



Older Women's Experiences in the Icelandic Workforce – Positive or Negative?¹

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of older women's experiences in the labour market, how they value their job opportunities and perceived attitudes towards them. Qualitative interviews were conducted with seven women aged 57–74 years who all have at least 10 years working experience after they turned 40. Experiencing discrimination in the workforce was often mentioned by the women. Their experience is that men are less discriminated against on grounds of age than women. Older women pride themselves for participating in the workforce for being reliable, unselfish and undemanding rather than being experienced, skillful and good at their jobs. The results indicate that it is important to research further the well-being of older women in the labour market and try to change the negative attitudes and discrimination that appear prevalent. Ageism against older women can affect their well-being and health and must be prevented.

KEYWORDS

Ageing / ageism / labour market / older women

Background

As the global population is ageing and the younger generations are decreasing with lower birth rate, there is a need for older people in the work force. Many, especially those in good health, welcome the opportunity to work longer, but others see it as an unavoidable obligation, either because of growing labour demands or a low pension. However, the reasons for retirement or continued work beyond retirement age differ. Individual factors related to both health and financial situation as well as work characteristics such as flexibility have been found to be influential in those decisions (Sewdas et al. 2017).

The opportunities and the attitudes older employees face in the labour market can also be an important factor in their decision to work or retire. Some discussion has been on how the labour market favours younger employees over those who are older, and that older employees are exposed to discrimination in relation to their chronological

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age, which is referred to as *ageism* (Abrams et al. 2016). Being exposed to ageism can affect employees' well-being and can be a push factor out of employment (Stypińska & Nikander 2018). Duncan and Loretto (2004) found in their research among 1000 employees that women were more subjected to ageism than men (Duncan & Loretto 2004), indicating that gender and old age combined are important to consider in this matter. Gender segregation in the labour market shows women of all ages receiving lower wages and not having the same opportunities for promotion as men (Johns 2013). For instance, the unadjusted gender pay gap in Iceland was 15% in 2017. Statistics also show that women tend to exit the labour market for retirement at earlier age than men (Statistics Iceland 2019a). Therefore, it is important to focus on research among older female employees to observe the interactions of age and gender on how they fare in their working life as they grow older and which factors affect their work motivation and decisions to retire. Research within this area has been lacking (Aaltio et al. 2014) and there are limited studies addressing the situation of older women workers. This current study will address the research gap. Like in other Nordic countries, labour market participation in Iceland is high for both genders, and gender equality rates high in the country, as Iceland has been at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index for several years running (World Economic Forum 2019). Also, participation rate of older employees is high in Iceland and the country has indeed had the highest rate of older employees on the labour market among the Nordic countries (Eurostat 2020). It therefore seems fitting to place such research within the Icelandic labour market. The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of older women's labour market participation to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences of growing older in the labour market and how they perceive their opportunities, their motivation to work and attitudes of coworkers and managers towards them.

Even if employment policies as for instance in Europe combat ageism in the labour market, ageism can still be present in different companies and organizations. Such discrimination can affect older workers and their job opportunities and promotions (Naegele et al. 2018).

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of older women's experiences of their participation in the labour market, of their opportunities and of their motivation to work, and how they perceived the attitudes of coworkers and managers towards them.

Theoretical framework

The world population is ageing due to both higher life expectancies and lower fertility rates. It is estimated that between the years 2015 and 2050, the world population of people aged 60 or over will increase from 11% to 22% (World Health Organization 2018). To reduce the effects this can have on welfare systems, most European countries have started to adjust pension reforms to encourage older workers to postpone retirement (OECD 2017). In Iceland, there is an ongoing discussion on raising the retirement age from 67 to 70 years.

