

Women in management: gender, age and working lives



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Authors

Marjut Jyrkinen (Hanken School of Economics, Finland) and Linda McKie (Glasgow Caledonian University and CRFR, Scotland/UK). Edited by Sarah Morton, CRFR. The Project 'Age, Gender and Diversity: Women Managers and Policies in Organisations' was funded by the Academy of Finland 2008-2010.

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Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
The University of Edinburgh,
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN
Tel: 0131 651 1832
Fax: 0131 651 1833
E-mail: crfr@ed.ac.uk

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The project reported in this briefing paper explored how age and gender inter-weave and impact on the working and home lives of women managers working in two EU member states, namely Finland and Scotland. The proportion of women in middle management jobs has increased, but few reach leadership or corporate board positions. There are structural problems, such as omissions in work-life balance, and gendered practices of old boy's networks and men recruiting men (referred to as homosociality), which pose obstacles for the career progress of women. At the same time, women undertake a large portion of home/unpaid work and organising of family life more generally. This limits the time available to achieve equilibrium between paid work, career development and home life. In many organisations, an ethos of long-hours and a culture of presenteeism* impact negatively on efforts to ensure well-being and career progress. The challenge is how to address the multifaceted nature of gendered practices against the backdrop of ageing workforces and economic downturn.

The study

The overall aim of the research was to investigate intersections of age and gender in public, private and third sector organisations in Finland and Scotland. The study draws on data from 25 interviews and four focus groups gathered in the two countries during 2008-9. The project involved women managers from different age groups, and considered their careers and choices in worklife, as well as policies in workplaces to support personal and career development.

Women and work in Finland and Scotland

There are many social and political parallels between Finland and Scotland. Geographical and demographic similarities include population size (just over 5 million) with a concentration of around 40% of the population in a core urbanised area of each country. The governments of both countries are addressing the implications of demographic change with ageing workforces and populations in general. The economic downturn from 2008 onwards is also an on-going cause for concern as both governments promote policies to ensure talent is utilised to generate growth. There are also other economic and social changes: families and relationships are shifting with

*Presenteeism; when employees feel the need to be seen to be at work.

Key points

- Women in management experience gendered ageism in Finland and Scotland.
- Women's caring responsibilities at different ages create significant impact on their careers, and makes their career paths different from those of their male colleagues.
- Women experience gendered ageism differently in different organisations, but it often includes comments on women's roles, sexual availability, potential to become pregnant and the menopause.
- Policies to prevent gendered ageism are generally underdeveloped in organisations.
- Employers were often felt to interpret part-time work as a lack of commitment to the organisation or women's own careers, even though women themselves felt otherwise.
- Women also enjoyed some benefits of experience and seniority that came with ageing; including recognition of self-worth and increased control.

divorce, serial monogamy, co-habitation, family re-formation and an increase in solo living. Changes pose particular issues for women who are expected to work, generally lead on home and domestic tasks, and who themselves wish to develop careers across their adult life. The question of income has implications for retirement given the gender pay gap. This is on average 17.5% in the EU, 20% in Finland and 21.4% in the UK. Taken as a whole the pensions of many women remain lower than those of men (European Commission, 2009).

Finland has greater welfare provision than the UK, but this does not mean that the state system has been able to effectively tackle well-being, work stress and exhaustion. The proliferation of short fixed-term contracts and job insecurity are major concerns. In the Scottish welfare system the government intervention and state support is more limited, and the approach is less regulated and more based upon advice, support and awards.

Women make up half of the workforce in both countries, but 82% in Finland work full-time while this is the case for 59% for Scottish women (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007; Scottish Government, 2007). This notable contrast in part or full-time working is due to the Finnish provision of universal day care and a parental leave system that enables either of the parents to stay home until their child is three years old, and the other parent to work meantime. According to the Fourth European Working Conditions Survey in 2005, nearly 40% of employees

in Finland and 34% in the UK had a woman as an immediate superior (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007). Of managers, women comprise 36% in Finland and 38% in UK, the average in the EU being 33% (Lyly-Yrjänäinen & Fernández Macías, 2009). However, in both countries, women's share in upper echelons is lower than in mid-management, and women managers are overrepresented in the social and health care sectors, education, retail and services (ibid.). Gender segregation of labour markets is a problem in both countries, but even more so in Finland.

