**Older Women, Work and the Impact of Discrimination**

The aim of this chapter is to shed some light on the impact discrimination has on older women (50 +) and to investigate how their under-representation in the workforce may be partly attributed to a combination of past and present age (and gender) discrimination.

It is suggested that a tension exists for older women in attempting to access employment as being at odds with their experiences of gendered ageism, the gendered assumptions of both the family and wider society and their sufferance of gendered disadvantage and discrimination. Each aspect of which has created barriers to women’s participation.

Despite being at the forefront of the fight for equal opportunities with women of all ages, older women are now looking back at a lifetime of endeavours to achieve equality with men, facing further prejudicial treatment as older women in the form of Ageism. For women the consequences of growing older in a society that values youth and beauty and the disadvantaging attitudes of employers and society in general, has served to limit the desires and expectations of older women to receive equal treatment in the workplace, thus resulting in a reduction in presence and constraints on prospects to redress the imbalance. All of which creates a disillusionment with the efficacy of legislation to combat discrimination.

Their experiences highlight that gratuitous treatment in the labour markets, in training, access and education, results in, internalisation of negative and unfair treatment. For a large contingent of women, striving to attain an acceptable work-life balance, chose to work part-time often under pressure from society, family and their own commitment to the provision of childcare within the home. The interpretation of part-time work as being low status, low skill work, accompanied by less employment rights, further diminished the value of women’s contribution to the economy and society.

Past experiences and missed opportunities within work and the education system created a mistrust of fair treatment at work (perceived to be based upon ageist assumptions by employers) and a lack of belief in their own ability to achieve educationally, thus potentially damaging any policy interventions aimed at improving work or educational opportunities for older people. The thought of re-entering education or work or training later in life after prolonged detachment is fraught with feelings of anxiety (Grant *Et al*  2006).

The chapter will be divided into two sections, the first section will explore the context of women and work; policy responses to the disengagement of older people with work key research into age (and other forms of) discrimination. The second section of this chapter will concentrate on the voices of women over fifty[[1]](#footnote-1), who were interviewed just prior to the implementation The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations. In this chapter they talk about their recollections of work, education and experiences of discrimination as both younger and older women.

Attention from policy makers in the UK regarding the under-representation of older people in the labour force resulted in various measures designed to remedy age discrimination. A consultation paper issued by the UK government in 1998, requested the views from employers, trades unions, and organisations representing older people and individuals, on ways which could be used to address age discrimination in employment. The responses culminated in the Voluntary code of practice, setting out a framework of measures to encourage and promote employment of older workers (DfEE 1999). As a voluntary code this achieved limited success. The evidence in both the media and academia was mounting, with the discrimination against older workers seemingly continuing unabated. The Employment Equality (Age) regulations were enacted in October 2006. Four years later in October 2010 (at the time of writing this chapter) the Equality Bill is set to supersede the previous legislation on discrimination, to provide a framework of discrimination law which protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society[[2]](#footnote-2).

Despite the legislation aimed at providing fairer treatment for older people evidence suggests many are experiencing difficulty gaining entry to the jobs market. According to Bytheway (1995) we are all of a particular age and are in the process of ageing, and as such “any unwarranted response to any age”, can be construed as Ageism. Defining at which age one is classed as ‘older’ brings about different responses from various authors, do we mean, over 50, over 60, or those that have retired from paid employment, or as some studies found for women in their mid forties, being judged as older? (Macnicol 2006) Ageism is believed to be experienced differently by men and women with some authors finding that older women are also facing the multiple oppressions of age and gender discrimination. The glass ceiling is now being replaced with the silver ceiling and the emergence of Lookism (Itzin and Phillipson, 1993) (Granleese and Sayer 2006).

Women now in their fifties and sixties witnessed and experienced the inequalities of access to equal opportunities prior to the legislation in the 1970s, many of whom now find they are less likely than their younger counterparts to be able to compete in the jobs markets for a variety of reasons. The 1970s legislation SDA and EOA heralded an end to discriminatory practices which had pervaded most areas of women’s working lives. In the intervening years women’s’ position within employment increased, however evidence has since emerged to illustrate discriminatory practices were part of their everyday experiences.

Women once left work upon marriage (e.g. teaching profession), however today most women leave work upon the birth of a child and generally can return to work after basic maternity leave (Maguire 1995). Hence, there are older women in society today who had a combination of different experiences regarding employment following childbirth. Many of today’s older women would have been influenced by their own experiences as daughters (and mothers) in post war Britain. Literature published by government in 1947 emphasised the work of women as being “temporary, helping in a crisis… and doing women’s work in factories”, Cmd 7046 (1947), women also viewed work in the same way and took on the double burden of home and employment and accepting it as specifically a feminine practice. The increase in women’s participation in employment crept up slowly; by 1951 31% of women were employed, reaching 45% in 1987 in part due to discrimination legislation, contraception being more readily available, the need to supplement the family income and to aspire to raise family living standards. (Summerfield, cited in Obelkevich and Catterall, (1994)). The female contribution to the family purse through engagement in part time employment had long been denigrated as pin money, yet it was a crucial lifeline for the working class woman, often supplementing the low incomes of their husbands or partners by taking on part-time or low paid employment keeping the family out of poverty. Thus the part time earnings of women were considered as an important and growing component of family income (Harkness et al 1997,).

