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A tale of mice and (wo)men: will current policies on extending working lives improve quality of life for all?

Dr Christine Broughan

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I discovered the mouse problem while preparing Christmas dinner. 'You'll have to deal with them,' my dad said, handing me two traditional mousetraps. I set the traps carefully in the kitchen cupboard and went to bed.

The next morning I couldn't face the carnage that was certain to lie within. I had to remind myself of the mantra 'I am a strident feminist' that Caitlin Moran proposes in her book *How to be a woman*. Whilst repeating her mantra like some Hindu yogi monk, I headed to the cupboard and opened it. My eyes were met by those of a small brown mouse looking back at me, caught in the trap, but very much alive. Momentarily forgetting my female warrior status, I shrieked, closed the door and phoned my dad. I'm 46.

Just more proof that men and women are sometimes like chalk and cheese: driven by different things, often taking on different roles and responsibilities. But the kind of traditional partnership between the hunter-gatherer husband and nurturing wife may have worked in the past, but how future-proof is our reliance on partners to ensure financial security in older age? Divorce rates would suggest this is becoming a risky strategy. Among people aged 65 or older, 46 percent of women and 26 percent of men now live alone¹; coupled with the fact that pensioners are also likely to be affected by poverty², single older women are at greatest risk of poverty and isolation³. Increased longevity is a 21st century phenomenon to be celebrated, but there is a risk that women, who often live longer than men, do so at the risk of being caught in the metaphorical mouse trap: alive but with little quality of life.

The bottom line is that women need to be more engaged in work during the lifecourse. However, certain demographic groups such as women and individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds

are, in fact, over-represented in the category of 'older inactive persons'. A key target of the Lisbon Strategy⁴ was to increase labour market participation of workers aged 55-64 to 50% by 2010 but figures in 2011 reveal that this target has only been partially met - with 41% of men and 59% of women in this age group inactive. So what can, and is, being done to tackle this?

Two major strategic interventions will ostensibly shape the future behaviour of all older workers: changes in statutory retirement age and pension provision. But these policies might only serve to bifurcate the lived experience of already advantaged and disadvantaged groups. We already know about the situation with pensions (8% of the poorest have financial protection via pensions; compared with 70% coverage among top earners). Being older, female *and* from lower socio-economic backgrounds therefore poses a triple jeopardy. And where is their voice in a country where the dominant discourse comes from leaders who are 80% male and went to fee paying schools⁵?

The solution towards engaging more older women in the workforce, is of course, complicated. It is not enough to suggest we simply encourage more women to stay in the workforce longer, as women are reported to experience ageism at a younger age than men⁶. So why is this?

An evolutionary explanation would suggest ageism begins once a person passes the time when they can contribute to the reproduction of the species. An alternative psychobiological explanation would say it's due to our own internalised fears of decrepitude and death. Either way, the idea that women hang around beyond their productive years and somehow demand more than their fair share of support could be considered by some as 'bad form'. But how could the sisterhood forget older women? One possible explanation is that we are fearful of the trappings of inequality that come with old age. Caitlin Moran compares media visions of the successful male in his business suit with its female counterpart, the young model; looking sexy, a bit annoyed and a bit dissatisfied. It's a tricky stance to maintain for anyone who takes on more responsibility in life than making their hair and makeup look nice.

With earlier onset of ageism, increased risk of poverty, gender inequality of pay, greater longevity and poorer pension contributions (...hold on, we're up to a quintuple-jeopardy and I'm not even sure that's a word!) older women from lower socio-economic groups have

the potential to become one of the fastest growing disadvantaged groups in society. Without significant intervention to realise the asset value of *all* older people, current trends suggest we will potentially create a much greater social divide as people enter the third phase of their lives. Those with better jobs will retrain, have flexible working arrangements, good private pensions, spending power. Those that don't will follow a very different trajectory. The World Health Organisation advocate that where years have been added to life we must now add life to years; a pertinent point for women who are more likely to outlive their male counterparts but at the same time more likely to live in poverty.

The bizarre notion of measuring a woman's workability based on the amount of times the earth has orbited the sun in her lifetime, her investment in products inclusive of the term 'serum/firming/anti-wrinkle', and the ability to wear six inch heels is tantamount to 21st Century witchcraft. But what should our version of utopia look like? I'm not advocating that we don our cardies and sensible shoes but what we do need to do is take more control of our lives. Moran rebukes the notion of becoming invisible in her older age, in fact she finds the idea of getting old totally thrilling: time to hag up, wear an inappropriately short frock and have the occasional sneaky fag. Let's just hope she (and the rest of us) will be able to avoid the metaphorical mousetrap and be able to afford them!