Research indicates that work motivation does not differ for older and younger employees (Büsch et al. 2012), but it is more likely to come down to work ability (Ilmarinen 2009). Work ability is a multifaceted phenomenon, where both work-related

factors and personal values and resources are influential (Ilmarinen 2009). On the individual level, both work motivation, health and financial situation have been found to be influential factors for work participation of older employees beyond retirement age (De Wind et al. 2014). For work characteristics, the flexibility that is offered on the working arrangement as well as the physical or psychological demands on the job have been found influential (Sewdas et al. 2017). Work ability is therefore not solely the matter of the employee, as the work environment has an important role in promoting a healthy work atmosphere that enables work ability to thrive (Ilmarinen 2009). Factors related to the psychosocial work environment, such as work-related conflicts, have been found to be a push factor for older workers out of employment (Lund & Villadsen 2005). A lack of respect and appreciation could also be a push factor (Thorsen et al. 2011).

Ageism has been defined as discrimination against people because of their chronological age and can be directed at individuals at all ages. In their research among 1000 employees of all ages, Duncan and Loretto (2004) found that discrimination due to chronological age was most prominent among both young (25 years and younger) and older workers (45 year and older), with the older employees though reporting higher ageism than the youngest. Ageism can be either implicit (unconscious) or explicit (conscious) and can be uttered on a micro-, meso- or macrolevel (Iversen et al. 2009; Ayalon 2013). Ageism can be found in varying degrees in the labour market. For instance, older workers may experience fewer earning opportunities than younger workers, or may not be given a chance of further training on the job, resulting in negative feeling and low self-esteem, powerlessness and uselessness of the employee (Furunes & Mykletun 2010; Kadefors & Hansen 2012). Furthermore, ageism can be found on different levels in the recruitment stage or if older employees are not considered eligible for promotions on the job, barred from participating in new working processes, or forced to retire at a certain age, even if they are in good health and willing to continue working (Solem 2016).

In a survey conducted by the European Commission in 2011, European citizens, aged 15 years or older, were asked if they had felt personally discriminated against due to their age or if they had witnessed such discrimination over the past two years. Overall, the most widespread discrimination found within workplaces was the discrimination of older workers. One in five citizens reported either having personally experienced it or witnessed it. Of the Icelandic participants, 31% stated that they had been discriminated against due to age or had witnessed such discrimination at work. By comparison, 20% of participants from the 27EU countries had experienced such discrimination. However, 83% of the respondents in Iceland felt that people over 55 years of age were generally perceived positively in their country compared to 61% in the 27EU countries. Older respondents 55 years and above were more likely to see negative attitudes towards people their age in their country (European Commission 2012). A Danish study by Jensen and Möberg (2012) shows that employers hold a relatively positive view of older employees, especially when it comes to social skills, loyalty and reliability. On the other hand, they are more positive towards younger workers when it comes to productivity, creativity and willingness to learn. In a Dutch research, Van Dalen et al. (2010) found that both employers and employees rate the productivity of older workers lower than that of younger workers. Furthermore, when categorizing qualities of employees as 'hard', such as flexibility, physical and mental capacity and willingness to learn new technology skills, and 'soft', such as commitment to the organization, reliability and social skills, the advantages of older workers are in the soft qualities, which carry



less weight when discussing productivity in a company, thereby favouring of younger workers.

Ageism is also found to affect the timing of retirement. In a Swedish study by Nilsson (2012), it was found that the decisions of retirement were made when employees felt they became invisible to managers and felt that their experience was no longer needed. An Icelandic focus group study found that older employees described negative attitudes related to their age and they often found that they considered themselves less worthy, as in society, the young employees are praised over the older employees. They considered however that their contribution mattered and that employers could benefit from a mixed age group for productivity and morale on the job (Sigurðardóttir 2006). A Norwegian study shows that older workers are more seldom permitted to attend training courses, and when new technology or new working systems are introduced, younger workers are preferred. It seems that the technical abilities of younger employees are viewed more favourably than those of older ones (Solem 2016).

Within feminist theories, it is argued that as different forms of discrimination can intersect, it is important to view the interaction of the different forms, like in the case of gender discrimination and ageism (Ainsworth 2002). Rather than observing this as double jeopardy, theories of intersectionality approach would argue that the two forms would intersect at various points over the life course so that when facing a form of discrimination, previous forms can be provoked when a similar incident occurs at another time.

