



Roundtable on Older Women and Employment

Monday 23rd March 2015

STUC, Glasgow

Older women are *“overlooked for promotion, subject to harassment and more likely to be unemployed”*.

There are real concerns that older women are becoming the *“forgotten generation”* of Scottish society. They are now having to work longer than their own mothers ever did and are struggling to find employment, despite the level of skills and experience they have gained throughout their working lives.

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Introduction

This event was organised in partnership with the STUC Women's Committee as part of the Commission on Older Women and Employment.

The Commission on Older Women will focus on the issues facing older women at work, and how to support the thousands of older women finding themselves out of work, particularly as a result of public sector cuts resulting in a wave of redundancies, as well as significant job losses across the private sector. The Commission will also consider how caring for older relatives is impacting on this generation of older women. The Commission is Chaired by Morag Alexander, a former board member of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair, is a co-Chair of the Commission.

Analysis by the Labour party has shown that unemployment among older women has risen while it has been falling in the general population. More than 13,000 women between the ages of 50 and 64 in Scotland are currently unemployed, up 30% since 2010. Over the same period unemployment for men between of that age has decreased by 23%.



When did you consider yourself to be an older woman?

Personal perceptions and the perceptions of others often contribute to the stage at which women consider themselves to be older. People tend to make judgments based on what they see, rather than on what older women are actually capable of. This can be detrimental, particularly in the workplace.

"I remember my mum always saying that while the body gets older, the brain doesn't age. So in our heads we might still feel like we're only thirty but that's not what's reflected in society."

Some women feel that they are beginning to "*slow down*", in terms of the pace at which they are able to carry out certain tasks. In the workplace this can be an issue, as although physically there may be a difference or a change, women's minds are still fully alert and they still have much to contribute.

"There's an issue for women about lack of equity. I like the idea of something like flexible retirement, because I still want to be in the workplace and I still want to be contributing. I don't really feel like I want to or have to work full time in order to still be a productive worker."

There needs to be some kind of recognition that older women have significant experience, and many have worked for the same employer throughout the course of their working lives. There should be some recompense for that.

There are also issues for those who work in particular jobs, many of which are subject to Equal Pay cases. These women often undertake physically and mentally demanding roles, such as that of a carer, or a nurse, which can become more difficult with age. They have had to fight for the basic right to be paid fairly for the work they have done, and in many cases continue to do.

Restructuring and redundancies within workplaces can contribute to women feeling, or being made to feel, that they are older. They are being forced to compete for positions similar to those which they have occupied for years previously.

“It wasn't until I had to re-apply for jobs that management started to ask how old I was. Up until that point nobody had mentioned my age but when the reorganisation started all of a sudden it seemed to become relevant.”

This type of process within organisations can make women feel that they should be considering retirement, especially when they are “displaced” into another role. Adjusting to new roles and responsibilities can be challenging, and older women are often afforded little or no assistance to make this transition.

Certain working environments can be seen to be the domain of young people, such as contact centres. This can be off-putting for older women,

“I was 48 when I joined this particular company and didn't feel old. At that time there were a lot of older people working in the contact centre, and a lot of them had been displaced from the branches. The company were looking for people with experience to be able to properly assist customers. However over the last five years I have seen older women disappear.”

In these kind of workplaces, older women are being targeted through performance, without recognition that they would perhaps need more time to undertake certain tasks, or time off for health reasons.

“I saw myself being treated the way that other women who I would consider older were being treated and that's when I started to consider my age.”



Has the current work situation changed within the last five years, in particular, attitudes to older women?

The lack of recognition of the health issues faced by older women has become more apparent over the last five years.

“One of the key things is that women who aren’t necessarily having major health issues, they’re just having to deal with things that happen as you get older. More often than not they’re having to do this without little or no support at work.”

Often policies relating to menopause, for example, are extremely difficult to negotiate and implement. Misunderstandings and misinformation around menopause can cause difficulties for women who are experiencing it, which discourages them from seeking support from their employer.

Certain industries, particularly those which are traditionally male dominated, often make decisions which have particularly adverse impacts on older women, without any consultation.

“I used to work in the railway and one of the issues there was uniforms were changed without consulting with staff. The women working as train crew, of which there weren’t very many, were all issued with horrible nylon blouses. The older women found them particularly uncomfortable/un-wearable and wanted to wear their own white blouses but were not allowed to. If the company had done a test, a consultation and some health and safety checking with regards to the menopause then that would have helped.”

Some women are reluctant to define themselves as older, as the way they feel about their own skills and abilities may change. Women who work in certain areas, for example youth work, feel it necessary to keep a *“young attitude”* because of the nature of the work they do.

The way in which the media perceives older women has an impact. Articles in newspapers, regardless of what they are about, will always mention the age of the people they pertain to.

“Where does this obsession with age come from? It seems to be used to define people in the media.”

