language and actions during the pandemic, but they are connected to deeper thoughts and feelings that people have about older people and ageing itself. These thoughts and feelings have compelled people to see COVID-19 as an older person's disease. When politicians and other actors voice this idea, they reinforce the stereotype that all older people are vulnerable.

Society's acceptance of age-based lockdown measures is also likely to have been influenced, in part, by social norms that normalise the segregation or exclusion of certain sections of the population in our society, including older people. These are connected to deep-rooted beliefs and values about the worth of different groups and the extent to which everyone in society believes that all people are equal. The policies and laws societies adopt are shaped by people's beliefs and values, but they also reinforce them and contribute to the cycle of ageism.



Activity 4: Your analysis

- What connections can you see between the elements of ageism we have looked at earlier or others you have identified?

Take Worksheets 1, 2 and 3 and put them together to build the whole lily pond. Now, draw arrows between the various elements, exposing the links between the beliefs and values rooted in society, the way people think and feel, and the visible examples of ageism seen on the surface.

- What do you notice about the links?
- Which links are the strongest?
- Which are the weakest?
- Where are there multiple links?
- Is there anything missing?

Draw arrows between your sticky notes, exposing the links you see.

1

2

3

A4 Worksheets available in Annex →

4. Challenging systemic ageism: next steps in creating a robust campaign strategy

Understanding the systemic nature of ageism is critical to designing effective and impactful campaigns. By undertaking the lily pond analysis, you have identified the drivers for visible forms of ageism.

You can now design a campaign that challenges the underlying causes (the feelings, thoughts, social norms, values and beliefs). Below, we outline the next steps you can take to build a strategy.

We recommend taking these steps⁴² in collaboration with older campaigners from a diversity of backgrounds so you can get a broad range of perspectives. We have also included a case study from the Philippines so you can see some of the ways that campaigners have successfully tackled systemic ageism.

Next steps

1. Do a context analysis

Take some time to understand the different trends that are affecting the issue you want to solve. Brainstorm the political, economic, social, environmental and technological changes that are happening in your context. Then, look at how they connect to the visible expressions of ageism, as well as the values, beliefs and social norms that you have identified in your lily pond analysis.

2. Look at what is working in your favour

What are the thoughts, feelings, social norms, values and beliefs that are working in our favour? Also consider who else is working on these issues, and what other changes are happening that may help us to achieve our goal. There may be many positive things already happening that you can leverage to achieve change.

3. Decide where you want to intervene

Now that you have explored the problem, it is time to narrow down what you want to focus your campaign on. Take a look at your lily pond analysis, your context analysis and your analysis of what is working in your favour. Decide where in this system you think you can make a change.

4. Decide who your target is

Who can make the change that you want to see? You need to identify your primary target. This is the person, such as a decision maker, who can ultimately make the change you want to see. You also need to understand who has the ability to influence that person.

5. Choose your tactics

What actions will grab your target's attention? There are many different tactics you can use to get to your goal. These could be anything from meetings with decision-makers and engaging with the media, to petitions, social media campaigns, and creative direct actions like flashmobs.

6. Start campaigning!

It is important to keep coming back to the lily pond analysis throughout your campaign. This will help you see whether there are any shifts and if you need to change your campaign plan at any time.

Addressing systemic ageism exposed by COVID-19 in the Philippines

During COVID-19, older people in the Philippines faced discrimination because of their age. In response, the Coalition of Services for the Elderly (COSE) worked with older people to identify actions to address ageism at different levels of society.

Visible examples of ageism during COVID-19

Like many others, the Philippines government introduced age-based lockdown measures. These were enforced by family members who wouldn't allow older relatives to go out. Many older people said that during the pandemic, they were also denied access to basic programmes and services, like health services.

Action COSE supported older people to campaign for the government to review and revise discriminatory age-based lockdown guidelines. They held online consultations with older people, meetings with decision makers, and established a radio campaign.

What was happening below the surface?

People believed older people might get infected more easily by the virus because they incorrectly assumed that they were all weak. Politicians, the public and communities equated age with ill health, vulnerability and dependency. COSE also found that some older people held these ageist stereotypes and thought of themselves as weak and unable to do some errands because they are 'old and incapable'.⁴³

The acceptance of age-based measures and discrimination against older people by some in society may suggest that not everyone believes all people should be treated equally.

Action COSE plan to engage the leaders of Older Persons Organisations (OPO) to take an active role in changing the way older people in their communities see themselves. Campaign leaders will give older people and their families information during meetings to raise awareness of ageism. They also plan to work

with other groups in the community, including younger people, to create more understanding of ageism and the value of having a community free from discrimination based on age.

To complement their campaign actions calling for the government to review and revise discriminatory age-based lockdown guidelines, COSE also intend to target decision-makers they have identified with information on ageism to improve their awareness and understanding of it. They hope that this will contribute to achieving the policy change they are seeking.

Endnotes

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Annex

On the following pages you will find Worksheets 1, 2 and 3, to use in Activities 1, 2, 3 and 4.