The Icelandic labour market and older adults

The Icelandic population is 360,000, of whom 14% are 65 years of age or older (Statistics Iceland 2019b). The population is relatively young compared to most European countries due to a relatively high fertility rate in Iceland, only recently under two per woman. Even if the population is ageing, population growth is rather slow and people over the age of 65 are predicted to represent a quarter of the population in 2060 compared to one-third of people the same age in most other European countries (Statistics Iceland 2018).

The official retirement age in Iceland is 67 years, both for men and women. Individuals can work until they are 70 years old in the public sector, or longer in the private sector depending on corporate policies. The pension system in Iceland is based on three pillars: A tax-financed public plan, a mandatory occupational or private-funded pension scheme, and a person's voluntary savings scheme. As of January 1, 2018, it is possible for those aged 65 and older to take a 50% old-age pension from the state-funded public pension scheme against a 50% pension from the privately funded pension funds, subject to certain conditions. Revenues do not affect half-pension payments from the publicly funded pension scheme, thereby increasing flexibility in retirement age so that people can collect a partial pension before turning 67 and gradually lower their participation in the labour force (Social Insurance Administration n.d.).

A survey was conducted by The Social Science Research Institute (2017) on well-being and retirement of the elderly in Iceland. A national sample of 1800 persons aged 67 years and older were asked about their opinion of retirement and if it should be made easier for people to remain active in the labour market after retirement age. Of

the respondents, 97% answered that it should be made easier for people upon reaching retirement age to continue working, showing that older people in Iceland are willing to work longer. The participants were also asked about the attitudes towards older citizens in society; 52% think it is generally positive. Of the younger group, 67–72 years old, 49% found the attitude positive but 71% of the oldest group, 88 years and older, found the situation positive. This could suggest that older workers experience more negative attitude than other groups of older persons.

Participation in the workforce in Iceland is 80.5% of the total population 16–74 years old and unemployment is 2.4%. Traditionally, demand for older workers has been favourable and work participation of the age group 55–74 was 61.8% in 2019. Of women 55–74 years old, 55.3% are working compared to 68.2% of their male counterparts (Statistics Iceland 2019c). The high employment rate among old people in Iceland might stem from low entitlement for pensions compared to working salaries. It could also be related to other reasons, such as that Icelanders usually value work very highly and employers seem to value older workers' experience (Nordic Labour Journal 2012). The participation in the labour force is 82.3% among the group 55–64 years in Iceland, compared to 60.2% in the EU 28 (Eurostat 2020).

Women's duration of working life (DWL) is higher in Iceland than that of women in other countries. The index used estimates the expected average duration of active working lives in the entire life cycle. In the EU, the duration of working life is 36.2 years, compared to 46.3 years in Iceland in 2018. For women, the duration of working life is 33.7 in the EU countries, compared with 44.2 years for women in Iceland, which is the highest in Europe. The duration of working life for women is 38–38.3 years in Denmark, Finland and Norway but 41 in Sweden, the longest within the EU member states. It can be expected that this trend will continue, and that women will remain central in the labour market (Eurostat 2019).

Women seem to be in a more vulnerable situation than men in the Icelandic workforce. During the economic decline of 2008–2012 in Iceland, women rather than men had difficulties with re-employment following lay-off. This was especially true for older women (Snorraddottir et al. 2013). A study by Júlíusdóttir et al. (2018) shows that leading Icelandic women and men experience gender differences both at work and within the family. Men have longer working hours and higher salaries, but the women bear the main responsibilities for the family, making it difficult to work as leaders. This can lead to difficulties both in their work situation and family lives and is hardly in line with the idea of Nordic gender equality.

In 2005, the Icelandic Minister of Social Affairs appointed a project committee with the main objective of strengthening the status of middle-aged and older people in the labour market. The project was called 50+. One of the aims of the project was to create a positive debate about middle age and older people in the labour market and to draw attention to the strengths of older employees. The goal was also to change the attitude towards older workers in society. This five-year project, from 2005 to 2010, resulted in a report describing the importance of active participation of older people in the workforce. The project management succeeded in showing the importance of active participation of older adults in the workforce and was considered an important contribution to the discussion (Ministry of Welfare 2009).

