

**Older women in the British
workplace: a case of
stagnation or progress**

An essay in response to assignment question 2

**STUDENT ID: 2134504
WORD COUNT: 3,307**

Recent demographic changes have greatly affected the societal and economic context within which older women in the UK find themselves. British society is aging: in 2016, there were 2 million more people aged 50+ than in 2006 (DWP, 2017b). Alongside this, low fertility rates and skill shortages have also been noted (Buttigieg, 2011) as in other Western countries (PwC, 2017). Thus, governments and employers are presented with challenges on managing this age diversity within the workplace. Since the beginning of the century, the UK has focused on diversity policies (Kirton and Greene, 2010) such as the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations Act 2006 and Equality Act 2010 in an endeavour to reduce unequal treatment. Moreover, the British government is also promoting the extension of working lives in response to the demographic trends, as this may have beneficial effects to individuals and the government itself (DWP, 2017b). Nevertheless, employers reported a lack of awareness of “what an ageing workforce would mean for their business” (DWP, 2017a, p.9). This suggests employers’ inadequacy in responding to the ageing labour market i.e. not developing programs that would suit their age diverse employees.

Older women’s employment has been influenced by these situational factors. The British government is struggling to manage and improve workplace conditions for an ageing population, while employers are unwilling to consider how the latter may affect their workforce. Some improvements have occurred: ever since the aforementioned government acts, older women’s presence within the labour market has increased. Despite this, issues still persist as older women are mostly found within administrative, precarious, low-paid work and 50+ aged women’s employment rate in 2017 was still 10% lower than that of 50+ aged men (PwC, 2017). Therefore, older women may encounter disadvantages across their careers leading to their marginal position within the labour market. This may be due to factors of both gender and age which they may be discriminated against. Within literature, this has been perceived as an intersectional combination of two or more concepts to understand how different axes of power affect perceptions of a group or an individual (Crenshaw, 1991). In the case of older women, age and gender contribute to their lower social, legal and workforce positioning. Vertical and horizontal labour market segmentation have most commonly been cited as exacerbating the situation (Murphy and Cross, 2017; Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2011), but there has not been a consensus on which issues prevail in hindering older women’s career progress.

In addition to situational factors, commonly held societal perceptions may also systematically disadvantage older women in the workplace (Murphy and Cross, 2017). This leads to their marginalisation within the workforce that is exhibited through characteristics of invisibility (Granleese and Sayer, 2006). Furthermore, older women have found themselves in-between structures of power: organisational politics and government policies, which may prevent individual agency in employment decisions. As such, macro and micro labour market issues are at play. So far, older women's unequal position has been exacerbated by two issues: (1) definitional problems within research and legal action, and (2) their disadvantaged situation throughout different employment stages. Moreover, governments and employers have introduced ways to improve older women's labour market position due to being able to potentially benefit a business. Despite the pressing nature of this business case, not much has changed over the past 20 years and older women remain marginally located within the workforce. The following essay will seek to shed a light on exactly this - what has influenced and what delays older women's career progress. Both ageist and sexist issues will be considered in the aim to produce an intersectional overview of their unequal situation. Moreover, this essay will provide general perspectives on the experiences of this disadvantaged group with a focus on the UK, but will also draw on literature from other Western contexts since cultural, societal and economic resemblances between both exist.

Definitional problems

The first definitional problem in the comprehension of older women's experiences within the labour market is the lack of agreement in labelling the discriminating processes at play. Some have referred to the latter as gendered ageism (Kirton and Greene, 2010; Clarke and Griffin, 2008; Jyrkinen, 2014; Riach et al., 2015), whereas others – as double jeopardy (Wilks and Neto, 2013). Both concepts view older women as being disadvantaged on age and gender grounds. According to Krekula (2007, p.163), however, double jeopardy works on a premise that perceives ageing as problematic; thus, resulting in a “simplistic misery perspective”. In this way, the older women become objects, upon whom structural factors, emerging from age- or gender-based discrimination, are enacted. Loretto and Vickerstaff (2011) have summarised four existing arguments: (1) gender discrimination taking precedence, (2) age discrimination as the underlying factor, (3) gender and age discrimination to be