Women *“of a certain age”* are expected to either conform to the idea that they will *“grow old gracefully”*, or that they will change their appearance in order to look younger.

“On one hand there are women like Judi Dench, who have turned 60/70, they’re happy not to dye their hair and it’s like a badge of honour. Then you look at the likes of Liz Hurley, who recently turned 50, and think everything’s tucked in, smoothed and frozen.”

In a world where you are judged on your looks and if you can afford it then fair play, because that's how she keeps her image, but she's still on the front page a magazine as 'a 50 year old woman'.

The same pressures are not placed on men, who continue to work in the media regardless of how they look and regardless of the age they are. There are seen to be different standards for men, and this is the case not only in the media but other workplaces as well.

Responsibility for tasks in the home traditionally undertaken by women, such as caring, cleaning and cooking, can also have an impact.

"Most women get older quicker because of the amount of work that we do which is unpaid and unrecognised. That's one of the problems."

There are some working environments, such as the police force, where there are not a lot of older women. This is mainly due to the way things used to work.

"In the world I'm in at the moment, there aren't many older women because it's a thirty year contract, and 25 years ago if you had a child you were out of a job anyway. That's changed for the better, however there is a missing generation in the workplace."

One of the most significant changes to work situations has been the increased use of IT. Employers may offer inductions and training courses, however this is not always possible with the constant advances in technology. These training sessions rarely take into account the specific needs of older women, who may require more time and further information in order to be able to use systems. The increase in workloads across all forms of employment can also be problematic.

"We're expected to do more and more, often with less time. In order to keep up with computer systems, I find I have to read up on things in my own time. There's no policy for getting that time back. It becomes a debate where I end up having to explain that I'm not just slow at typing."

There is also seen to be a sense of competition between younger and older workers.

"Young people will be trying to impress their employers so are more likely to give up 4,5, 10 hours of their own time. I just don't have that time to give along with all of the other responsibilities I have in life."

So much of life is online, young people do not feel that they're giving up their time to carry out additional tasks because it's an ingrained part of their world. Depending on what they're doing it could be seen as socialising, whereas many older women do not use social media. That is seen as a big separation between generations.

What changes would you make within the workplace to improve the situation for older women?

It is vital that employers and other staff members recognise the skills and experience that older women bring to the workplace. There needs to be a basic understanding that although older women may, at times, require additional support, time and assistance, they are still more than capable of fulfilling their role and making a positive contribution.

There is an expectation that people will do more for less if redundancies are to be avoided, which places unnecessary pressure on workers. This is particularly detrimental to older women, who are in a different phase of life.

“My sister just retired a few months ago. She’s 62 and was a nurse. She almost regrets retiring now, as she doesn’t feel she was quite ready to give it up. The level she had reached within her organisation didn’t allow her to work more flexibly so that’s a big issue.”

There needs to be a way of maximising the skills and experience older women possess, for example through mentoring other staff members or younger people.

“Employers need to understand the benefit they will get from having older women in the workplace.”

Women do not progress into senior management roles overall, for a number of reasons. However, their experience and often their loyalty should be valued as much as the people who have had a *“meteoric rise to the top”*. In certain areas of employment, such as the financial sector, there was a macho culture which arguably contributed to the current financial climate. The main driver for recovery from the financial crisis has been women.

More needs to be done to bring an end to employment practices such as zero hours contracts and low-paid jobs. Many older women have been made redundant following long careers with employers, across all sectors. These women are being forced into accepting jobs which they are not only overqualified for, but which are precarious and which can often be exploitative. This type of role is often within companies which do not recognise trade unions.

“I’m looking for a job at the moment and it’s nothing short of a nightmare. I can get an eight hour contract in a clothes shop, or 12 hours in B&Q, who are held up as great employers for older people, but they don’t offer full time work.”

Older women seeking work are also at a disadvantage when it comes to detailing their qualifications on application forms and CVs.

“Even if the form doesn’t ask for your age, it asks for your qualifications. I did O-Levels, and the people who are helping me at the ‘jobclub’ don’t understand that. They ask what grades I got, not realising that with those qualifications it was either a pass or a fail.”

There are other ways of checking age without actually asking for it. Many women have ‘qualifications’ which come from in-house training and so are more informal but no less valuable. The lack of formal qualifications, or qualifications which are recognised now, means that many are seen as lacking because experience isn’t valued.

When those who are seeking work ‘sign on’ they must sign a pledge, part of which is that they will use Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc to seek work. A lot of older women just do not use these things. This means that even when they are out of work, barriers still exist.

There is a need for access to a computer/the internet as all applications are online, and also a mobile phone because that’s how the Department of Work and Pensions keep in touch about claims. These are just two examples of potential barriers for women starting to sign on and look for work.

Older women in rural areas experience further barriers, as mobile phone coverage and broadband access are poor, and in some cases non-existent.



The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

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