



Gender Discrimination and Ageist Perceptions

Liverpool John Moores University
European Social Fund Objective 3

Research Report
Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from an ESF Objective 3 Project “Gender Discrimination and Ageist Perceptions”. The project is based at Liverpool John Moores University, in the Faculty of Education, Community and Leisure.

Context

Older age groups have consistently been undervalued and often discarded by employers, for being too old. They are now being encouraged to re-enter the workplace through schemes such as New Deal 50 plus and Pathways to Work, or to take up volunteering through the promotion of “Active Citizenship”. In addition, the concept of lifelong learning has been advocated by New Labour as an attempt to move away from the traditional notions of education, towards a vision in which education forms a lifelong process, which can be accessed at any time during the life course. Yet, despite the lower labour market attachment of the over fifties, people of this age group in higher education account for only around 1% of the student population. There is a variety of ways in which people approaching their mid life would, on the face of it, be able to access work, education or volunteering experiences. However, past research and current data suggest that there appear to be barriers to the take up of such opportunities.

The Aim

This study set out to investigate the experiences and perceptions of women and men aged over fifty and the organisations which impact upon their lives, in an effort to understand more fully the potential barriers this age group may face when accessing opportunities, employment, training or education.

Background

Gender disadvantages in the world of work have been well documented. Increasingly, age perceptions are thought to be a factor in older peoples’ access to employment and training opportunities. Data shows that the

over fifties comprise a third of people of working age; however, only a fifth of those are actually in work and only a tenth of those are on employer and government training programmes (TAEN, 2006).

The demographic change, with more people living longer, coupled with low birth rates, is creating an expanding older population and fuelling concerns over labour shortages. There is, therefore, an economic imperative to draw workers back into work via a variety of avenues.

Despite over 70% of women now participating in the workforce, the employment patterns of men and women show that only 21% of women over 40 are in full-time employment, compared with 46% of men. Women have not had the same opportunities as men to build a career or to earn the equivalent of males due to their child-rearing and caring responsibilities, with many continuing to be concentrated in traditionally low paid sectors. The pay gap between some men and women is widening, despite the long history of legislation on equal pay. To compound the situation, older women are now said to be facing a double jeopardy of age and gender discrimination.

Tackling discrimination has been at the heart of equal opportunities legislation designed to prevent unequal treatment regardless of gender, race and disability. The Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) and Equal Pay Act (EPA) both came into force in 1975. Each Act attempted to redress the inequalities suffered by (mainly) women in terms of employment and education. The Bill to establish the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) received Royal Assent on 16th February 2006 and will provide an integrated approach to all forms of discrimination including that on the grounds of age.

Sample

A national sample of 1035 men and women over fifty was surveyed, as were 181 employer representatives across the private and public, voluntary and higher education sectors. Interviews were conducted with 51 people over the age of fifty and 21 with organisation representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Findings

- ◆ Both men and women over fifty faced considerable difficulty in gaining re-entry into work following labour market detachment. Factors which they perceived to hinder their access included a belief that ageist assumptions were operating within the recruitment process.
- ◆ Almost three-quarters of the men and women had experienced gaps out of the labour market. For women these were largely due to maternity and child-rearing, whilst for men, detachment was mainly due to unemployment or redundancy. Women often felt as though these gaps resulted in their skills lacking currency and hence many felt 'left behind'.
- ◆ Clear relationships were found between the cumulative experiences of discrimination past and present and those in the sample who exhibited lower levels of life satisfaction and self-efficacy. This was affected by circumstances or events which were beyond the control of the individual, for example compulsory redundancy or ill health.
- ◆ Women were likely to indicate, during the interviews, that gender disadvantage and ageist assumptions were factors in their experiences of entering work or progression within employment. There was evidence that the double jeopardy of age and gender combined to create a distinct form of prejudice against women. The stereotypical assumptions associated with age, mental acuity and physical appearance were played out in the work environment.
- ◆ Around half of all organisations were aware of the voluntary codes of practice on age. Yet there was widespread belief that ageist assumptions were commonplace in certain organisations. However, most organisations favoured a legislative approach to age discrimination.
- ◆ Very few organisations placed importance on the skills, proficiencies and competencies required in running a home.
- ◆ When exploring the concept of 'older', the organisations perceived women to be older at an earlier age than men. Public and private employers gave a mean age of fifty-five for women and fifty-six for men. However, the voluntary sector identified the higher ages of

sixty for women and sixty-four for men, indicating a more age positive approach, yet the difference between the mean ages for men and women was greater.