additive, (4) age and gender as mutually reinforcing. This implies the lack of consensus within scholarship on where the weight falls between ageism and sexism. In addition to literature disagreements, most research has been concentrated within a few journals (*Gender, Work, and Organisation* and *Work, Employment and Society*). No other perspectives that may arise within journals on marketing, economics, etc., have been explored. Moreover, knowledge on older women has not expanded much since Ainsworth's (2002) conclusion of this group being neglected from research as since then only a few articles specifically explore individuals' experiences (see above mentioned references). The stagnation in literature and lack of concrete explanation for older women's experiences of inequality further exacerbates their situation. Within the little existing research, however, the common denominator is that throughout the years discrimination towards older women has persisted. Similarly to theory, the British government also has not been able to pinpoint the root of the issue in their reports (DWP, 2017a; DWP, 2017b). However, it can be speculated that the most likely explanation derives from Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality, which sees different axes of power intersecting and oppressing an individual. Older women's position has thus been viewed as the result of an interplay between multiple issues that may compete, complement each other or even develop a new conceptualisation of the marginalisation of this group (Krekula, 2007; Spedale et al., 2014). It should be noted, however, that this essay does not undermine any of the work, but rather uses them as a source to suggest the existence of discrimination towards older women.

Another issue arises when trying to define old age and gender as socially constructed concepts. Rather than being strictly confined categories, gender and age are performative and fluid (Halford et al., 2015) and hence, are quite individual. Moreover, societal views and stereotypes of old age are associated with inflexibility, lack of productivity, aversion to change and technology (Buttigieg, 2011) reaffirming inherent ambiguity on whether chronological age has the ability to alter one's capabilities (Kirton and Greene, 2010). On the opposite side, the government proposes employment and retention of older people whose capabilities may reduce organisational costs by being able to provide training to new employees (DWP, 2017a). Furthermore, research views older women's situation through either gendered ageism or double jeopardy; however, both have been accused of perceiving gender and age as essentialist notions (Halford et al., 2015). To reduce the essentialisation,

recognition of the existence of individual, organisational and societal factors (Spedale et al., 2014) may help deconstruct the umbrella terms that gender and age are. This leads to considerations of how policies and employers may view discrimination as institutionalised rather than perceiving individual agency. Sociologically, “employment discrimination and patterns of inequality do not simply happen; they occur because of the actions of organisations and individuals and therefore are not inevitable or insurmountable” (Kirton and Greene, 2010, p.6). In this sense, discrimination arises due to the structures at hand and individual actions that provoke the inequality of the group. Moreover, within this structure vs. agency debate, older women should also be seen as possessing agency in policies or employee practices rather than perceiving them as having a collective identity based on their gender and age. Some employers, for instance, have reported providing flexible working hours on a case-by-case basis (DWP, 2017a). However, such market practices may not be satisfactory in addressing issues of inequality and instead lead to approaches that favour disadvantaged groups, also known as positive discrimination, which the UK government considers illegal (Kirton and Greene, 2010; Herring, 2011).

The next definitional problem can be found within government and employer practices of managing a diverse workforce, namely, equality approaches. The issue arises when defining discrimination as treating someone unequally, where equality is hardly ever specified (Herring, 2011). Equality may be sought on different levels – treatment, outcome and opportunity (Kirton and Greene, 2010). However, any kind of sameness may put a group at a disadvantage or another at an advantage. Thus, policies based on any equality notion may not fully address older women’s issues. Recently, a new trend that emphasizes diversity has become apparent within organisational policies. Utilizing, promoting and rewarding differences have been seen as conducive to a successful and productive organisational environment (Kandola and Fullerton, 1994). Nevertheless, some scholars have been critical of this managing diversity approach as it advocates an agenda that focuses on return on investment, which exploits difference (Kirton and Greene, 2010). In this way, neither equality nor diversity agenda have been successful in eradicating factors that may impact the position of disadvantaged groups such as older women.

The stagnation in literature as well as the persistence of many inconclusive and ambiguous understandings of age and gender contributing to the lack of progress for

older women's equality within the workplace reverberates onto the practical experiences of the group.

Inequality within employment stages

Inequality has also been found within various employment stages (before and during), which withholds older women's career progress. The labour market positions this group in opposition to younger people (age discrimination) and to men (gender discrimination), which further marginalises these women.