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Not seen or heard? Older women in the workplace

Wendy Loretto

Wendy Loretto is Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the University of Edinburgh Business School. Her main research field is age and employment, with a particular focus on changes in employees' and employers' attitudes and practices in extending working lives. She is especially interested in the ways in which gender and age interact to affect work and retirement experiences amongst older men and women.

In 2009, Miriam O'Reilly claimed that she had been dropped as presenter of BBC's *Countryfile* because she was an older woman. Although her tribunal case and circumstances attracted widespread media attention, gendered ageism - the combined forces of age and sex discrimination - tends to be one of the 'less visible gendered mechanisms' ¹ affecting women's experiences of work. This essay considers why older women are often overlooked in the workplace and offers some suggestions for challenging this invisibility.

In many ways older women workers could be considered highly visible. More are staying in employment until later ages, and against a backdrop of recession and youth unemployment, increased employment of older women (and men) may be considered a success. Despite this, the patterns of employment amongst older women show evidence of segregation: women over 50 are concentrated into a smaller range of jobs in lower grades than their male counterparts or compared to younger women. A recent TUC survey also highlighted pay discrimination: women over 50 earn less than men of the same age and less than women in their 30s. It is tempting (and more optimistic) to dismiss such differences as cohort effects, i.e. it is unfortunate for the current generation of over-50s women, but younger generations will not face the same disadvantage when they enter their older life-stages. However, a more detailed consideration of the reasons why older women are in the position they are reveals some systemic and deep-rooted issues that may well extend across successive generations.

While older men are more likely than younger men to suffer from age discrimination or ageism, and women are more likely than

men to be subject to sex discrimination, there are strong grounds to assert that that gender and age discrimination are mutually reinforcing and that this mutual reinforcement puts older women in a particularly disadvantaged position². This perspective draws upon the notion of sexualising women's value to work (and to society in general) in youth, in a way that is simply not the case for men³. As such, the limited research in this area has focused mainly on appearance as an explanatory factor, where only 'attractive', i.e. youthful-looking, older women can succeed in the workplace. The recent rancour over the appearance of esteemed academic Mary Beard provides a clear illustration of this principle.

Several ironies arise from this perspective on gendered ageism: first, as research into women aged 50-70 in Canada has shown, older women's invisibility in the workplace is 'grounded in their acute visibility as old women'⁴. Many of the women in this study addressed the problem of invisibility by minimising the visible effects of ageing through beauty work – ranging from hair dye and make up to non-invasive and invasive cosmetic techniques. Some felt that youthful appearances were required in order to work with the public, especially in health-oriented jobs, the implication being that looking younger is not just associated with being more attractive but also being healthier. Respondents also expressed the tension caused by being aware of ageism but at the same time submitting to it by accepting the importance of physical appearance and engaging in beauty work. Some spoke of how retirement had offered them the 'luxury' of having these appearance pressures lifted.

A second irony is that concern over appearance and being perceived as less attractive is higher among older women in professional, male managed and hierarchical organisations⁵. Paradoxically, these are the very areas where women are often only seen as successful if they can suppress the feminine side of their characters⁶. Walker et al.⁷ highlight how these processes of 'self-denial' and self-separation' differentiate (gendered) ageism from the other 'isms'.

A third irony arises from patriarchal assumptions of the role of women's paid work in society in general. Ainsworth and Hardy's⁸ analysis of a public enquiry into problems faced by older unemployed workers in Australia demonstrated how older female job seekers were rendered invisible, because they were

constructed as privileged, and consequently less in need of government assistance. This 'privilege' arose because of their experience of and greater propensity towards flexible working, which would make it easier for them to take lower-paid jobs. It was also felt that gaps in women's employment history could be accounted for more easily than could gaps in men's careers. There was also greater public sympathy for older male workers because of perceived greater impact on men of loss of self-esteem.

The gendered nature of the labour market has been well researched and understood for some time in the academic literature, but as Krekula⁹ comments, little attention has been paid to age in the construction of women in gender theory. For example, debates over the impact of domestic roles - in particular caring - in constraining employment have focused more on women as mothers of small children. However, the impact of caring on labour market activity for many women threads through the lifecourse, including not only looking after children well into their teenage years and beyond, but also caring for elderly relatives, ailing spouses and grandchildren.

This brief discussion of gendered ageism has provided some insight into the ways in which older women are marginalised, often by being rendered invisible – to employers and to society as a whole. However, the reality is that employers face an ageing workforce, especially in those very areas (e.g. local government health, education) in which a larger proportion of older women are already working. Increasing visibility of this 'untapped potential' is crucial and requires recognising the contributions older women make through paid and unpaid work, the latter often in their capacity as carers. We also need equalities legislation to recognise the existence of multiple/intersectional discrimination, and for employers to question the effects of apparently age and gender-neutral policies and practices.

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