- ◆ Management appointments were more likely to be offered to people between thirty and forty years of age. This perhaps discriminates against women who have taken time out of the labour market in their earlier life due to maternity and childcare responsibilities and thus may contribute to the glass-ceiling effect.
- ◆ Organisations that operated flexible working arrangements and/or negotiated retirement options, were those least likely to be suffering from skills shortages or retention problems.
- ◆ Training opportunities were sometimes limited for older workers, due to a perception that the cost and the payback period, in terms of years an older person was expected to continue working, were economically unviable.
- ◆ Recruiters within the higher education sector used a variety of methods to contact potential students. However, very few used outreach methods or sustained community liaison. There was evidence of limited support for older students within some institutions.
- ◆ Older students were perceived as bringing unique attributes to their studies including maturity, wisdom and stability. They were also believed to reach high levels of achievement despite experiencing a myriad of barriers.
- ◆ Whilst one in four of the sample expressed a desire to study at a higher level, both recruiters and individuals over fifty perceived barriers to be mainly attributed to costs of study, loans and top up fees. Also, both identified a lack of self-confidence and the perception of feeling too old to study, as barriers.

Summary of Recommendations

It is recommended that age be incorporated into an Equal Opportunities (EO) statement or policy. Age should be considered on an equal footing with discrimination on such grounds as race and sex.

All decisions regarding suitability of applicants for work, volunteering or education should be based upon an age neutral set of criteria, which values experience and competency whether acquired through paid employment, volunteering or the undertaking of caring responsibilities.

The double jeopardy of age and gender discrimination is often expressed in the form of ageist and sexist stereotypes, therefore, a proactive approach in the form of monitoring organisational performance through regular gender and age audits, will ensure that career progression is age neutral.

Age restrictions on specific roles or tasks need to be removed (unless absolutely necessary¹) to promote age equality.

Equal opportunity for training, career development and progression must be transparent and achievable regardless of age.

Negotiation of needs for training between employer and employee should be part of the performance criteria.

Flexibility in working patterns has been identified as a benefit most appreciated by workforces. Organisations should appoint an age diversity champion to ensure age equality is in place for all personnel, thus raising awareness of how gender and ageist assumptions can conspire to limit opportunities.

Training opportunities to raise awareness of gender and age discrimination issues should be developed to facilitate an understanding of the

¹ Organisations would need to refer to the 2006 Age Discrimination legislation to understand under what circumstances such age restrictions would be lawful. Exemptions will be allowed on Genuine Occupational Requirement (GOR) and if there is an objective justification.

dynamics at work, and thus create opportunities to challenge possible discriminatory experience.

Feedback to identify what stage of a recruitment process people reach when applying for a position is recommended, and should be actively pursued and piloted. Standardising this feedback would help to allay the perceptions of the application ending up 'in the bin'.

Flexibility of work opportunities should be encouraged for all age groups and should be equally available to all who need them.

Flexible and negotiated retirement is a precursor to a more inclusive and stable work environment and is valued by both employers and employees. Development of flexible retirement options should be explored with employees.

Under the terms of the forthcoming Age Discrimination legislation, employees should be given the relevant information on retirement policy.

Partnerships should be created between both small businesses and local community organisations, whose knowledge and contacts may be able to assist employees with their job-finding skills.

Mixed age and gender workforces have been shown to create inclusive environments and therefore open up opportunities to both men and women of all ages. Forming partnerships with the voluntary sector could create an avenue of support for those contemplating a phased retirement, who may wish to make the transition into volunteering.

Higher education institutes should endeavour to review their support mechanisms for older students including financial advice, support for family obligations (including childcare), study skills groups and a specified advisor for older students.

Higher education institutions should seek to forge links with community projects and interventions or local learning groups, prior to involvement with further education (FE) level, and not wholly rely upon Access routes.

Barriers need to be broken down; therefore encouragement should be given to universities to engage with local community groups. There will be many individuals with the competencies required to enter higher education, based upon their previous work or voluntary experience and due weight should be given to competencies acquired through undertaking caring responsibilities.