Older women in the sample had faced mixed experiences following childbirth. As already stated women left work upon marriage, some typically left upon the birth of a child, upon re-entry some then either had to look for new employment or some employers accepted them back into previous employment. Women would then work (intermittently and mostly part time) between the births of subsequent children. Whilst this pattern is certainly different for single and divorced women, the identification of a cause of age disadvantage for older women is made by Groves, that in today’s society and with the aid of the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (SDA), “the younger the woman, the more paid work she is likely to have done and the better qualified in formal terms she is likely to be” as opposed to her older female colleague (Groves, 1993: 43). Thus the challenges older women face in accessing and progressing in employment can partly be attributed to the gaps they took out of employment, at a time when it was expected that women would set aside career aspirations to have their children, compared to the experiences of working women of today who are (mostly) legally protected in employment after childbirth.

Despite older women’s marginal attachment to the labour force, they have faced gender discrimination and challenges in gaining an equal footing in the workforce. Throughout the struggle for fair treatment, they contended with the concomitant, and insidious undermining of their contribution to work, both paid and unpaid, through both discriminatory practices and, stereotyped attitudes of a “women’s place” being in the home. Many older woman experienced age discrimination throughout their younger employed life; employers freely questioning plans for starting a family or getting married, or the implied association of mental acuity as women aged, to be used in the process of selection or de-selection. Whilst unlawful under the SDA, it was nonetheless widespread. According to Groves, “discrimination, when it did occur, was more implicit than explicit, expressed through double standards and judgments made on account of women’s real or perceived age” (Groves 1993:43).

The ageing population has led governments to prioritise extending the working lives of people in the UK to continue in work beyond the current retirement age. This requires attitudinal change by employers to ensure older people are able and willing to participate. Thus the prevailing myths attributed to older workers need challenging. For older women the combination of ageist and sexist treatment, places them at a disadvantage and undermines their efforts to access and progress within the workplace, threatening to impede government objectives to increase the labour market participation of older people.

Age UK [[3]](#footnote-3) in their analysis of employment statistics[[4]](#footnote-4) found that two in five people aged 50-plus were long term unemployed (LTU)[[5]](#footnote-5), with rates of LTU older women rising by a third in 2009 (TUC 2009) the highest percentage increase among all age groups. Whether leaving work before SPA is due to an economic downturn or though choice, depends upon the sector women find themselves in; in the private sectors women who generally undertook low skilled work, often part time and specifically in gender related employment would not have recourse to join an occupational pension scheme as meant in he private sector were under no obligation to provides such. However when compared to women in the public sector who would in some cases be able to access an occupational pension following early exit. Thus disadvantage throughout the working life can be a precursor to poverty in the later years with many experiencing pensioner poverty.

Previous studies show that early exit from labour markets can lead to poverty, usually lower skilled male workers being likely to be living on low incomes at 60. However, women were much more likely to be poor when aged 60+ than men. The reason for this was the shorter working life of women, unstable attachment to work, and the predominance of part time working. As older women were much more likely to live without a partner, this “substantially increased the risk of low income, even for women that had worked for much of their life” (Bardasi and Jenkins, 2002).

Whilst time trends have revealed increased employment in the over fifties today, they also reveal a decline associated with age, around the age of fifty and beyond. The following graph (Figure 1) illustrates that the age at which female employment declines is around 50, and declines more rapidly than male employment.

FIGURE 1

Women working outside the large public sector organisations tend to be located in occupations where workplaces are smaller, for example in retail, care and personal services or hospitality, with more households being dependent solely or primarily on the woman's wage as the major part of the family income. In past recessions men bore the brunt of becoming laid off or made redundant, trade unions now believe this is changing with women facing increasing rates of redundancy, rising to almost double the rate of increase in male redundancies caused by care home closures and the loss of small retail chains (Adams, Rosebys, and Ethel Austin etc). With around 44% of part time workers being older women without dependent children, many were found to be over-represented in private sector low paid employment**Error! Bookmark not defined.** 2009).

The recent recession has been projected to affect employment in the public sectors in the future. Public sector work has provided many women with the kind of flexibility they require, and tends to provide those occupations women are more likely to undertake. Compared with the more, rigid work patterns associated with private sectors women can often negotiate flexibility within a public organisation. In a review and response to the first budget of the incoming Coalition government in May 2010, Evette Cooper [[6]](#footnote-6) formerly the Secretary of State of the outgoing government, produced a report on the forecast of projected cuts in public expenditure, in which she expressed her concern for women in this sector being disproportionately affected as jobs in the public sector start to diminish.