Within recruitment and selection practices, older women encounter discrimination due to the structure of the labour market that compares them to a younger workforce. Firstly, on a macro level, an increase in older women's employment rate has been noted (TUC, 2014), however, on a micro level, older people have mostly retained their jobs rather than having the ability to obtain new ones (Philipson et al., 2016). Therefore, employment rate statistics cannot account for recruitment practices that may discriminate against older women. Moreover, as competition and working pace are increasing, employers are seeking a younger workforce (Kirton and Greene, 2010). Thus, older women are being compared to the latter rather than being assessed for their performance and capabilities irrespective of age and gender.

Before and after being hired, older women's experiences have strongly been influenced by how their appearances are perceived by their male counterparts. Age and gender place individuals within visible categories (Kirton and Greene, 2010) against which appearance-based discrimination may occur (Clarke and Griffin, 2008). Western cultures have developed an ideal feminine beauty associated with youthfulness which positions older women at a disadvantage (Clarke, 2017). Appearances have long been used to evaluate women and their possession of social status. The situation has not changed much since the 70s when Sontag (1978) discovered that in their experiences of old age, men are judged based on their achievements, whereas women – on their appearance. The men-women comparison reinforces the existence of a patriarchal society. Women are not only externally assessed, but they have also been socialised to believe that their worth is defined based on their looks (Clarke, 2017). Such societal perceptions equating old-ness to lack of beauty also closely impact perceptions of older women's appearances within

the workplace, which increases at later stages of their careers (Jyrkinen, 2014) and mostly occurs within the customer service and retail sectors (Clarke, 2017). Thus, older women's experiences of ageing are shaped by how their bodies look or do not look like. This discrimination may affect older women's self-esteem (Clarke, 2017; Walker et al., 2007) as their worth may be seen as less due to the lack of youthful beauty. Similarly, Sontag's study (1978) referred to a process of internalisation through which older women believed their self-esteem depended on the value of their appearance. As a result, older women's employment opportunities may be disrupted due to issues of low confidence. Granleese and Sayer (2006) see 'lookism' as a problem that impacts older women in academia. In their study, older female academics felt the need to manage their looks to fit in an environment dominated by male colleagues, whose capabilities are not judged based on appearance. In such cases, discrimination does not only pertain to lack of youthfulness, but also to older women's perceived sexual attractiveness by men (Duncan and Loretto, 2004; Walker et al., 2007). Duncan and Loretto (2004, p.107) discovered that the negative treatment received by women included "accounts of ageism...[which] contained a sexualised element". Even in older age, women are perceived as sexual objects hindering their employment experiences. Despite such appraisals upon one's visual characteristics, many older women have reported a sense of invisibility within society (Clarke and Griffin, 2008), which has transferred onto the working environment (Ainsworth, 2002). Older women are systematically being pressured to perform beauty work such as hair dye, make-up or even cosmetic surgeries (Clarke and Griffin, 2008) in order to achieve a visible youthful status. Hence, older women become involved in self-presentation practices due to workplace assessments upon their bodies. Discrimination against older women revolves around their possession of a certain visible standard of attractiveness and appearance, often associated with youthfulness.

The group's marginalised situation is further exacerbated once they enter the workplace as stereotypes due to their gender and age emerge and intersect. Mostly, older women are found within lower ranks and precarious job conditions, where they receive a low pay (TUC, 2014). As such, older women have experienced an occupational segregation, which occurs on horizontal and vertical levels. They are concentrated not only in lower echelons of employment (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2011), but also within the public sector and mostly perform administrative work (TUC,