In Iceland, there is a special Act on the Affairs of the Elderly, which applies to persons 67 years and older (Lög um málefni aldraðra [Act on the Affairs of the Elderly],



no.125/1999). The purpose of the Act is to ensure that older people have access to health services and social services that they need, but nothing is stated in the Act about special protection due to age. In other Icelandic laws, little is written about the elderly. In the Constitution of the Republic of Iceland, Article 65 states: 'Everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status' (Government of Iceland n.d.). Being old could fall into the category of 'other status'. Other laws leave out older citizens while mentioning the minority groups, which should not be discriminated against. Most laws mention 'or other similar reasons', which can apply to the older adults. However, it can be viewed as positive that the elderly are not mentioned specifically in the laws and are therefore not considered to be a vulnerable group that needs protection.

Method and sampling

A qualitative research design was used, and data were collected with semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). A snowball sampling method was used. This method was used as the researchers wanted to recruit a special group of women with at least 10 years working experience in the labour market after they turned 40. By recruiting women fulfilling these requirements, we were able to interview women with an experience of being older in the labour market, without seeking contact with them via official registers or categories (Howitt 2016). We recruited the interviewees with a snowball sampling method, first accessing some of them via contact information and then informants referred the researcher to other informants. All were informed about the study in advance and all were willing and interested in the study and consented to participate. Because the participants had different education and represented a range of work roles, we got an interesting insight into various working situations. The qualitative methodological approach allowed for respondents to reflect on their situation and share their experience of the labour market.

Seven women aged 57–75 years were interviewed, and all of them had at least 10 years working experience in the labour market after they turned 40. Four of them were married, one unmarried, one divorced and one a widow. All except one have children. The participants had varying degrees of education, had worked in different areas of the labour market and represented a range of work roles, such as specialized office work, work in the field of public relations, care and coaching. Four had 14–30 years job experience in the same workplace, one had the same kind of work for 47 years in three different places. Two started to work after they turned 40 after being housewives. One of them is still employed full-time, one is self-employed part-time after being driven out of her former workplace, three of them quit their jobs at their own request before they turned 70 years old and one stopped working due to health reasons. All interviews were conducted in Icelandic, by one of the authors and a researcher assistant. The interviews were conducted in 2017 and each interview took from thirty minutes up to one and a half hours (Table 1).

The interview guide included open-ended questions. The women were encouraged to share their experiences of growing old in the labour market and whether their circumstances changed after they became older. The researcher wanted to hear their views and experiences in the labour market. Also, they were asked about their experience of retirement.

Table 1 Description of the interviewees

Interviewees	Age	Family situation	Occupation	Working experience	Current work status
Marta	59	Divorced with children	Public relations	Worked at the same place for thirty years	Seeking job, quit because of organizational changes when she was 58
Viktoria	68	Married with children	Reporter	Working at home (Housewife) until 40	Still employed
Anna	68	Married with children	Clerk Part time work	Working at home (Housewife) until 43, after that part time work	Quit work when she was 65 at her own request
Silvia	74	Widowed with children	Specialized office clerk	Worked at the same place for twenty years	Quit work when she was 69 at her own request
Kristina	73	Unmarried without children	Specialized office clerk	Worked similar jobs for 47 years in three different places	Quit work when she was 67 at her own request
Birgitta	57	Married with children	Coach	Worked for 14 years on her last workplace	Self-employed part time, quit her previous job because of organizational changes when she was 55
Margretha	74	Married with children	Nurse aid	Worked for 20 years on her last workplace	Quit work when she was 64 due to illness

Analysis and result

A narrative approach was used when analysing the interviews (Howitt 2016). The interview guide was continuously modified and adapted. The questions provided flexibility to capture the unexpected, but at the same time enabled the interviewer to be systematic and include similar question to all informants. Also, probing or follow-up questions were used to clarify and expand on the topic of discussion. Field notes and memos were taken during the research period and used during the analysis phase of the data parallel to the interviews.

The analysis process started after the first interview. After transcribing and reading the interviews repeatedly, different themes became apparent. Thematic analyses were used to identify patterns of themes, and codes were used to explain the different themes. Five main themes were identified: feeling rejected, feeling degraded self-worthiness, experiencing a lack of understanding from employers and coworkers, facing discrimination and experiencing respect and equality. Even if these themes show different priorities, many of the women had similar experiences in the workforce. Theoretical saturation was achieved after seven interviews.