The reasons for premature detachment from the labour market have evolved from an “early retirement culture’ which has been associated with a variety of push and pull factors. Push factors include ill health, redundancy, discrimination and the difficulties in combining work with caring roles. Pull factors are predominantly associated with having more economically advantaged circumstances whereby individuals can choose to leave work before their retirement age. The two combinations of factors identified in early detachment have been described as the ‘two nations’ of early retirement (Lissenburgh and Smeaton (2003), Arthur (2003)). Those associated with push factors are often located within lower social classes who have experienced both redundancies or are long term unemployed with inadequate skills or reduced health (Banks and Tetlow 2008). For those who can choose when to leave employment, unconstrained by financial security, often taken care of through income from an occupational pension the future can mean taking on other interests whilst in good health.

The implication for social policies designed to increase participation in the workforce for the over fifties for these two groups are quite distinct. Losing ones employment after the age of 50 is more likely to lead to long-term unemployment or inactivity compared with job loss at younger ages. In the UK older workers are overrepresented among the long-term unemployed, however this underestimates the problem of unemployment in this age group as many older people, although wanting to work, move directly to retirement becoming part of the ‘hidden unemployed’. It is known that that a variety of structural and individual barriers exist in attracting such people back into work and for employers to retain older workers. These include discrimination and discriminatory perceptions of older people; a lack of currency in their skills, or being unable to access suitable training or educational opportunities (Green 2003).

On a psychological level being defined as old can result in a person becoming susceptible to identity degradation (Berger 2006), thus serving to perpetuate detachment from labour markets. Furthermore, women also disappear from the workforce to provide intergenerational care (Mooney and Statham 2002). The EOC in 2004 found that many women when faced with the burden of providing care and undertaking work, either they reduced their commitment to work or left employment completely.

Ageism has generally only been referred to in a gender-neutral framework. However, age discrimination is not gender neutral, Granleese and Sayer (2006) identified female appearance or Lookism, as being important in the judgement of colleagues in academia. However, stereotyping and labelling associated with age, gender or appearance are precursors to disadvantaged treatment resulting in discrimination. Gender inequalities are compounded over time and internalised by women, when as women grow older the ‘social pathology’ of growing older affects women more so than it does men, in terms of how they age and the perception that looking older may have on their opportunities (Itzen and Phillipson (1993), Duncan and Lorretto (2004)). Women appear as more vulnerable to such pressures than men do, indeed internalisation of previous discriminatory experiences are made complex by the realisation that in today’s society an older women no longer conforms to the modern standards of youth and beauty, leaving some more prone to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety (Saucier 2002). In a society that embraces “youth, beauty and the commercialised images of happiness and well being’ (Sontag 1972:29-38) such pre-occupation with “looks” has lead to women taking action to holdback signs of ageing thorough the use of beauty work (Clarke and Griffin 2008). A study of the BBC found that whilst the corporation placed a very high public commitment to equal opportunities, its older workers over the age of fifty were (over a 15 year period) increasingly whittled out from its workforce (Platman and Tinker (1998). Academic studies support the assumption that ageism for women is also bound up in sexism have found that women are thus, “subject to a ‘double standard’ of ageing (Sontag 1972) and to gendered ageism (Rosenthal 1990) by virtue of their simultaneous membership of the categories ‘old’ and ‘female and now facing the additional burden of ‘lookism’.

Lookism, is an appearance related form of discrimination experienced differently by women in an assortment of scenarios, Granleese and Sayer (2006) in academia non-academics viewed academics as being “career driven by their lack of attractiveness and or poor appearance”. Being a young female academic meant playing down one “looks”, as they perceived this would disadvantage their careers. Relating factious based appearance judgements to women’s work, trivialises women’s contribution reduces the value of their skills, disregards the important attributes, stifles motivation thus imposing an additional barrier for older woman to break down in the workplace.

A number of issues related to the experiences of older women and labour market attachment have been raised, yet as many studies have identified, it is not only access to labour markets which are important, but also gaining access to learning for qualifications which improve the chances of gaining better paid employment and opportunities for progression within work. For some of today’s older women the years during which they were bringing up their own children was also an era of increasing technological advances. Being detached from the labour market also meant detachment from on the job training, creating a further disadvantage when applying for employment. Academic studies pointed to a particular kind of disadvantage for the older woman of a certain age. Rationales for this have been attributed to the fact that most women did not have the same opportunities as men to build up a career, or to earn the equivalent of males due to their childrearing and caring responsibilities (Women’s Equality Unit).

The dominant ideology within organisations emerging from recessions in the 1990s was towards ensuring a younger workforce as a buffer against an ageing demography, equated with low growth and economic stagnation. Despite the forecasts of a changing demography on the coming decades, Metcalf and Thomson (1990) found recruiters in the 1990s, whilst aware of the changing demography set for the future, hey adhered to recruitment practices which were built upon age-related assumptions and generalisations. The negative stereotypes of the older employee included “inflexibility, resistance to change, unwillingness to learn, poor health and lack of drive, energy and ambition” subsuming the more positive associated characteristics of reliability, maturity, loyalty and commitment. Arguably many of those individuals who believed they had been discriminated against because of their age would argue that whilst legislation may be in place today, it is not the legislation that needs policing, but those who hide behind the well intentioned policies whilst harbouring ageist and sexist assumptions.

