

2) Ageism and democracy in Switzerland: What we can learn from the Covid-19 pandemic

Marion Repetti¹

In March 2020, facing the surge of Covid-19, the Swiss federal authorities enacted a “partial lockdown,” enforcing social isolation to combat the pandemic and to avoid overcrowding in intensive care units in hospitals. They called on the population to shelter, that is to say, to stay at home as much as possible; this instruction was especially directed at “vulnerable” people, mostly at those aged 65 and over². The protection of the latter age group was presented as a key priority in containing the spread of the disease. At that time, the Swiss national data showed that the average age of people who died from Covid-19 was in fact 81³. Yet, the increased risk of dying from Covid-19 with age has given legitimacy to these stricter measures towards older people. But, as this contribution will discuss, whilst they have been put at the core of pandemic policies, older people have also been—and still are—absent from the democratic debates regarding the social and economic consequences of these policies.

The social consequences of old people’s social isolation

Although mortality by age group is similar internationally⁴, the category “vulnerable people” in regard to Covid-19 covers

1 This contribution is an English translation with minor changes of an article previously published in the *Revue d’Information Sociale*. <https://www.reiso.org/document/5879>.

2 Federal Council. 6 March 2020. Coronavirus: mieux protéger les personnes vulnérables et évaluer l’impact économique de l’épidémie. <https://www.admin.ch/gov/fr/accueil/documentation/communiqués.msg-id-78381.html> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

3 Federal Office of Public Health. 2020. Covid-19 en Suisse. <https://covid-19-schweiz.bagapps.ch/fr-1.html> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

4 Our World in Data. 2020. Case fatality rate of COVID-19 by age. <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus#case-fatality-rate-of-covid-19-by-age> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

different groups across countries. The age at which this category starts to apply has been set at 70 in France⁵ and the United Kingdom⁶. Other governments such as Germany⁷ and the United States⁸ have not selected a specific age in their policies. These variations suggest that the decision of the Swiss political authorities to set the threshold at which people are considered “vulnerable” at the age of 65 does not reflect purely statistical motivations. This age is in fact the one at which people can first access old-age insurance, and the one which Swiss state policies use to define the start of old age.

Although urgent measures were meant to protect people aged 65 and over, paradoxically, their voices have been largely absent from democratic debates about which policies to adopt as a response to the pandemic. The media have given a platform to political authorities, health experts and professionals, trade unions, and independent and small business representatives who are suffering the economic consequences of the partial lockdown. Whilst there are legitimate reasons for these groups to take part in the democratic debates on the consequences of the pandemic and the political responses to it, the invisibility of the people presented as the *raison d'être* of the measures is questionable. The social, emotional and psychological effects of sheltering have sometimes been mentioned in the media as particularly

5 Ministry of Solidarity and Health. 2020. <https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/actualites/actualites-du-ministere/article/coronavirus-qui-sont-les-personnes-fragiles> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

6 Gov.UK. 2020. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advice for vulnerable people. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-vulnerable-people> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

7 Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung. 2020. Informationen zum neuartigen Coronavirus / COVID-19. <https://www.infektionsschutz.de/coronavirus.html> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). Older Adults. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

important for older people, but the legitimacy of a “stricter” confinement has only been rarely and belatedly discussed.

In reality, the strict social isolation of people aged 65 and over has had significant consequences for the social organisation and social cohesion of the country since the beginning of the pandemic. Firstly, it should be noted that older people’s voluntary contributions as grandparents were quickly placed at the heart of the debate on whether or not to close schools. The authorities first wanted to keep schools open in order to prevent working parents from asking grandparents to look after their children. Some people then noted that the requirement to work outside of one’s home already involved the need for grandparents to look after their grandchildren *before* the pandemic. Therefore, preventing older people from leaving their house was a problem for working parents, even if schools remained open. When the federal authorities subsequently closed schools, they enjoined companies to allow employees to work at home as much as possible, reinforcing the workload for parents—mostly for mothers. Parents (mostly mothers) had to both take care of their children, without the help of grandparents, and keep working for their employer from home. In this context, older people’s role in the functioning of the Swiss economy has suddenly been revealed. Without them, the so-called “reconciliation” between work and family was compromised, requiring a fundamental revisiting of the daily organisation of most families.

Secondly, during the pandemic, anti-poverty charities lost the majority of their unpaid workers—i.e., older people—with dramatic consequences for precarious populations. Let us take the example of food banks in Switzerland, such as *Les*

Tables du Rhône in the canton of Valais⁹. Just like many other volunteer programmes, these are particularly dependent on the free social work provided by people aged 65 and over¹⁰. Without older people's contributions, their capacity is reduced, which in turn threatens to weaken social cohesion. And yet, in contrast to their role as grandparents—probably identified because it impacts on parents' abilities to maintain employment—older citizens' work to help poor and excluded groups in our society has received little political and media attention so far.

Heading towards the end of the year 2020, Switzerland is facing a second wave of Covid-19 and the authorities continue to call for older people to be more strictly confined than the rest of society. As for the absence of people aged 65 and over from charities, this has begun to be questioned¹¹. Yet, older people are still scarcely consulted about Swiss pandemic policies. Paradoxically, although solidarity is now highly valued in the media, one of the most impacted groups (older people) remains ignored, in contrast to younger citizens whose contributions are regularly praised in the public debate. This discriminating political treatment of older people is not new in Switzerland—it is at the heart of the ageist social relations that structure our society, where each of us loses a share of power as we grow older. Although this loss of power takes place regardless of our social positioning, other power relations shape it, such

⁹ Associations Tables du Rhône. 2020. <http://www.tablesdurhone.ch/> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

¹⁰ Federal Statistical Office. 2018. Travail bénévole, part en % de chaque groupe de population accomplissant un travail bénévole institutionnalisé ou informel, selon le groupe d'âge, le type de ménage, le niveau de formation et le sexe. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/catalogues-banques-donnees/tableaux.assetdetail.5106554.html> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).

¹¹ Hartman, Dominique. 22 April 2020. Le travail bénévole s'essouffle. *Le Courrier*. <https://lecourrier.ch/2020/04/23/le-travail-benevole-sessouffle/> (Accessed 10 December, 2020).

as gender, economic resources, ethnicity, and citizenship, among others. Thus, in the context of the Covid-19, older and poor people run a high risk of being invisible in public debates, especially if they are women.

The exclusion of older people from democratic debate

Political measures to combat Covid-19 reproduce age relations in Switzerland just like in other countries¹². This situation highlights the difficulties that people encounter as they age in maintaining a legitimate place as actors in democratic debates. If the pandemic is to mark the organisation of our society in the long term, it seems essential to rethink this political treatment and to give older people a legitimate place as citizens. It is important to respect their democratic right and duty to participate in debates on the individual, social, political and economic consequences of measures which directly impact them. Their continued marginalisation has negative social consequences for society as a whole and positions older people as victims rather than as fully-fledged citizens, actors in a democratic society, and agents in their own lives.

¹² Calasanti, Toni. 2020. Pervasive ageism in the response to the pandemic. ASA Footnotes. https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/attach/footnotes/may-june_2020_0.pdf;

Brooke, Joanne, and Jackson, Debra. 2020. Older people and COVID-19: Isolation, risk and ageism. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 29(13-14), 2044-2046;

Phillipson, Chris. 8 April 2020. Covid-19 and the crisis in residential and nursing home care. *Ageing Issues*. <https://ageingissues.wordpress.com/2020/04/08/covid-19-and-the-crisis-in-residential-and-nursing-home-care/> (Accessed 1 December, 2020).