Result

Feeling rejected

It was commonly mentioned in the interviews that the women started to feel insecure in their job as they got older. They felt as if they were seen as less competent due to their age and felt that they were treated differently, such as being less frequently asked to take on some kind of responsibility and less often appointed new tasks. Some of them speculated whether they would be laid off and some thought about whether they should resign from their current occupation and seek another job opportunity or whether they should retire. Many expressed feeling rejected and found it difficult to accept a changed position within their workplace. Some of the women had voluntarily left their jobs after turning 50–55 years of age. They emphasized that the decision to leave had been their own, indicating that they had control over their situation. However, they also discussed that they felt that it was better to make the decision to step down themselves rather than being laid off. Among all the participants, this view of controlling their own work destiny was common, as most of the women stated that they considered it better to decide themselves to quit before being laid off or having coworkers talking behind their backs, ‘old lady this and old lady that’ and then getting laid off.

Insecurity is also found to be part of their own assessment and how they see themselves able to cope at work. It was found that some of the women were reluctant to changes and afraid to take on new tasks. This came up for instance among participants who were familiar with reorganization within the working environment, and they stated that with older age, they were more and more tired of being involved in changes being made affecting their job and felt reluctant to take on new or reorganized tasks. Furthermore, they also felt that with reorganization, their workplaces were also thinking of a new outlook that included getting rid of older workers: ‘When the operating form was changed in the company, an attempt was made to get older workers redundant, they were “invited to quit”. Others were laid off and their assignments moved to younger employers’ (Birgitta, age 57).

After a long time working for the same company, a 57-year-old woman got fired and her assignments were moved over to people who were 15–20 years younger. She felt that her age was the reason for her being fired, but the employer cited the fact that she had worked there for many years as an excuse to terminate her contract.

I had experienced that I had a strong position, I had been training younger people who wished to rise in rank and at the same time I heard from my boss that I could not adapt to changes. He said that people should not be for so long at the same workplace, and then he fired me. (Birgitta, age 57)

Getting a new job seemed difficult for the women. They experienced that their qualifications were not valued, and their long-term experience was not seen as valid in a new job. A long-term dedication to one employer left them with qualifications that were not desirable: ‘This job I was working on was quite specialized and ... I’m not sure people are aware of the experience I have’ (Marta, age 59).

Feeling degraded self-worthiness

When the women reached a certain age, they began to focus more on their work identity. Many of them were not happy with their position in the labour market and began to review their value and worth as employees. It seems that older women are hard on themselves, stating that they are not good enough, 'I think I cannot make any difference, and no one needs me, I feel unworthy' (Marta, age 59). 'A woman of my age is so stagnated and cannot embrace new technology and get into any innovations' (Birgitta, age 57). Some of the women felt that with age, they became slower and needed more time to perform certain tasks. This affected their self-worthiness and they thought about the years when they were faster workers with a certain regret.

Those who do not know me might think that I am not as hard-working as younger people, and probably that is the case. I think I need a little longer time to do things now than I did ten years ago. I think I was most hard-working when I was fifty (Victoria, age 68).

It emerged that older women needed to be generous with their time to survive in the labour market. Our respondents described the need to be willing to work longer hours to hold on to their jobs. They also felt that they had certain obligations towards their employer. As one of the women stated:

All these 22 years I worked, I was happy at work, always felt good and never had reason to be unhappy. And even though people made comments on what I was doing, it was only fair that it was either something I overlooked or was not able to do. I had major surgery once and started working way too soon. I was entitled to sick leave for six weeks but was back in four.... I did not stay home any longer than I needed to, I felt I had become healthy enough, but that was not quite the case. After working for two weeks I realized that I should have taken full leave (Anna, age 68).

Another factor that shows how they have degraded self-worthiness is that they said that they did not make demands such as asking for higher salaries and were willing to forfeit rights such as paid overtime and coffee breaks.

