

GENDER

# Older Women Are Being Forced Out of the Workforce

by Lauren Stiller Rikleen

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Susan\* is a woman in her 60s who has spent decades working in the insurance business. After years of performance reviews describing her outstanding work ethic, her fortunes turned once she started reporting to a woman 20 years her junior. Under her new manager, Susan felt set up to fail—she was assigned more cases and held to much higher standards than her younger

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colleagues. Susan's manager issued a formal performance evaluation that characterized her as failing in her duties. Although Susan was supposed to have 90 days to improve, her manager fired her after a few days. Susan has since sued her employer for age discrimination.

⊗ NO THANKS, I WANT TO CONTINUE READING.

Mary\* is a 72-year-old sociology professor with significant scholarship credentials, several teaching awards, and an illustrious record, including three stints as department chair. Her positive career recognition came to an end when the university hired a much younger dean, who denied her funding to hire needed full-time faculty, accused her of poor leadership, and favored her younger colleagues. The dean eventually told her that he would not approve an additional term for her to serve as department chair. Mary filed a lawsuit against the university for age discrimination, which was recently settled.

At the age of 64, Jane\* had worked as a bartender at a neighborhood bar for more than a decade. The bar was being sold, however, and the buyers told Jane that she was too old to be a bartender, disparaging her age and gender in front of other employees and customers before the sale was finalized. They did not keep her on, and instead hired significantly younger women. Jane has since filed suit for age and gender discrimination.

Susan, Mary, and Jane represent a variety of backgrounds and positions, but their stories share a theme that is both commonplace and all too often ignored: senior women are being phased out of the workplace. For the past five years, I have traveled across the U.S., speaking and conducting research on women's leadership and advancement and bias in the workplace. Hundreds of women in their 50s and 60s have shared their stories of demotions, job losses, and the inability to find another job—outcomes they attribute primarily to their age and gender. These women often have long histories of career success, but they have seen their responsibilities assigned to younger workers, their compensation lowered for inexplicable reasons, and their career mobility impaired by a workplace that seems to value youth over experience.

Many women who feel discriminated against because of their age feel that their only recourse is to sue their employers—but they have a daunting road ahead if they choose to do so. Even as state and federal laws prohibit age discrimination, a 2009 Supreme Court decision made it much harder for plaintiffs to win by shifting the burden of proof in these cases to them. This creates bookend barriers to senior women who are seeking to change jobs or re-enter the workplace.

For many of the women I spoke with, these challenges arose just as they were freed from the family responsibilities that slowed their career progress when they were younger. As mothers, they were subjected to assumptions about whether their family obligations interfered with their commitment to work. And when their children grew up, they raced back into the workforce, only to see their careers stalled by a reduced tolerance for aging women at work.

This observation appears to be backed up by recent research. A study that came out last fall by economists at the University of California at Irvine and Tulane University found “robust evidence of age discrimination in hiring against older women.” The data show that it is harder for older women to find jobs than it is for older men.

The researchers created 40,000 job applications for fictional job seekers and submitted them to a variety of online job postings. They made resumes for older applicants (ages 64-66), middle-aged applicants (49-51), and younger applicants (29-31). After monitoring employers’ responses to these dummy applications, the researchers concluded that the evidence shows it is more difficult for older female workers to find jobs. For example, the authors reported that the callback rate for middle-aged female sales applicants was lower than for younger female applicants, while callback rates for middle-aged and young male applicants were similar.

The authors suggested two possible theories for why older women may suffer from age discrimination more than older men: one is that age discrimination laws do not deal effectively with the situation of older women who face both age and gender bias; the other possibility touches on society’s focus on the physical appearance of women, a scrutiny that does not seem to similarly impact men. For example, this appears to be playing out in Hollywood, as actresses like Catherine Zeta-Jones and Kim Cattrall decry the industry’s lack of roles for women in their 40s and older.

For too long, this nexus between age and gender discrimination has been discussed in whispered anecdotes and quietly filed lawsuits. Although this study is a great step in raising the issue, it is striking how little research actually exists on the topic. In order to address and root out age and gender discrimination, there will need to be more future research scoping out the problem and offering recommendations to fix it, and organizations have to take stock and be willing to make changes.

One in three Americans are 50 or older, and by 2030, 1 in 5 will be 65 and above. As women continue to outlive men, they are more likely to have increased healthcare needs, are more likely to be widowed, and will have fewer years in the workforce to accumulate post-retirement savings and sufficient social security.

Managers need to recognize and root out these biases against older women to ensure a workforce where all generations are embraced for the talents they bring. For 50 to truly become the new 30, we need a workplace that provides equal opportunities for women of all ages.

*\*Names have been changed to protect interviewees' identities.*

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Lauren Stiller Rikleen, the author of *You Raised Us, Now Work With Us: Millennials, Career Success, and Building Strong Workplace Teams*, was named by Public Media's Next Avenue as one of the 50 most influential people in aging. She is the president of the Rikleen Institute for Strategic Leadership and a Visiting Scholar at the Boston College Center for Work & Family.

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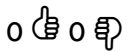
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