In an attempt to identify whether there were employment disadvantages between men and women, an analysis of data by the Department of Work and Pensions over a 30-year period from 1973 to 2003 found that the Female Employment Disadvantage had been reduced dramatically (including the employment disadvantage associated with motherhood in particular) meaning that it was more likely that younger women would now have more chances of obtaining work compared to women over fifty. However a new employment disadvantage associated with being women aged over 50 began to emerge during this period (Berthoud and Blekensaune 2007).

Older women’s rationale for undertaking paid work and their experiences of work have undergone transformation over time. For many women the burden of gendered assumptions that provision of care within the family and society should be provided by women. Census data revealed that 10% of women were carers and that care giving increased with age, reaching a peak between the ages of 45 and 59 years of age. This in part answers why many older workers can only work, or choose to work part time hours, or drop out of work altogether due to caring commitments.

The following section will focus on the key themes of discrimination as identified by the women in the study which supports and adds to current literature on how experiences in the past, in work, education and in periods of economic inactivity have been bound up with age. The Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 had gone some way to ensuring that women and men would be treated equally in the workplace, yet despite this, consecutive data [[7]](#footnote-7) Labour Force Study (2001; 2003 2009) indicates that women were more likely to be found in part-time work and be more concentrated in three occupational groups, clerical, personal services and retail with only 10 per cent of women in professional occupations and 11.5 per cent in managerial positions. In comparison to other countries in Europe the employment rates for the over 55s in the UK were in 2009 57.5%, the same as Denmark, but lower than Sweden 80% and Norway 68.7% [[8]](#footnote-8) .

**Section 2**

Perceptions of Past Discrimination

Age discrimination was found to operate when people were just starting out in their employment. Occasionally some rationalised this as being negative treatment rather than discrimination. This was more apparent for those who entered manual labour occupations after their initial schooling period. It was a period they could look back on and perhaps identify it as a learning process or a kind of initiation into adulthood. Some interviewees felt that they had experienced discrimination in terms of the pay they received, whereby organisations based the pay scales on age rather than experience. When age discrimination occurred in later years the women viewed this more seriously as this placed limitations on their opportunities and was to impact quite markedly on individual life chances. Hence accepted ageist practices were traced back to being initially largely been played out in the labour market in identifying the pay and rewards that went with ‘age’.

A common example of age discrimination many women identified was that of age barring, preventing women from applying for a job due to age limits in job advertisements. The study found that women had both experienced discrimination in the past due to their age, and were continuing to come up against discrimination in later life. Although age limits in job adverts are mostly illegal, however, current evidence has been found (post 2006 legislation) of ageist language within the wording of job advertisements[[9]](#footnote-9).

In the not too distant past ageist adverts were much more blatant, creating a myriad of emotions related to the inequality of opportunity that such practices had in holding women back in accessing employment or progressing. Women spoke of being hurt, angry, upset and frustrated at being unable to show potential employers what they as “older” women could offer, *“I remember coming home and saying to Mum, ‘I’m thirty six and I’m written off already - I can’t believe it’ - and I didn’t feel old, but it made me feel worthless.” (Female 55, working)*

There were also examples of the negative effect that the double jeopardy of gender and age discrimination could have upon the individual. Such experiences and the internalisation of negative messages provoked feelings of frustration, thus lowering expectations for advancement in a situation in which they had little control or alternatively, deciding to subordinate any work aspirations to concentrate on other aspects of their lives, over which they could exert some control,

*“I think at the time it just made me work harder. I feel I had to work twice as hard, but I think it made me a little bit introverted as well because you were frightened to discuss how you felt with other people and you (women) were in a minority…I suppose at the time because I was younger and it was a career I’d always wanted, it made me stronger but I also think that when my family came along, I had someone else to consider, so it was a disadvantage. I used to take things to heart and that is why I thought in the end, ‘oh, I give up’. I think if I hadn’t had any one else to consider I’d have dug my heels in.” (Female 50, job seeker).*

Applying for an internal management post this interviewee found later that her failure to get the job was clearly due to her age*.* Acceptance of clearly unjust contentious decisions could, for some, result in internalisation of the negative perception society would seem to place on them and their potential value in the workforce.  *“I felt very disappointed and very hurt because I was told I hadn’t got the job. When I went (left employment) it came out, that the people said, no, they wouldn’t give it to me because I was too old at fifty-three, because they expected somebody younger…they wanted to it run for x number of years, so I didn’t get it… I was disappointed, but afterwards I thought well, that is life.” (Female 62, unpaid volunteer).*