Theme-based analysis of the data brought up issues around care responsibilities and their impact on women's worklife and careers, age and gender based discrimination, the affects of embodiment of age and ageism, and the empowering factors of age. The interviews and focus groups are anonymised, and all the names in quotes are pseudonyms.

Age group	Sector	Marital status	Children	Education
≤45 n=9	Business manager n=10	Married n=14	No children n=9	High school + professional education n=9
46-59 n=10	Own business n=8	Co-habiting n=2	1-2 children n=8	Masters degree n=14
≤60 n=6	3rd/public sector n=7	Single n=9	3 or more children n=8	PhD n=2
Total n=25	Total n=25	Total n=25	Total n=25	Total n=25

Table 1: One to One Interviews in Finland and Scotland

Care responsibilities and worklife

Caring for others in the workplace is a significant part of managerial work. Care continues to be gendered with women generally taking responsibility for the delivery of key care and domestic tasks. Women reported that whilst enjoying many aspects of unpaid care work, this had impacted radically on their worklives. All interviewed women were well educated, professionally innovative, and enthusiastic about their work and career advancements. It was also common that care for others – in and outside the workplace – was considered so pertinent part of one's identity and values that some women decided to opt out from their careers or to change working hours and patterns. Part-time work and career breaks were reported to endanger the career prospects of women managers. It was commonly remarked that employers interpret part-time work as a lack of commitment to the organisation or one's own future at a higher level management.

Women undertook a range of care duties, such as the care of young children, but also of elderly parents, relatives and friends. Care for others encompassed many satisfying and enriching aspects of working life, but work-life balance legislation and organisational policies were reported to offer limited support for those with care responsibilities. Care responsibilities, or even the 'threat' of childbearing, could restrict advancements of women with young families.

Age groups	Finland	Scotland
30's	7	5
40's	4	3
50's	1	2
Total	12	10

Table 2: Focus Group Participants

If I hadn't had a family, I would have [advanced] to be in a powerful position now... I couldn't even get to the next [stage] in there now [the recruitment process] because of my age and the fact that I had been married for, you know, two years... for about ten years, ... I chose to do that [job] because it was important for me to be with my daughter.
(Business manager, Fay, Scotland, 47)

I did not dare to take the risk and stay at home after childbirth 11 months, because I was afraid that it will impact on my career.
(Business manager, Viola, Finland, 44)

Policies in administration and private sector organisations are generally assumed to be gender-neutral, but their implementation and practices can be exclusive and discriminatory. In spite of anti-discrimination legislation, gender policies and gender mainstreaming efforts, traditional structures in organisations and political decision-making often perpetuate hidden discriminations in particular if they are based on multiple marginalisations, such as the intersections of age and gender. The impact and manifestations of age, ageing and ageism are often experienced differently by women and men working in the same organisation.

Gendered ageism at work

Gendered ageism refers to discriminatory actions, whether intentional or non-intentional, based on the intersections of gender and age. It is not limited only to relations between men and women, but may be evident among women as well as men. In the data, women managers had encountered gendered ageism at different stages of their careers in both countries.

Previous research has concluded that gendered ageism, or 'sexagesim', is more of a problem for women than for men, because sexism is still much embedded in current societies and organisations (Carpenter, 1994). Women managers were often understood and defined as ageing at an earlier chronological age than men, and the 'best age' was described to cover a short time period in early-mid age.