2014). However, was such segregation enacted and forced upon these women? As theories conflict, the question can be answered with both 'yes' and 'no'. Academic debate argues that inequalities are due to as much as individual agency and preference as structural constraints (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2011). On one hand, society places responsibility of family care-taking upon women, especially those above 40 who are expected to take care of their parents and own children (DWP, 2017b). Because of this, many choose part-time or any other employment that would offer them flexibility. Such types of unpaid work and skill have been historically invisible, especially due to being associated with women's work (Steinberg, 1990) and are still underappreciated by society (TUC, 2014). As a way to treat this unequal outcome that demonstrates a gender bias against women, the government enacted the Flexible Working Regulations in 2014, but in 2017 it was discovered that many employers still had limited experience with providing flexible working patterns (DWP, 2017a). On the other hand, the existence of the glass ceiling and the gender pay gap, have been reported as structural barriers to older women's career prospects (Murphy and Cross, 2017). TUC (2014) reports the widest gender pay gap to exist between those aged 50 and above. A recent government report shows an increase in the hourly pay for older women, however the gender pay gap not only persists, but also mostly remains unexplained (ONS, 2018). Additionally, ageist practices, which have increased with the introduction of new technologies (Walker et al., 2007), may also hinder older women's career prospects. Thus, older women's disadvantaged position within the labour market should be understood as deriving from sexism and ageism. Some have theorised that constrictions to the older people's employment come forth due to informal workplace discrimination (Roberts, 2006) or as suggested in previous paragraphs due to a variety of other reasons. However, the recurring issues pertaining to older women's experiences while being employed are their undervaluation and invisibility.

Legal and employer practices

More legislative actions to improve the labour market situation of disadvantaged groups have come forth over the past 20 years. However, these developments have not fully transferred onto employer practices. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations Act (2006) may have made direct age-based discrimination illegal, but much of the discrimination takes more subtle and hidden forms (Jyrkinen, 2014), which

legislation may not always be able to control. Government policies can only articulate more overt forms of unequal treatment whereas the subtle forms represent a grey area. Furthermore, British legislation, rather than ensuring that responsibility falls upon the employers to improve workplace conditions to accommodate older people accordingly, remains mostly on the supply side (Philipson et al., 2016). Therefore, the UK government's approach is still not able to fully support, improve older women's situation as well as eradicate structures, processes, and actions that may drive inequalities, which, as already mentioned, are embedded within societal perceptions of these women. As much as the government may promote anti-discrimination, if individuals within a company perceive older women upon their appearance, for instance, the situation would remain unchanged. Moreover, policies have mostly focused upon treating the outcomes of inequality. For instance, the government's Fuller Working Lives document (DWP, 2017b) proposes employers to retain, retrain and recruit older people, whereas employees should rethink (finances, health), refresh (skills), reinvent (ways and types of working). On one hand, these suggestions remain just that as employers are not obligated to fulfil them. On the other, proposals to employees are problematic as older women may be unable to take such actions due to the above mentioned institutional barriers or even individual acts of discrimination. Furthermore, in order to eliminate issues of inequality, proposals should not just remain on paper, but be acted upon. Some companies, for example, have shown progress by taking action in improving older workers' prospects within the workplace. For instance, Barclays introduced a Bolder Apprenticeship scheme, which could be joined by any individual and many of the involved older people received this programme positively (DWP, 2017b). Starting from such small organisational actions, older women may perceive employers more positively and their marginal position may be improved.

Furthermore, the British government also encourages a diversity agenda. It has relied on diversity management that views older people as possessing abilities that organisations may benefit from, also known as the business case for employing older people (Kirton and Greene, 2010), in order to address organisational issues such as skill shortages, mirror population, marketing reasons as well as to create learning organisations within which training is performed by the older workers rather than external parties (Buttigieg, 2011). As older women fall within this category, employers

should consider hiring and retaining them. However, as mentioned above the business case focuses on exploiting difference in the aim of benefitting the company, rather than organisational practices perceiving older women for their capabilities irrespective of their differentiating factors of age and gender within the workplace.

Therefore, there have been improvements in both legal and practical areas; however, more has to be achieved in order for older women to reach full visibility and equality within the workplace.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to provide a deeper explanation for why discrimination against older women may occur and how this hinders their labour market progress. Ambiguity and stagnation within research further marginalise older women, whereas in practice – they experience discrimination during many employment stages. To solve these issues, government and employer actions within the past 20 years have been attempted; however, they have not been enough to eliminate sources and outcomes of inequality that persist due to structural barriers and more individual forms of discrimination. Older women's position may become less marginal if the source of their discrimination were to be discovered as well as if governments and employers work together to improve societal perceptions towards this group by assessing individuals based on their abilities rather than on their visual characteristics.

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