I am rather generous with my time, and I did not grow up to claim overtime wages in general. I have never asked for extra payment, even when it has been a long stretch of workday, as it often is. But it is also because I'm so excited to work ... (Victoria, age 68).

Experiencing a lack of understanding from employers and coworkers

In the interviews, it became apparent that many of the women felt that their employers and colleagues did not show them the same understanding and tolerance as they got older, and the women found this difficult to accept. Even if some of the interviewees felt that they were slower workers, it was their opinion that women 50 years and older had still a lot of good and valuable qualities: Most of them are healthy, few of them have

young children, and they show responsibility. Some of the women mentioned that they perceived that their bosses/superiors were afraid that women past a certain age were too bossy, thinking they knew everything and spoke their minds. They also revealed their opinion that they believed employers preferred to hire younger people they can shape into whatever mould they desire.

The women disagreed with employers that older women were not good workers. Some mentioned that there seemed to be an assumption about older persons that they were not capable of keeping up with new technology and learning new computer skills.

Managers who are not willing to hire older women should know that they are perhaps the best workforce, have no small children, never have to be home with small or sick children. Many of those who are applying for employment on the market are perhaps widows or divorced and what they live for is their work, they are the best workers. Everyone can be taught. So, if you hire an adult woman and teach her what to do ... For example, I learned the computer work like a parrot, when I went to the courses. It can always be taught (Marta, age 59).

Some wanted to send advice to employers in general and one participant completed the interview as follows:

And I want to say that women who are between fifty and seventy are great workers if they are healthy, because they have so much experience that can be useful. Yes ... and I just hope managers open their eyes to the fact that it is quite safe to hire women even though they are over fifty. And people in general, not just women (Victoria, age 68).

Facing discrimination

Being discriminated against in the labour market because of age and gender or attributes being ignored is difficult for anyone to face. Being faced with such an attitude can have a negative impact on health and well-being (Abrams et al. 2016). Some of the women had met negative or ageist attitudes in their workplace or when seeking a job or heard stories about other older women's experience in the labour market. They talked about ageism against older women, not only from the managerial level but also from coworkers.

I was the chairman and manager of the workplace and actually the manager of younger employees. Of course, I was hearing this "old, old" talk but not so that the attitudes against me changed. But I heard it from others in the case of other women who were getting older (Silvia, age 74).

The interviewees had experienced that some younger coworkers did not treat them as equals, which they related to them becoming old:

You noticed the younger businessmen, in the marketing departments, they did not bother talking to these older women. It was possible to take advantage and use us in many ways, but we were not eligible for this hip and cool marketing (Christina, age 73).

There is a gender difference in workers' retention in the workplace. The women talked about seeing a difference, for instance where women were being dismissed from work but men, at the same age and with similar job experience, were not. It seems that when women reach a certain age, they go to work part-time, whereas men work full-time until they are seventy.

It is very common that if a male and a female of the same age work in the same workplace, the man is working until he reaches seventy, but the woman is encouraged to reduce her work to a part time/half time job (Christina, age 73).

Even if gender equality is a public value supported by plans and resolutions, it is not always fully honoured when age is taken into account.

It was discussed in the company that the number of women in administrative positions needed to increase. But at the same time, myself and another woman in a management position were downgraded. So, no old women either who were over or around fifty or had worked for more than four years with the company kept their positions. There were only new young women employees that took over the management (Birgitta, age 57).

Participants also expressed judgements about their own age, mentioning that it is unfortunately quite common for older women to put themselves down on account of their age. 'I think we do it to ourselves. We talk about ourselves and say, I am now so old that I cannot do this or that or have stopped wanting this or that' (Silvia, age 74).

It also seems that the women perceived essential female attributes, such as attractiveness, as connected to youth and directly related to getting respect in the workplace.

I asked for more than 3 months' salary after being dismissed from work, where it is not easy for 55 year old women to get a job, "You do not have to worry about not getting a job, you look so good," they said. An unbelievable attitude, it was supposed to hurt my retirement contract because I looked so good, was so good looking (Birgitta, age 57).

Also, being an older job seeker seemed to be difficult and some women had the experience of not getting an interview despite having strong qualifications. They felt that they were precluded from having an interview because of their age.

