

# Reflections on perceived gendered ageism in the U.S. federal civil service

## Abstract

Issues related to age are often overlooked when researchers conduct studies of demographic groups in the U.S. workforce. This results in limited understanding of the work experiences of older workers – especially women. In the few studies that have focused on older women, the women who were interviewed disclosed consistent pressure to look young as well as feeling overlooked at work resulting in perceptions of diminished opportunities. This article concludes with recommendations for practice.

**Keywords:** gendered ageism, age inclusivity, women, older workers, intersectionality

## Introduction

“In our society that values men over women and youth over old age, sexism and ageism intersect to erode women’s status more rapidly and severely than men’s. However, limited attention is given to women’s responses to their devaluation, particularly collective efforts to either resist or accommodate dominant beliefs about ageing women. In the midst of dramatic changes in the experience of growing older – expansions in the average length of our lives and improvements in the quality of our later years – the socio-cultural valuation of age remains constant: Youth, not old age, is the desired state. However, feminist perspectives point out that ageism intersects with sexism to create a double standard of ageing, a gendered ageism that more severely and rapidly erodes women’s than men’s social valuation as they age...”<sup>1</sup> (p. 764)

## Background

Unlike demographic characteristics that *typically* remain static over one’s lifetime (e.g., race, gender), age is a characteristic that changes over time for every individual that ages. Persons in the U.S. are living longer and eschewing retirement at a greater rate than anticipated resulting in a four-generation workforce with Baby Boomers on one end of the spectrum and Gen Z on the other. As individuals age in the workforce, they experience the organization and the individuals within it differently because how individuals are treated is shaped, in part, by perceptions of age.

Nancy Morrow-Howell,<sup>2</sup> warns, “If we are lucky enough to live a long time, we will experience ageism.” (p.1) Ageism – prejudice or discrimination based on a person’s age – can impact job satisfaction, turnover, and more importantly, one’s mental and physical health.<sup>3,4</sup> Researchers such as Cuddy et al.,<sup>5</sup> suggests that ageism “often goes unchallenged by mainstream society” (p. 280) and Angus & Reeve,<sup>6</sup> believe that ageism has “become so embedded in our perceptions of human life that they are taken for granted” (p. 138) which echoes Allen’s,<sup>7</sup> suggestion that ageism is “the most socially condoned and institutionalized forms of prejudice in the United States.” (p. 610)

While there is some research on the construct of ageism, there is less research focused on the intersection of gender and age – namely, gendered ageism that exposes the juxtaposition of the perceptions regarding older men and older women in the workplace. As stated by Barrett & Naiman-Sessions<sup>1</sup>, “... feminist perspectives point out that ageism intersects with sexism to create a double standard of ageing, a gendered ageism that more severely and rapidly erodes women’s than

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men’s social valuation as they age ...” (p. 764). As Beery & Swayze,<sup>8</sup> suggest, ageist behaviors against older women workers can include microaggressions and marginalization, a focus on youthful looks, and the presumption of retirement.

## Findings

In 2021, Sharon Beery,<sup>9</sup> conducted...” a qualitative study of older women workers in the U.S. federal civil service. Through the interviews, the women gave voice to their perceptions and experiences. One woman spoke of the perceived need to color her hair to appear younger:

*“I’m sorry to say ... I sit there and I think that if you look old, they’re gonna treat you like that. And so, I tried to look young and be young and tried to exercise and stay in shape so that I’m not seen as somebody who, like the older woman on my team – I don’t know how old she is, but she looks very old. And I wonder because I’d been caught off guard when I’ve seen people within the agency, who look very old and they’re actually younger than I am. And so, I’m sitting there thinking, you know something, that’s how others will perceive them and treat them like, Oh, you’re my mother... but they look the part of an older person. I know that my face is getting older, and you know, I’ve got the bags under the eyes, and I haven’t done any surgeries, but I do get the hair done because I think we have to, in order to be credible and have a presence, to have a leadership presence.”<sup>9</sup> (p. 105)*

This study participant’s quote exemplifies the extra burden – the older woman tax – that is paid to portray youthfulness and reinforces the idea or position of being old as negative in comparison to being young. Cecil et al.,<sup>10</sup> suggests that portraying a more youthful appearance may include a myriad of activities ranging from using cosmetics, undergoing surgical or non-surgical procedures, attending to hair to specific clothing choices. The extra burden – the older woman tax creates pressure for them to not only pay more attention to their appearance but also to conform to unrealistic societal appearance norms, to prevent themselves as being categorized as “old” or less competent. As highlighted above, being perceived as old reiterates that there is something wrong or detrimental about being identified as an older woman, both in capability and appearance.

