



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 ages¹²—age 40 for women compared to age 45 for men in the UK.¹³ **However, the ways in which men and women respond to ageism diverge, highlighting its heavy impact on women**¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ In one study, women managers reported feeling pressure to adhere to societal beauty standards and maintain a young look.¹⁶ 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.²¹ **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.**²² 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.**²³

- **More Talent and Experience:** A survey reported that employers on average believe that older individuals have better communication and technical skills than younger employees.²⁴ Other studies have shown women are more adept investors, managers, and entrepreneurs.²⁵ By hiring and retaining older women in the workforce, companies could protect their institutional knowledge.²⁶
- **Better Outcomes:** The experience of older individuals could complement the strengths of younger employees by supporting **better decision making and increasing productivity and innovation.**²⁷ 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.²⁸

- **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.²⁹ 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.³⁰
- **A Happier Team:** A survey found that older individuals tended to report higher job satisfaction levels.³¹

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.³² Maybe it's time to expand our definition of inclusion and expand the talent pool to be more inclusive of older employees.³³

¹ World Health Organization, "[Ageing and Life-Course](#)."

² Sophie Beaton, [Gendered Ageism in the Canadian Workforce](#) (Samuel Center for Social Connectedness, 2019).

³ Victoria A. Lipnic, [The State of Age Discrimination and Older Workers in the U.S. 50 Years After the Age Discrimination in Employment Act \(ADEA\)](#) (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, June 2018); Clay Krekula, Pirjo Nikander, and Monika Wilińska, "[Multiple Marginalizations Based on Age: Gendered Ageism and Beyond](#)," *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, vol. 19 (2018): p. 33-50.

⁴ Victoria A. Lipnic, [The State of Age Discrimination and Older Workers in the U.S. 50 Years After the Age Discrimination in Employment Act \(ADEA\)](#) (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018).

⁵ U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "[Chart Data for the State of Age Discrimination and Older Workers in the U.S. 50 Years After the Age Discrimination in Employment Act \(ADEA\)](#);" U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "[Age Discrimination](#)."

⁶ U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "[Chart Data for the State of Age Discrimination and Older Workers in the U.S. 50 Years After the Age Discrimination in Employment Act \(ADEA\)](#);" U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, "[Age Discrimination](#)."

⁷ Rebecca Perron, [The Value of Experience: Age Discrimination Against Older Workers Persist](#) (AARP, 2018).

⁸ "[New Age Discrimination Statistics Compiled by Age UK Show Ageism Is Rife in Europe](#)," *Agediscrimination.info*, March 7, 2011.

⁹ Peter Gosselin, "[If You're Over 50, Chances Are the Decision to Leave a Job Won't be Yours](#)," *ProPublica*, December 28, 2018; Nate Swanner, "[Ageism for the Over-50 Crowd Means Longer Layoffs, Less Pay: Study](#)," *Dice*, January 3, 2019.

¹⁰ PwC, [PwC Golden Age Index: Unlocking a Potential \\$3.5 Trillion Prize from Longer Working Lives](#) (June 2018).

¹¹ Richard W. Johnson and Peter Gosselin, [How Secure Is Employment at Older Ages?](#) (Urban Institute, December 2018).

¹² "[Ageism at Work Starts Earlier than You Think](#)," *Fast Company*, September 10, 2019.

¹³ Lindsay Cook, "[Ageism in the Workplace 'Starts at 40' for Women](#)," *Financial Times*, December 21, 2018.

¹⁴ "[Ageism at Work Starts Earlier than You Think](#)," *Fast Company*, September 10, 2019.

¹⁵ Diane Grant, "Older Women, Work and the Impact of Discrimination," in *Age Discrimination and Diversity: Multiple Discrimination from an Age Perspective*, ed. Malcolm Sargeant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): p. 41–63.

¹⁶ Marjut Jyrkinen and Linda McKie, "[Gender, Age and Ageism: Experiences of Women Managers in Finland and Scotland](#)," *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 26, issue 1 (February 2012): p. 61-77.

¹⁷ "[Ageism at Work Starts Earlier than You Think](#)," *Fast Company*, September 10, 2019.

¹⁸ Noah Higgins-Dunn, "[Older Workers Are America's Fastest-growing Labor Pool—And the Least Protected from Workplace Discrimination](#)," *CNBC*, April 13, 2019.

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- ¹⁹ David Neumark, Ian Burn, and Patrick Button, "[Age Discrimination and Hiring of Older Workers](#)," *Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco*, February 27, 2017.
- ²⁰ "[Long-Term Unemployment Affected Older Women Most Following Recession](#)," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, November 17, 2015.
- ²¹ Kathryn Moody, "[To Combat the Talent Shortage, Employers May Need to Shift Productivity Measures](#)," *HR Dive*, September 26, 2017.
- ²² "[Why Retaining Older Women in the Workforce will Help the U.S. Economy](#)," *Wharton University of Pennsylvania*, June 6, 2018.
- ²³ Kejal Macdonald, "[It's Time to Celebrate What Older Women Bring to the Workplace](#)," *MarketWatch*, March 8, 2018.
- ²⁴ Florence Shen and Brendan Birth, "[Embracing Older Women in the Workplace](#)," *American Society on Aging*.
- ²⁵ Kejal Macdonald, "[It's Time to Celebrate What Older Women Bring to the Workplace](#)," *Market Watch*, March 8, 2018.
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- ²⁹ Deanna Bretado, "[Retaining Talent Is More Cost Effective Than Hiring](#)," *TLNT*, October 27, 2016.
- ³⁰ Florence Shen and Brendan Birth, "[Embracing Older Women in the Workplace](#)," *American Society on Aging*.
- ³¹ Matt Sedensky, "[Older Workers Are Happier, Survey Finds](#)," *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2013.
- ³² Bonnie Marcus, "[Companies Are Still Ignoring Older Female Workers, and It's Hurting Their Bottom Line](#)," *Fast Company*, June 18, 2019.
- ³³ Bonnie Marcus, "[Companies Are Still Ignoring Older Female Workers, and It's Hurting Their Bottom Line](#)," *Fast Company*, June 18, 2019.