THE INFORMATION CENTER

Topic Brief: Gendered Ageism

Gendered Ageism on the Rise

What is Gendered Ageism? Ageism is defined as the “stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people on the basis of their age,”1 while gendered ageism refers to differences in ageism faced by women and men.2 The term “gendered ageism” covers the intersectionality of age and gender bias: two disadvantaged groups.3

The Fastest Growing Labor Pool Is Older Workers, and They Are Reporting a Rise in Age Discrimination4

Ageism and sexism are not new concepts, but countries are reporting an increase in age bias, particularly against older women.

- In the United States, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports a 15% increase in the number of Age Discrimination in Employment Act charges by women at or over the age of 40 from 1990 to 2017.5
  - In the same period, charges by men within the same age bracket decreased by 18%.6
- 61% of US workers at or over the age of 45 reported witnessing or experiencing ageism in the workplace.7
- Ageism is the most common type of discrimination in Europe. More than 44% of respondents interviewed in Europe and 64% of those interviewed in the United Kingdom reported being concerned about age discrimination.8

Older Workers Are More Likely to Be Let Go: A Costly Decision for Both Employees and Employers

- In 2016, nearly 30% of US workers over age 50 were involuntarily separated from their jobs; these workers were likely to be unemployed for a longer time and to find lower-paying jobs than those in their 30s and 40s.9
- A recent study by PwC estimates that the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) could increase their total GDP by around $3.5 trillion by matching New Zealand’s employment rate—one of the consistently highest in the world—for older workers (55 and over).10
- Both women and men over age 50 have a high likelihood of experiencing a layoff or other type of involuntary dismissal.11
Ageism Hits Women Earlier and Harder

Ageism affects women and men at similar rates and ages—age 40 for women compared to age 45 for men in the UK. However, the ways in which men and women respond to ageism diverge, highlighting its heavy impact on women and the additional barriers they face in the workplace. In addition to societal biases that older employees are less innovative, adaptive, and generally less qualified, older women face marginalization based on “lookism,” gendered youthful beauty standards. In one study, women managers reported feeling pressure to adhere to societal beauty standards and maintain a young look. For example, women are almost twice as likely as men to feel compelled to dye their hair.17

Ageism hinders women’s careers at every phase starting with hiring:

- When job hunting, older women endure more employment rejections than older men.18
- A study found that younger women (under age 45) had a callback rate of 14.4%—almost double the rate for older women.19
- From 2007 to 2013, the unemployment rate for older women (over 65) spiked from 14% to 50%.20

Can Older Employees, and Women in Particular, Help Fill the Growing Talent Shortage?

Despite experiencing a talent shortage, many corporations continue to ignore ways to retain or tap into the talent of their older employees. As the fastest-growing population, women aged 55 and over will constitute more than one-third of new hires joining the workforce from 2016 to 2026. The misperception that age affects ability leads many companies to create workplaces that are quick to welcome young individuals and even quicker to dismiss older employees. However, older employees, especially older women, can contribute to companies, improving both business results and work culture.

- More Talent and Experience: A survey reported that employers on average believe that older individuals have better communication and technical skills than younger employees. Other studies have shown women are more adept investors, managers, and entrepreneurs. By hiring and retaining older women in the workforce, companies could protect their institutional knowledge.
- Better Outcomes: The experience of older individuals could complement the strengths of younger employees by supporting better decision making and increasing productivity and innovation. By including older individuals, organizations enable mutual training between older and younger generations—for example they might exchange institutional knowledge for newer aptitudes such as digital skills.
• **Lower Costs:** Having older individuals in the workforce is associated with cost savings for the company and society. Retaining older employees saves companies the cost of hiring new talent.\(^2\) Keeping older individuals in the workforce also means that they can continue to contribute to, rather than spend from, social welfare programs, such as social security funds.\(^3\)

• **A Happier Team:** A survey found that older individuals tended to report higher job satisfaction levels.\(^4\)

Despite the increase in ageism and talent shortages, **only a few companies include age in their diversity and inclusion initiatives.** According to PwC, only 8% of companies listed as the most diverse workplaces by Fortune and A Great Place to Work consider age as a dimension of diversity.\(^5\) Maybe it’s time to expand our definition of inclusion and expand the talent pool to be more inclusive of older employees.\(^6\)

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1. World Health Organization, “Ageing and Life-Course.”
24 Florence Shen and Brendan Birth, “Embracing Older Women in the Workplace,” American Society on Aging.
30 Florence Shen and Brendan Birth, “Embracing Older Women in the Workplace,” American Society on Aging.