




COMMENTARY

# Older persons in climate change-induced hazards and building forward better: International Psychogeriatric Association, World Psychiatric Association-Section of Old Age Psychiatry, and NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva position statement

Liat Ayalon,<sup>1</sup>  Carlos Augusto de Mendonça Lima,<sup>2</sup>  Debanjan Banerjee,<sup>3</sup>   
Kiran Rabheru,<sup>4</sup> and Kelly G. Fitzgerald<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Louis and Gabi Weisfeld School of Social Sciences, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

<sup>2</sup>World Psychiatric Association Section of Old Age Psychiatry, Centre Médical du Jorat, Mézières, Switzerland

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Apollo Gleneagles Multispecialty Hospitals, Kolkata, India

<sup>4</sup>Professor of Psychiatry, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

<sup>5</sup>Chair of the NGO Committee on Ageing in Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland

Email: [liat.ayalon@biu.ac.il](mailto:liat.ayalon@biu.ac.il)

An unparalleled level of global cooperation will be required to deal with climate change, a “crisis multiplier” and the “biggest threat modern humans have ever faced” with profound implications and impact, according to the United Nations (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; United Nations, 2021). All living things, including humans, are expected to experience more severe and frequent weather events in years to come due to climate change. Climate changes are known to reduce biodiversity by affecting rising sea levels, melting of glaciers, causing droughts, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, and extremes in temperatures. Climate change is also known to substantially impact the health and well-being of all human beings, in addition to impeding access to adequate and safe food, water, air, and shelter. Although several papers published in the *International Psychogeriatrics* have addressed the topic, they have mainly considered the mental health effects of natural disasters (O’Donnell and Forbes, 2016; Parker *et al.*, 2016), neglecting to acknowledge the effects of more consistent changes, such as the heating of the environment and the degradation of the air quality.

Climate change affects older persons’ physiological health and well-being disproportionately (Filiberto *et al.*, 2009). Research has shown that following extreme climate events such as severe heat waves, for instance, it is older persons who are more likely to die (Aida *et al.*, 2017). Severe heat is also responsible for a disproportional increase in cardiovascular events (Kenney *et al.*, 2014), whereas pulmonary illness and dementia are more likely to occur due to air pollution (Béjot *et al.*, 2018;

Smirnova *et al.*, 2023). The Lancet Commission on “Dementia prevention, intervention, and care” in their 2020 report mentions air pollution to be one of the 12 potentially modifiable risk factors for dementia. It carries a population-attributable risk of 2% (Livingston *et al.*, 2020). Older persons may also experience some of the negative mental health effects of extreme climate events. These include suicide ideation, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It also is important to note that older persons, especially those in long-term care settings, may become the subject of abuse and neglect during climate-induced evacuation, with older persons being abandoned behind. Financial fraud and domestic violence also were noted during and after disasters (Gutman & Yon, 2014).

Although older persons are susceptible to the negative effects of the changing climate, it is important to acknowledge that there is substantial heterogeneity in older age. It is older women, older people of color, older people who live in poverty, residents of long-term care settings, older persons with mental or cognitive conditions, older persons with physical impairments, and older persons who live in the developing world who are more susceptible to the negative effects of the changing climate.

The susceptibility of older persons to the changing climate has been attributed not only to their age alone but also to the limited social, financial, and community support available to them, especially at times of threat (Klinenberg, 2015). Hence, the role of structural and institutional inequalities cannot be underestimated. There is a scientific consensus that human (in)action is responsible for the changing

climate, which among other things is a direct result of our growing carbon footprint (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). In this statement, we argue that not only are humans responsible for the changing climate but also for disasters that occur because of the changing climate. Although the climate might pose hazards, it is humans' failure to mitigate and adapt to the changing climate, which results in disasters (Cannon, 1994).

An important lacuna can be found in current climate change policies. There is a shortage of policy, which explicitly targets older persons in the case of climate change mitigation and adaptation. This is even though older persons are particularly susceptible to the negative impact of the changing climate. These groups of older persons, who have shown to be susceptible to the negative effects of climate change, are also less likely to be involved in climate change mitigation and adaptation policy. Their voices are unheard and not reflected in national and international policy provisions. Hence, inequalities prevail regarding all aspects of the changing climate. The limited acknowledgment of older persons and other susceptible groups in current climate change policies results in their neglect by social and health institutions, which are supposed to protect their health and well-being. We argue that the absence of mention of specific protection for older persons in current climate change policies is a result of ageism. Hence, ageism in the context of climate change may result in the failure of social and health institutions to protect older persons during climate events as well as in a blaming discourse, which views older persons as responsible for the current climate situation (Ayalon *et al.*, 2021).

The climate change movement is one outlet to impact policy change. However, currently, the movement is characterized by its youthful nature (Cloughton, 2021). Moreover, at least some of the climate change discourse is characterized by a blaming tone, which assigns the responsibility for the changing climate to older generations who have failed to preserve the environment. Older persons often are characterized as "greedy geezers," who have been acting in their own self-interest, while neglecting the impact their (in)actions have had on the environment and the climate and subsequently on future generations. These characteristics of the climate change movement could potentially hamper older persons' involvement in it.

The few attempts of older persons to contribute to the climate movement have been age and gender segregated in the global north. Clearly, there is no doubt that older persons, especially older women, are disproportionately affected by the changing climate. However, we argue that instead of relying

on age-segregated organizations, current efforts should be geared toward fostering greater collaboration between young and old to impact climate change policy. This could not only result in a healthier climate but also could possibly reduce ageism through intergenerational collaboration.

Much less is known about the climate movement and the role of older persons in the global south. This is even though it is older persons, especially in the global south, who potentially have a traditional body of knowledge that can be beneficial for the development of sustainable energy solution. Moreover, the global south is already taking much of the brunt associated with the changing climate. Yet, it is the global south, which is now asked to transition to sustainable energy solutions at the expense of benefiting from existing industry that might advance the economy in the short run yet harm the environment in years to come.

### Recommended steps for building forward better

- We call on the United Nations for a convention on the rights of older persons to protect and promote the rights of older persons, everywhere, while addressing the impact of climate change.
- We argue for the need to acknowledge the susceptibility of older persons to climate change events while paying particular attention to intersectionality (e.g., the global south, older age and female gender, older age and mental health or neurocognitive conditions).
- We stress the need for climate change policy that targets susceptible groups including older persons with mental, cognitive, or physical conditions, people who live in poverty, women, refugees and migrants, and older persons in the global south. Because some future events are not yet foreseen or imagined at this point, policy and health systems should remain flexible to meet future challenges. Voices of older persons need reflection in policy provisions.
- We recognize the need for a more inclusive approach in the climate change movement, which should strive toward intergenerational solidarity. Moreover, we would like to stress the important knowledge of traditional practices for sustainable living that older persons, especially in the global south, hold and can possibly transfer to the younger generations. Under such circumstances, we expect higher levels of collaboration between all sectors of society toward a healthy climate. This also is likely to result in reduced ageism toward a world for all ages.
- We also acknowledge the fact that because the changing climate is now becoming more severe, it is younger persons who will be most affected by the changing climate for a longer period

## Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to report.

## Acknowledgement

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