Gendered ageism takes different forms at early, midlife and later stages of careers. Exclusion from career development took place through subtle and covert forms and processes of discrimination, often stagnation in one post for some years. More direct gender-based discrimination in recruitment, promotion and remuneration was also reported. The intersection of gender and age has a strong impact on women managers and their work and career plans. A number actively chose to 'opt out' to opt into their own business (see Stone, 2007).

Policy/research implications

- Policies and practices by senior management and HR to prevent gendered ageism should be developed to better exploit the full talent and knowledge of women in different age groups. The research suggests that women managers who had encountered gendered ageism had either changed their career plans and paths, or were planning to do so.
- Policies and practices on flexible work could enable career development of women in different age group. Re-evaluation of part-time as 'real work' should be considered, as shorter hours do not implicate lesser commitment.
- There is a need for in-depth re-analysis of age and ageism from gender perspective, and development of pro-gender and age policies and practices in organisations.
- New research on gendered ageism, care and careers is necessary given ageing populations and economic downturn.

You are not necessarily taken seriously, because you are a young woman. Sometimes it is just because you are young, sometimes it is because you are not a man, and sometimes it is both.

(Business manager, Alice, Scotland, 35)

... From 50 on you are seen as someone in the older category who is approaching retirement... The organisations are structured in a way that many people don't even see that these structures are, you know, sexist and ageist.

(Public sector manager, Cornelia, Scotland, 67)

Embodied age and ageism

Exclusions and career hurdles on the basis of age were reported by many women managers. Many had to tolerate implicit and explicit sexism in order to maintain work relations and membership of work groups and teams.

Many women managers encountered gendered ageism across their careers and in various ways. Seniority did not stop violations such as sexual harassment, which many women spoke of but had rarely reported to HR or colleagues and when reported were often played down by immediate managers who tended to express unwillingness to take action. The harassment was often laughed off as a bit of fun that women should expect now and again. Practices of 'non-actions' were common in organisations in both countries.

Some women experienced the 'triple burdens' of gender, age and 'lookism'. Sexualised beauty standards are present in worklife, and the embodiment of age and gender became one of the major themes: many women felt pressures to look 'ageless' or younger than their chronological age because of the demands of youthfulness and 'beauty' they felt as built into worklife. These physical aspects of age and gender were reported more in Finland than in Scotland.

It is awful to look at the mirror in the morning before make-up! It is tough to wait for the moment [to get comments on basis of ageing looks]... All want to be young and successful... It is typical that older men are looked upon like a grey eminence, and older gray and tired women in a different way.

(Business manager, Viola, Finland, 44)

Empowering age

Many interviewees realised their potential with maturity — demonstrated through confidence about leadership. 'People skills' often develop through multiple experiences of work and knowledge that relates to many other aspects of life outside work. The self-reflective approach of many interviewees enabled them to develop skills with subordinates and colleagues, which built on wider perspectives and knowledge of work-life issues.

Women in their mid and later careers had more time to invest into worklife as their children had grown older. 'Advanced age' opened up more freedom and courage in worklife, and possibilities to support others. Age(ing) brought a realisation of one's knowledge base and it became easier to challenge problems on policies and practices in organisations. Senior age was a strong empowering element at a personal and organisational level.

I have felt that [mature] age is beneficial in business consulting, as in the very young age a woman can be seen as a 'girl'... as the representatives of the organisations, the managers are often older, age is a benefit. For me the best age has been at over 50 years of age.

(Business owner, Finland, Samantha, 56)

So the older I got, the better I got and the more I was able to convince people of my experience.

(Business owner, Scotland, Cate, 40)

However, care for elders was a day to day reality or on the horizon for many. Growing older brought new opportunities but also on-going challenges with care responsibilities.

Conclusion

To summarise, data illustrates that women managers encountered gendered ageism in both countries. Gendered ageism related to career development, which also included questions of physical appearance and age, and sexualised forms of misbehaviours, even sexual harassment. Care responsibilities at work and home impacted on careers of women in different age stages. Many women changed their career paths because of discriminations and difficulties in career progress. At the same time, age and ageing offered empowering elements for many women managers.