'Visible' elements of society
on the surface

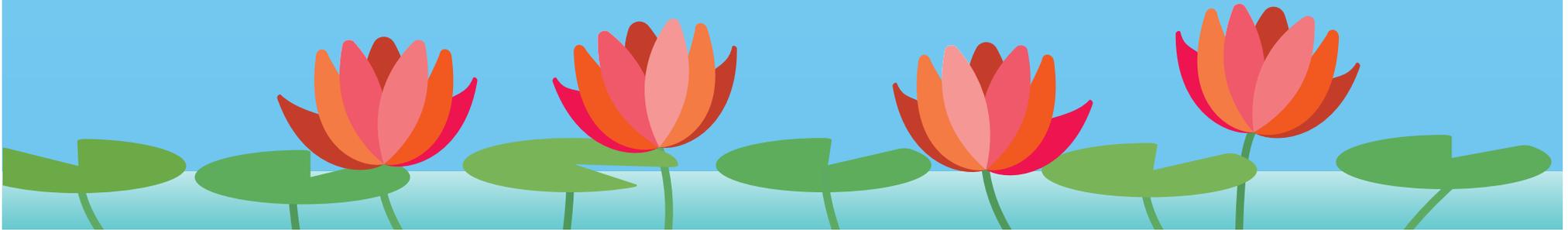
Worksheet 1 – Lilies

Language

Events

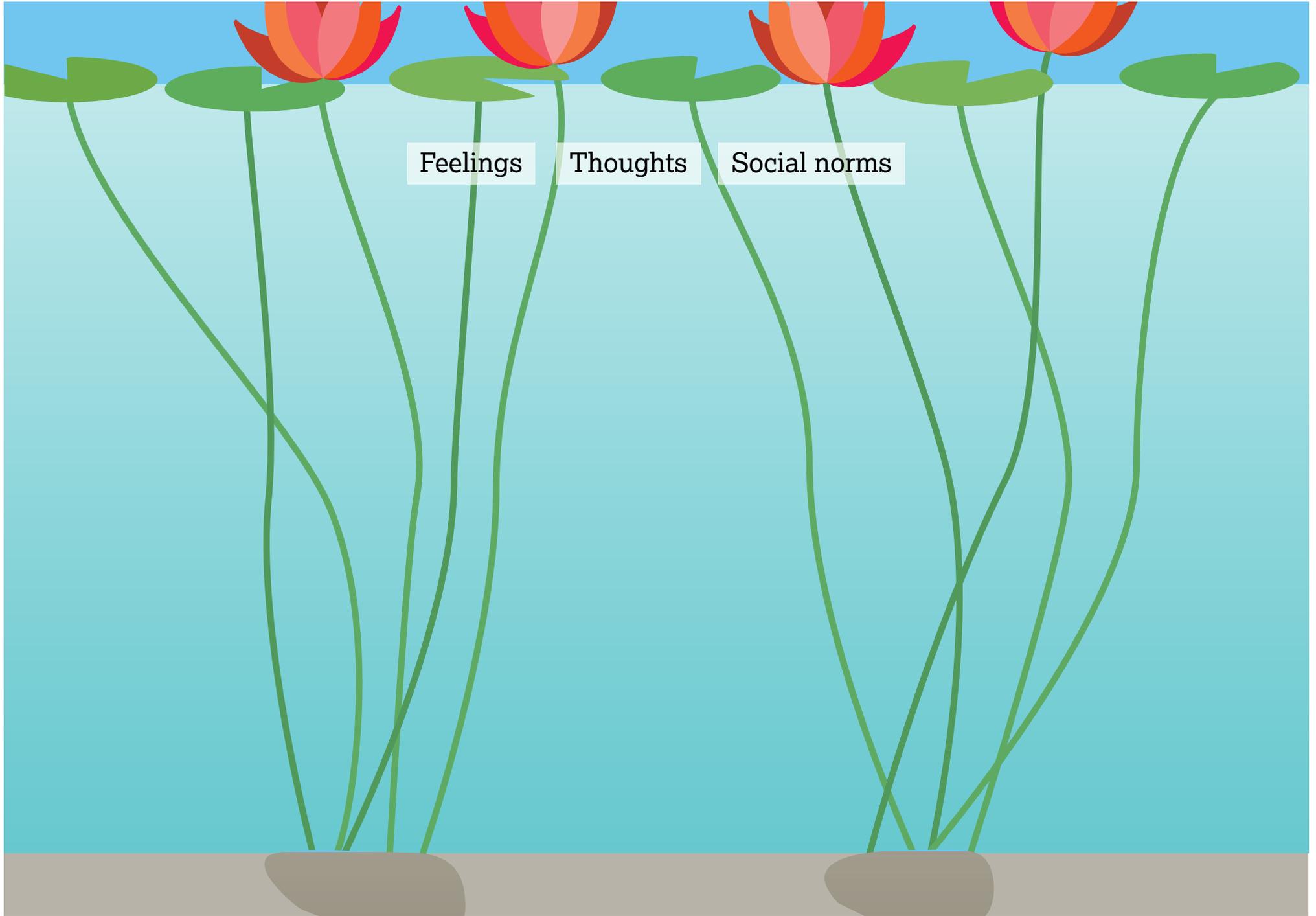
Actions

Formal rules



Worksheet 2 – Stems

Thoughts and feelings,
and social norms and customs



Worksheet 3 – Roots

Beliefs
and values