I was not hired partly because I was applying for jobs where there were a lot of applicants and very many who are well educated and experienced as I am. So, I am competing with people in an equal position and then the age may turn against you. I have heard that from more women of my age ... one woman of my age got to an interview but heard this from the employer, a younger man: Oh, I just felt like my mom was working here if I hired you. She looked at him and said: I have four children and have no interest in having more. He did not hire her, you understand (Margrethe, age 57).

There seems to be a tendency to get older employees to sign a retirement contract. A 59-year-old woman, unemployed, searching for a job felt that there was more interest in getting younger people to work. 'One suspects that a person my age is not the hottest candidate to be a new employee' (Marta, age 59).



Experiencing respect and equality

Even if most of the women reported that they had experienced some kind of discrimination at their workplace because of their age and gender, some of the women mentioned that they had received goodwill from their coworkers. These women thought it was their own behaviour that affected how they were treated. In their opinion, most of the younger people had gained from working with older people and learned a lot from them.

I have not had any age problems there, I'm always in the middle of much younger people. One woman is the same age as I but most of the employees are young people. I like everyone ... show everyone respect, no matter what age they are. It's such a good spirit, I always think there has been such a good spirit in this workplace (Victoria, age 68).

In the interviews, it also emerged that some of the interviewees were not happy with the discussion on age and gender division in the workplaces and thought that it would be necessary to focus on what employees could do and would be good at. 'The best working places are where there is diversity, both young and old, men and women' (Victoria, age 68).

The same benefits characterize a good employee. We need to stop talking about these men/women, young/old people, in the labour market. It is just an employee, infallible, fun and knows what he needs to know. Managers are far too busy with this division all together (Silvia, age 74).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of older women's experiences of participation in the labour market, their opportunities and motivation to work and how they perceived the attitudes of coworkers and managers towards them.

The study shows that the interviewed women did not perceive opportunities to flourish in the working environment as they grew older. Their chances of promotion, further training or being handed responsibility of work tasks was limited with higher age. They experienced attitudes towards them changing with higher age suggesting they were less productive or capable of performing tasks they had previously handled. The study therefore indicates that older women in Iceland are met with attitudes that are based on ageism. This result comes through even though participation of employees over the age of 50 is relatively high in the country and a relatively high participation rate is even found among employees 65 or older (Statistics Iceland 2019c). Nevertheless, this study is in line with other studies, which have found similar forms of ageism existing in other countries, as was found in this study (Duncan & Loretto 2004; Ayalon 2013). This study is limited to women over the age of 50 and therefore does not give any information on whether men would have similar or other recognitions of ageism. However, women in this study reveal that they sense that women are more prone to at least some forms of ageism than men and they name especially in case of being laid-off or having opportunities of promotion. This is interesting as Iceland has been in the lead on the Gender Gap Index for several consequent years (World Economic Forum 2019). Even if some of the

women described a positive attitude from coworkers, they also found a lack of appreciation and respect for their working experience which clearly affected their well-being (Thorsen et al. 2012). The result indicates that as women age, the working environment in Iceland can become unfavourable and possibly push women out of work prior to their own preferred retirement.

Ageism is visible in various forms in this study. The women describe negative attitudes, their sense of unworthiness, their lack of opportunities for hiring or promotion, lack of offerings of training, the perception of older women considered less adaptable to technology and less creative. All these forms have come forward on previous studies (Gringart et al. 2005). The participants, on the other hand, felt their contribution to the work environment was important and in their own view they felt that younger workers could benefit from their work experience as they had valuable experience that could be passed on. They also see that they should be considered as reliable workers as normally women over 50 do not need to be away from work because of young children and generally they consider their generation in good health, both of which can be of an advantage in the labour market. However, they did not have the experience that women of older age were sought after in the labour market, rather the contrary, they felt that they were more dissociable than the younger workers. On the level of how the women see they could combat the situation, it is found that they prefer to resign rather than being laid-off when they sense they are no longer considered of worth a finding also found in Nilsson's (2012) study. Furthermore, while at the same time participant elaborates on how their working life is impacted with ageism, it also comes through that some see it as a two-dimensional situation as they themselves could show off kind attitudes and respect for the younger workers in order for receiving good spirits in return. In that way, the women are taking responsibility themselves of ageism.