Another aspect to part time working is the issue of promotion within employment. This interviewee could not view this as an option. In order to progress the perception she had was that a person has to work full time. *“I prefer working part time but the problem with part time work is that it can be difficult to move up. Basically, if I wanted a promotion I’d have to go full time, which is…I think, one of the problems for older women, for women in general - because I think a lot of women try.* Here a balance was struck between home and work life and for that to succeed the compromises made were to accept the limited scope work could offer in terms of promotion, “*Even though my kids are older now, I mean my youngest is 14, I still want to be there sometimes when she gets home from school. I still want to be there if she wanted help with her homework. I still want to be there if she wants a shoulder to cry on.” (Female 50-54, working full-time).*

Many of the women interviewed had confronted classic gendered discourse about motherhood, the care of the family and their role within it. It was felt in their younger days (1960’s,1970’s), that employers at that time thought women were only interested in work until they got married or had children,

*“Just after I was married I went for a job … it was an internal promotion and it was between me and two men. … the men were the same age as me, … less qualified than me …had a worse sickness record than me,- because I was always careful or conscientious about my days off- so on paper it looked like me... but at the interview, this man said to me,- this is the gods honest truth- he said to me, ‘you’ve recently been married?’ I said ‘yes’. ‘So you’ll be having children in a few years time?’ I said ‘no, I don’t intend to have any children for a long while yet’, ‘But you will be having children?’ It was an assumption he made without me saying anything. I didn’t get the job, one of the men got the job, but I was so angry because I knew why they hadn’t given it to me.” (Female 55, working full-time).*

 Ageist attitudes were perceived to be operating within the workplace. As one interviewee understood it, age discrimination had always been a part of the workplace culture, operating amongst work colleagues as well as management and as such it was accepted as an inevitable part of growing older in employment.

*“I remember when we went for a night out, the younger people that we had trained were coming up, I was now part time, and they were now full time. We were in a restaurant and I sort of came in slightly later, and I remember (x), who I had known for some time [say] ‘oh, you are over there with the oldies’ and then she was like, ‘oh, I am sorry, I am sorry’ ... I was [saying] ‘yeah you are right’…I remember being her age and doing it [myself]. That was interesting…you see there was no age discrimination then... it was just the way it was, there wasn’t a label or a word for it, that’s the difference.” (Female 55)*

Age discrimination in recruitment was also cited as the reason why very few people thought that they would find a suitable work or why they applied for ‘inferior’ jobs or jobs that they were over-qualified for. One interviewee explained how discrimination can undermine a person’s confidence, causing them to be self-limiting or self-deselecting or put themselves down.

 *“I think I got a couple of interviews but just didn’t get anywhere with it, but by that time my confidence was really knocked. I wasn’t performing very well because usually I can get interviews no problem and if I do get an interview I’m not saying I’d get the job, but coming back again now [pause] it took me a long time and it knocked my confidence a lot…I went for an interview, the person there fed back to me,… she said that…I’d sort of given negative answers. I seemed to be identifying problems rather than solutions, so I must have had a negative turn of mind then…I’ll undersell myself and I’ll go for jobs that are less than £30,000 and I shouldn’t.”*

*(Female 50+, student).*

There was an overwhelming feeling that older people have a lot to offer an employer but were not being given the opportunity to prove their worth or showcase their talents. Those women out of work in our study were keen and eager to work. Many had dependent children to support or were single or divorced. It was felt that employer prejudice prevented the majority of them from regaining a place in the labour market or ushered them into work that was unsuitable, temporary or inferior. The waste of talent of people in their fifties and sixties was a common theme in the data,

 *“I feel a lot of older people have got an awful lot to offer and what happens is I think their experience of life is overlooked and the fact that maybe they* ***can*** *pick things up quickly. I find, and I say it to myself all the time, ‘well if only I could get in a place and they showed me exactly what to do, then I’d pick it up no problem’. But it’s actually going in with that bit of paper, which obviously a younger person will do because they’re taught computers at school.”*

*(Female 50, job seeker).*

Situations arose in work in which access to training opportunities were based upon age. Assumptions were made about perceived learning capabilities and mental acuity. The reinforcement of negative messages brought about self doubt and lack of confidence, as relayed by this interviewee, *“I think for somebody of my age, you sometimes get a lot of ageism. I used to work in the (public sector) in the enquiries department, and I had to go for… training. All I kept getting told was that ‘we won’t expect you to be able to do this, because you are an older person’ and although they had this policy of non-ageism, no prejudice, it kept on getting dropped in the conversation…”.* Although she enjoyed the job and the colleagues she was working with, she was always aware of her age, as being the oldest and not being as valued. She did not used to feel that way before she went to work in that organisation, but felt that the expectations they had of her, not being up to the training, because of her age made her ‘feel’ old, “*The training put years on me… I even put a complaint in about [it] - I mean she was a lovely girl, but she kept bringing up this thing, about, well, because you are older and fair enough I maybe wasn’t as fast, I had never been great at geography but I mean I had only been there three months and I got the employee of the month, so I wasn’t that bad!” (Female 58, paid staff voluntary sector)*