## One woman spoke of her invisibility at work after she aged

*“I’ve heard this from older women that you feel like you disappear, that people don’t see you anymore. ... When I was younger, I couldn’t*

*imagine it. I was like, what are you talking about? Why would you disappear? But as I get older, and I'm becoming that stereotype, I realize that there is some truth to it. People don't look at me; they don't see me. They don't take me seriously.”<sup>9</sup> (p. 88)*

The above narrative highlights invisibility and erasure, as both a common and shared experience of older women, in particular. In the above example, a study participant recounts instances of older women sharing their lived experience of their presence being erased, becoming invisible as well as the personal impact it had on her to hear these stories. The shared stories raised profound questions about her sense of belonging and showed how stereotypes can be internalized shaping who one becomes.

The concepts of belonging and invisibility are deeply interwoven with identity as well as societal roles. Belonging refers to the relational phenomenon of individuals feeling valued as a part of or as a group or organization (by being seen and there being a connection among the members, for example).<sup>11</sup> Having a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need. However, due to prejudices and negative stereotypes associated with gendered ageism, achieving a sense of belonging in the workplace.

Stereotypes found at the intersection of gender and age also pose unique challenges for older women. When older women's self-identities are shaped by ageist stereotypes, they often internalize the double standard of aging and physical attractiveness.<sup>12</sup> Beyond what one own lived experience or can imagine for themselves, the experiences of others, especially those who share similar characteristics, can shape one's perceptions, beliefs, and lead to the adoption of ideas associated with a stereotype into one's own view of oneself or others. Internalizing any type of negative age stereotypes can adversely influence the effectiveness of older female employees.

Furthermore, the negative behaviors toward older women are often internalized and can, in turn, become a self-fulfilling prophecy supporting the perception that older woman workers are less valued members of the workforce as expressed in this quote from an interview with an older woman worker in the U.S. federal civil service:

*“It’s part of the subconscious bias. It’s just the way that we pick up. I definitely think that is predominant in this society right now. And it’s very unfortunate – and this is a point I want to make – is that what happens with this subconscious bias in a work environment is that over time, people start almost to believe the negative things that most people think about them... They start to embody it, and it diminishes the benefit of diversity because people don’t feel valued. ... They don’t show up with all of their abilities and perspectives. And so, it just generally, the stereotypes and the subconscious, it really does reduce creativity and innovation and productivity. And it affects the people who have the view, as much as it affects the people who are the recipients of the negative, but it diminishes everyone.”<sup>9</sup> (p. 137)*

## Conclusion

Age is an unusual demographic characteristic in that it changes over time, whereas other demographic characteristics are static for most individuals (i.e., race, gender). Ageism – discrimination and prejudice against the aged – is often unaddressed in organizations.

Morrow-Howell,<sup>2</sup> suggests that since “There is no social pressure to confront it [ageism], no Me-too movement or Black Lives Matter.”, ageism will continue, unimpeded. Thus, both organizations and individuals within them must take specific actions to address

ageism and promote age-diverse workforces, especially considering the demographic projections that show a significant increase in individuals aged 60+ remaining in the workforce.<sup>13</sup>

### Consider these three actions that organizations can take to curtail ageism

Lose the trappings of the way it has always been done. Taking the routine route will recreate yesterday’s workplace and stall progress in the areas of hiring, talent development, and promotion.

Scrutinize your human resources policies, benefits, and support offerings. Examine each policy with a focus on who is privileged and who is overlooked and then work to make each policy equitable.

Create and innovate with older workers at the table. When creating work groups, utilize the Max 70 rule (where the representation of each demographic group is held at 70%) to ensure adequate representation across groups.

### Consider these three actions that individuals can take to curtail ageism

Ditch the burden of youth and lookism. Save time and money by leaning into one’s natural look and encourage your colleagues to do the same. Together, you can create a new normal around looks.

Break the cycle of internalization and embodiment. Spend time examining your own biases and self-criticisms that may stem from your youth or societal messages. Cast off negative self-talk that doesn’t serve you and replace it with affirmations and additional positive messages.

Create the workforce that you want to experience now or age into. As an individual you have power to shape the workplace. If your organization does not have an employee resource group focused on older workers, then create one. Develop mentorship and reverse mentorship dyads to build relationships across generations. In other words, actively participate in your organization’s culture around aging.

In sum, take action – organizations don’t change for the better on their own. “Ageism is discrimination against one’s future self. So, working toward a more age-just society will benefit all of us”.<sup>2</sup> (p. 1)

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest of any nature.

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