However, the women seem to be reluctant to make a point of themselves as being valuable assets to their workplaces. This is interesting, as at the same time, they are also making the point of how they are degraded as older workers. Especially the oldest women in this study seemed to fear taking on new tasks and mentioned themselves how older people are slower workers than young people. This could be in line with the results presented by Van Dalen et al. (2010) suggesting that such feelings of low self-esteem can stem from the way they are treated in their workplaces, as if being repeatedly treated in a certain way becomes the aspiration of their own thoughts. Gender segregation in Icelandic workplaces has been repeatedly found to devalue women, both in terms of earnings and opportunities of promotion (Júlíusdóttir et al. 2018). In this sense, the seeming reluctance to speak of their worthiness as employees can also be seen as a response to how they as women have been treated as not equals to men throughout their career. Over the life course, women in Iceland have been met with lower salaries than men, less opportunities for promotion all of which devalues their contribution in their labour market (Júlíusdóttir et al. 2018). This is further seen in the interviews as the respondents reflected on ageism and gender and their experience was that ageism was more common for older female employees than older male employees. Even though as this research shows, there is still a need to highlight and emphasize on reforms for older women in the labour market, to change the attitudes underlying ageism, it cannot be separated from overall reforms in order for improved gender equality in the labour market. In that sense, it is important to consider the accumulated disadvantage of women over the life (Moore 2009).

Participants also had the experience of being dismissed or having resigned due to ageism. The message they got of the dismissal being thought of for their own good is a way to hide age discrimination. Such a move can be called implicit ageism (Iversen et al. 2009). In another case, a participant mentioned that the employer commented when she was laid-off that because of her good looks at the age of 55, she would surely get a new job after she was laid off. This reflects the idea of youthful looks being deemed more important than the qualifications and skills of women. Such an attitude from an employer is humiliating to older women in the workforce and elsewhere.

It is important to understand and discuss ageism in the workforce openly if we want to develop suitable solutions and fight it. The women who participated in this study strongly indicated that they were vulnerable to discrimination because of their age and their gender. This negative attitude they experienced affected their self-esteem and wellbeing. Future prospects show that there is a need for older workers in labour markets both to compensate for a lack of manpower in sight, and also with higher life expectancy, it will be important in order for lowering the cost on welfare systems.

Limitations of the study

This paper is based on a qualitative interview study. The chosen approach has some limitations because the number of the interviews is limited to seven. However, they give insight into the women's experience, and furthermore, the findings are interpreted against a backdrop of findings, perspectives and analyses in already existing research. The small number of interviews prevents us from making any direct generalizations.

However, we were able to investigate the experience of women 55–75 years old and gain a deeper understanding of their situation in labour market participation and of the attitude they receive in relation to their gender and their age. Because we only interviewed women, it does not allow for a deep discussion on the distinction between older women and older men in the labour market.

Conclusion

This study explores how ageism is present and experienced by women in the Icelandic labour market. Our research underpins arguments that in order to fulfil reforms on prolonging individual working life and postponing retirement, as many countries are now focusing on, fighting ageism is crucial in any such scheme. If ageism results in early retirement from the labour market, it may counteract reforms set in action to prolong individuals working life. Therefore, it is important to be aware of and oppose stereotypical views of older employees that represent them as not being as important as younger employees for the labour market. Instead, focus should be on how indeed older employees are able to share valuable experiences and specialized knowledge that is feasible for many occupations. As our research focuses on women, it also throws light on the intersection of gender inequality and ageism; women experience that they more often than men have to battle ageism. A consequence of this is that some women eventually accept the premises of ageism considering themselves of no or little value to the labour market. Further research is needed in order to know more about how gendered ideas of women's

value in the labour market affect decisions of staying or leaving the labour market at older age. Furthermore, a political strategy should be developed to prevent ageism in the labour market and change the attitudes of employers and coworkers on older employees. Such a strategy should moreover include improved conditions for gender equality in the labour market as gender discrimination and ageism intersect.

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