On reflection the experiences women faced in conjunction with age were also equally associated with sexism or lookism, as well as gender stereotyping. An older female manager in a male dominated environment had been confronted with prejudicial behaviours,

*“I have also been referred to, even in my later years, as 'eye candy', or, ‘we have got to have bit of glamour at this meeting’, ‘(participants name) will you come along?’... which is all very nice in one way, but you know if I wasn’t … presented in that way, what would I be, the office croney? It is just not a very valuable way of assessing people’s abilities I think.” (Female 50, paid staff, voluntary sector).*

Not only were past experiences of age and gender discrimination related to us but current practice in the workplace was being witnessed, *“only a few weeks ago we were going to do an exhibition down in Birmingham and they got two girls from telesales, and they were told to wear short skirts. I couldn’t believe it. So they were picked to go down and told to wear short skirts”*.

In response to a question as to the existence of sexism in the workforce this interviewee responded*, “Yes, yes ... I think basically there’s still a lot of sexism around, I think so, I’m pretty sure...We were laughing - although we make a joke out of it at work - you know, you get some of the bosses come in and they go,”Can you make a cup of tea?” and they’ll turn to a woman!, they won’t turn to the bloke, they’ll turn to the nearest female, so it’s there, in their heads”.*

Subjective decisions on who to put forward for training, based upon a person’s age is often couched in terms of, the economic benefit or payback period the trainee may have within the company, and as such they are misjudged. The literature has shown, that workers who have considerable length of service are more likely to repay their firm with loyalty, unlike younger workers who move on with the training certificates acquired elsewhere in their CVs.

As with age discrimination, the tendency to have experienced perceived gender discrimination was stronger amongst the younger end of the cohort, particularly those in the 50-54 age group. One possible explanation for this was that profound changes regarding women’s employment and equal opportunity legislation, during the last thirty years, had impacted greatly on this group, simply by virtue of the fact that these women were more likely to have grown up and grown older under these changes. They witnessed the challenges, then and now, of gender inequalities being brought before the tribunals and courts, providing a drip feed of evidence, reinforcing the experiences of those who had faced the hurdles associated with maternity, promotion, and equal pay and promotion,

*“Just after I was married I went for a job and it was an internal promotion and it was between me and two men. Both of the men were the same age as me, they were less qualified than me, they had a worse sickness record than me, because I was always careful ...conscientious about my days off, so on paper it looked like me. But at the interview, this man said to me, this is the gods honest truth, he said to me, ‘you’ve recently been married?’ I said ‘yes’. ‘So you’ll be having children in a few years time?’ I said ‘no, I don’t intend to have any children for a long while yet’ ‘But you will be having children?’ It was an assumption he made without me saying anything. I didn’t get the job, one of the men got the job, but I was so angry because I knew why they hadn’t given it to me.” (Female 55, working full-time).*

Another told of how on gaining a new position she found out she was pregnant, upon which her contract was terminated, *“They [employer] said, ‘… I must have known [that I was pregnant]and that I was taking the [training] place…that I was just messing around,*

*because it takes you a few weeks you know to get trained …so they just said, ‘you must have known you were pregnant’ and I said, ‘well I didn’t’ and they said, ‘well we’re terminating your contract’.”(Female 58, carer of family and home, not actively seeking work).*

Others gave examples of negative gendered stereotypes that they had experienced during their working lives. One woman told how sexist ‘jibes’ and ‘jokes’ had become a part of her everyday existence, *“I was whistled at I think every day I came to work and not just by the students, there was a lot of sexist banter and comments, nothing specifically insulting, but just low level boring crap… and you can’t be bothered to respond to it on a daily basis, so it just becomes part of your daily existence.” (Female 50 paid voluntary sector)*

There were also examples of women in the sample, who in the 1970’s, had taken advantage of the new legislation – they were the first to ‘break though’ and establish themselves in formerly male-dominated jobs, yet found themselves facing a new set of hurdles along the way. One woman recalled the trouble she had in being accepted in her post in a public institution which has had a long history of male domination, *“When I went into X, it was 1976 so it was just after the Equal Opportunities, but you know some people had claimed... for discrimination … I mean if I’d claimed for some of the things that were said to me when I went [there], and the way we were treated, because we were women, not by all of them, some of them were brilliant. But some of the things that were said, you could have taken them to a tribunal. But at the time you didn’t realise, you’re only young and you felt that if you stepped out of line - that would be it - because they could do that at any time… just say that you’re not suitable, and they didn’t have to give you an explanation.” (Female 50, job seeker).*

Time taken out of the labour market to have and raise children had a profound impact on the availability of opportunity and choice once women returned to work. Although many could return to their previous employer they had fewer years of service (compared to men and to single women) in which to progress and move up the career ladder. For those women who entered the job market at that time, it was not only their gender and family status that conspired to discriminate but their age preventing them from applying for a post,

*“I was 36 years old and believe it or not, seventeen years ago they used to put on the notice board in the job centre [pause] they used to type it out [job advertisement] on a little postcard, so they would put something like, ‘18-30’ and they would actually put that on…(pauses)…the numbers of jobs, jobs I could have done quite easily… receptionist jobs, answering the telephone … that would have got me back into the workplace and I could have coped with that.” (Female 55, working full-time).*

To remain in particular spheres of work requires training or to re-enter work may also necessitate a strong committal to re-enter education in order to gain new qualifications. The following extracts address the perceptions of self and others to the issue of training and education as a person becomes older, “*I had an example of ageism today, Mary said to me, “have you had your test yet? she said, ”well” she said “you’ve got to remember that as you get older it gets harder to take things in” and I didn’t say anything, because I’m too polite, but I felt like screaming, No! No! it doesn’t, it’s just your perception of it”* Professional female: aged 57

Having the confidence to embark upon training after periods out of the workforce created tensions and comparisons between themselves and those who were more conversant with new technology, *“I've been on a computer course, but it's only the Learn Direct one, so I feel that the barriers are obviously my skills aren't up to date, … a lack of confidence as well, because you realise that everybody else is up to speed on computers and things, and when you've been out of the full-time workforce for any length of time, you do lose your confidence and, you know, it's hard.” (Female 50, job seeker/volunteer).*

The women were generally less confident about studying than the over-sixties. Younger age groups also had greater concerns about the demands of study and, interestingly, also were more likely to believe that they were too old to study and appeared to have less confidence in their ability to learn. This interviewee recalls how lack of achievement at school was in a way expected of them, resulted in limiting the choices that were open to them, *“I was in the C stream so my expectations or the school's expectations of me was not [good] …I wouldn't be suitable for going onto further education or anything like that. My only choices were to work in a factory or shop work you know that kind of work.” (Female 55,early retired).*

*“I always felt that I had failed really because when I took the 11 plus I had an interview to go to the grammar school and I didn't pass. You can imagine the first couple of years of my schooling, I probably felt quite a sort of failure really.” (Female 54, returned to work in her forties).*

There was a clear perception that Higher Education was not interested in the likes of them. With some institutions thought of as being exclusively aimed at younger people and not valuing the life experience gained by prospective older students. Whilst this suggests institutional failings in widening participation amongst older learners, the barriers were sometimes much more blunt,

*“….then a course came up in X [another college] so I thought I’ll try there so I rang up and by then I think I was 49 or 50 and he (tutor)said. ‘How old…can I ask you how old you are?’ I said, ‘I’m 50’, he said, ‘Won’t you feel stupid in a class of 16-19 year olds?’” (Female 50+, unemployed).*

Policies enacted to emancipate older women also served to reduce the importance of their contribution through their experience of persistent and often covert discrimination. The layering of ageism and ageist perceptions created insurmountable challenges and perpetuated discrimination against older women during their collective routes into (and out of) work.

Very few of the women had taken up study to increase their employability and were beginning to question whether study after middle age was going to be as profitable as initially thought. Comments suggested that they expected to face age discrimination when looking for work. Negative cultural perceptions about age and learning were at the back of their minds or had impacted on their study in some respect.

 Reasons to try and improve qualifications fell into three categories, to re-train after redundancy, increasing social contact, and thirdly, for reasons of personal development. *“I was the oldest person doing my final…this diploma …my tutor said to me ‘why are you doing it?’, because I was already qualified, but I just wanted to get in there, renew it all and find out what else is going on, she used to say to me ‘you are so brave’, and I used to think, ‘is it because I am older’, you know, what the bloody hell is she doing* ***this*** *for?” (Female 57, volunteer).*

Intermittent work patterns in the past served to reduce the opportunities for women once they re-entered the workforce. Experiences of discrimination because of gender, race or disability were not unusual. Indeed the period was characterised by the sex-stereotyping of jobs, whereby the majority of women were channelled into female dominated occupations like teaching and shop work as one woman put it.

*“There was a lower expectation of women actually progressing up the ladder. Women generally had to work twice as hard as men to achieve, particularly the higher positions within the system and there was a cultural expectation that really it was the man who worked and provided and really women would work for a number of years until they got married and settled down.” (Female 50-54, working full-time).*

Some women had to fight to enter jobs that were previously closed off to them. One such woman applied for a job in her chosen career, only to be rejected and told that it was a “male-only” position.

*“To do the actual job I do now, I had to wait for the Equal Opportunities Bill and then re-apply, because they [employer] didn’t take notice of me the first time. I applied for my first X, and I was told that it was a male only job, and then I applied again and they said ‘no’ they only employed men. I’m going back a long time ago – anyway they only employed men and then I reapplied when the Equal Opportunities Bill came in which must have been in the [pause] 70s. I wrote out a written application and attached a copy of the Bill.”(Female 50-54, working full-time).*

The demand for part time employment might increase progressively with age, and thus some people can choose to combine elements of work and retirement. On the other hand, some people are forced into part-time work because of ill health or disability, redundancy, early retirement or the unavailability of full time work. Hence the growth in demand for part time work may include elements of choice and necessity. From the interview data there was a clear demand for more flexible forms of working.

*“I’ve been working since I was 15 and that’s coming on 35 years, that’s a lot of work, that’s a long working life and now I’d rather do less work perhaps 3 or 4 days a week.” (Female 50-54, student).*

*“I mind my grandson a couple of afternoons a week and I’ve also got another granddaughter…I’m going to be here whenever I’m needed, because I enjoy doing that really as well. I would need to work ... but to work twenty-five hour’s gives me the best of both worlds really …” (Female 50-54, working part-time).*

An increasing number of middle aged and older women had specific care responsibilities for older (parents, spouse or partner) as well as younger (children, grandchildren) family members. The Fawcett society had found that over a third of grandparents help out with the care of their grandchildren, either regularly or occasionally.

This interviewee enjoyed taking care of her grandchildren – it was a role that she felt was deeply enriching,

*“…a lot of my generation are starting to do unpaid work looking after the grandchildren because you feel responsible, you have to give them [offspring] a helping hand, rightly or wrongly, and some children expect their parents to reduce their hours perhaps, if they’re working fulltime to make sure that their child is looked after.” (Female 55, working full-time).*

Another felt a sense of exploitation,

*“I think the government plays on us…at the end of the day they’re stopping us from working because they know it’s costing too much to put their babies into nursery.” (Female 54, job seeker).*

The comments above suggest that for many women detachment from the labour market could be a rational choice, that women were making decisions that still reflected caring responsibilities, even though the detail of that responsibility may have changed over the years. So in some ways the greater flexibility gained from part-time work, was a consequence of, and a precursor to, care provision. Regardless however of the reason for the take up of part-time employment, we found that right across our sample the respondents were more likely to be working part-time now than previously. Indeed, the incidence of part-time work, we found, correlated with age, rising fast after 55. It was enlightening to find how one interviewee hadmade a decision to try and gain promotion when she was fifty. Thus supporting the evidence that some women are moving into managerial positions in the middle years, this interviewee explains how she decided to make the move,

*“I just decided to change direction a year ago because I'd been with [x] for 18 years...I saw this job advertised and I just read it, and I thought I could do that. It was just a spur of the moment thing, seeing that advert. I had thought about moving on - well I can't at my age - I'll be here till I retire [I thought]. When I say that, I thought, its worth a try and I did…I wouldn't say I'm ambitious, in the past I think that I just got to the stage in [x] where you could do the job with your eyes closed. You go on automatic pilot. The chief executive said ‘I thought you'd be here till you retired’ and so did I, ‘but if I don't do it now maybe it won’t wait till I'm over 60, its going to be even harder’,…he was very pleased for me and very supportive.”*

*(Female 58, change of career at age 50).*

Women’s progression in the workforce has been slow to filter through, with many still encountering gendered assumptions, some breaking through the glass ceiling, with many older employees now facing the silver ceiling of ageism. For many older women they have dropped out of the running for full time employment, preferring to undertake part-time or voluntary work, or combining this with caring for their own family members. Many failed to re-engage due to internalised barriers related to their lack of belief or confidence in their own self efficacy or rejection by employers. Thus however positive the previous interviewee may be, the evidence of past experiences as well as current perceptions has led to the belief that even though legislation is now in place for equal opportunities, including laws to protect against ageism, that a range of ‘isms’, relating to age and gender are operating in the workplace and in society that belittles efforts, demeans their contribution and stifles their productivity and finally they deny many older women the opportunity to show what they can really do.

The author would like to extend grateful thanks to the women who participated in the GDAP study. who allowed the sensitive and difficult experiences of discrimination in their lives to be used to inform future generations of the need to fight against inequality and work to eradicate discrimination in all its forms

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Figure 1: Male and female employment rates by age, autumn 2004



Source: Labour Force Survey 2004

1. Prior to the implementation of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006, Liverpool John Moores University embarked on a 3 year research project funded by ESF Objective 3. Data was gathered from 1035 men and women over fifty and 178 employer representatives on issues concerning age and gendered stereotypes. The interviews with women over fifty form the basis of section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Government Equalities Office see, http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality\_act\_2010.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Age Concern and Help the Aged merged in 2010 to become AgeUK. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/50-plus-workers-trapped-in-long-term-unemployment/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (LTE) unemployed over 12 months. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Evette Cooper, Sunday 4 July 2010, Guardian newspaper Sunday 4 July 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Labour Force Study (2001; 2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY\_PUBLIC/3-04082010-BP/EN/3-04082010-BP-EN.PDF [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. "Applicants should be graduates, ideally with not more than 2-3 years' experience in a commercial environment." Supermarket was ordered to pay €5,000 and advised to amend future advertisements [↑](#footnote-ref-9)