Ageism and Sexism in the Workplace

By Rosalind Chait Barnett

America is graying. The signs are unmistakable, and they are everywhere. Even our compulsively youth-driven culture is coming to terms with this new reality. The "older demographic" is squarely in the sights of policy makers, advertisers, and the media. Pharmaceutical companies bombard us with endless claims about the benefits of potions for erectile dysfunction, arthritic pain, and diabetes. The 60-year-old actress-model Lauren Hutton still graces magazine covers, as does 70-year-old Sophia Loren. The cover story of the March/April 2005 issue of AARP featured seven of "Hollywood's Hottest," all stunning female Oscar winners, four of whom are in their 70s. And older women now play feature roles in movies, even in sexy roles. Witness Diane Keaton in Something's Gotta Give, in which she plays the mother of a 20-something daughter who is having a fling with an aging Jack Nicholson. In one of the most memorable scenes, Nicholson sees Keaton coming out of the shower nude and is shocked because he has never seen an older woman's body before. He gets over his shock and develops a mature relationship with this age-appropriate woman. And Clint Eastwood, a 70-something actor and director, plays the lead role in Million Dollar Baby, arguably a modern-day classic. Yet, as we all know, issues of aging are in many ways women's issues, partly because American women on average outlive men by about seven years.

For most women, attitudinal and structural factors in the workplace put them at a tremendous disadvantage and render them more vulnerable than men to hardship as they age. Much has been made of the great sacrifices American women make for their families at home and in the workforce. These sacrifices are not limited to their disproportionate share of child-rearing. Because women outlive their husbands, they are more likely than men to care for their ill and dying parents, in-laws, and spouses, and they are often left widowed and impoverished at the end of their lives. Indeed, the problem of poverty in old age is mainly a women's problem. In general, it is fair to say that as a result of ageism and sexism, women as a group are in double jeopardy as they grow older.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

Families are growing vertically and shrinking horizontally. For example, the four-generation family is now our current reality: The 85-year-old mother is cared for by her 60-year-old daughter or son, who may be supporting a
40-year-old child and that child’s teenage children. Overall, there are fewer adults available to care for their dependents, both older and younger. The dramatic demographic movement in the U.S. population distribution, as well as that of most other developed countries, has been referred to as a shift from a pyramid to a pillar (ILO, 1989), a shift attributable to decreased fertility and increased longevity.

These demographic trends create a new context for employment and caregiving. Today, the impact of caregiving on women’s employment is not limited to the child-rearing years. A recent survey reported by the National Academy on an Aging Society found that women represent nearly three-quarters of those providing informal, uncompensated care for people age 50 and older (Entmacher, 1999). Not surprisingly, elder-caregiving responsibilities affect the caregivers. Some 49 percent of these women have had to change their work schedules, 11 percent have had to take a leave of absence, 7 percent have had to take a less demanding job, and some have had to leave the workforce entirely (National Women’s Law Center, 2000). Recently, employed men have also been joining the ranks of the caregivers (Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg, 1998). However, the double whammy of sexism and ageism in the workplace makes the price of caregiving much greater for women than for men.

Several studies indicate how large a price women pay for interrupting their careers. Initially, when women return to work after an interruption, their average wages are some 30 percent lower than their wages prior to the career hiatus. And, even after twenty years of continuous employment, these women still earn about 5 percent less than comparable women without career interruptions (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999). Even brief leaves of absence are costly. For example, managers, male or female, who take leave for such reasons as childbirth, dependent care, or personal illness experience less career success and fewer rewards, including promotions and merit salary increases, than those who do not experience comparable disruptions (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999). Not surprisingly, those who take multiple leaves receive fewer rewards than those who take only one leave, but even those who take only one leave receive fewer promotions and smaller salary raises than those who take none. These troubling outcomes are independent of both the length of the leave and the reason for the leave. In general, women suffer more than men from these penalties because women are far more likely than men to take leaves in the first place. In the same study by Judiesch and Lyness (1999) of 12,000 managers, 89 percent of those who took leaves were women.

**WORKPLACE CULTURE**

Before discussing specific workplace practices and policies that put older women at a disadvantage, let us consider the cultural context within which employers and employees operate. In the United States, aging is viewed primarily in terms of decline: As age increases, it is widely believed, mental capacities weaken, reflexes slow, drive diminishes, ambition wanes (Gullette, 2004). While the stereotype of decline is generally applied to men as well as women, there are notable exceptions. With age, men who have achieved success in male professions are seen as having grown in skill and wisdom. Think Senator Ted Kennedy, the conductor Seiji Ozawa, and the economist Alan Greenspan. Such men attain high stature, are sought after as leaders and mentors, and are looked upon with respect and even adoration.

In contrast, as women age, those who have been successful in such predominantly female professions as teaching are often seen as old-fashioned and behind the times. Older women do not enjoy the “premium for experience” enjoyed by their male counterparts (Gullette, 2004, p. 25). Moreover, in spite of such successful older women as the actresses mentioned above and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, the Nobel Laureate writer Nadine Gordimer, and the award-winning actress Judi Dench, there are as yet no widely accepted positive images of older women save that of “grandma,” a rotund, kindly person who busies herself taking care of her grandchildren.

In such cases, stereotypes of age combine with gender stereotypes, another pervasive and pernicious aspect of our cultural context. These stereotypes create a catch-22 situation for women. Research by the psychologist Susan
Fiske and her colleagues shows that women, as members of an “outgroup” in the business world (i.e., any group other than white males), are seen as either liked but incompetent (think a blonde secretary), or as successful but disliked (think Margaret Thatcher). Not only do women who achieve in the male world pay a high price socially, they also pay a steep price professionally. The research suggests that such women are not readily offered special opportunities for advancement, nor are they likely to receive high salaries and other benefits (Heilman et al., 2004). Successful males pay no such price.

But, of course, most women do not often achieve such lofty positions. For most of us, other workplace realities have a more immediate effect on our lives. Perhaps the most influential is occupational sex segregation. Although there has been some movement toward integration in recent years, it has been relatively slight (Padavic and Reskin, 2002). By and large, there is a male work world and a female work world. Even when women manage to cross into a male domain, they tend to be clustered at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. The result is many female teachers and few female school superintendents. Women are said to be stuck to the “sticky floor.” In contrast, when males enter female professions, they tend to quickly advance to the top of the hierarchy. Men are said to ride the “glass escalator” right to the top. Thus, in such fields as nursing and teaching, the number of males at the top of the professional hierarchies is well out of proportion to their numbers in the occupation.

In addition to frustrating women’s ambitions, being stuck on the bottom has other short- and long-term consequences. Compared to employees on the top rungs of the organizational ladder, those on the bottom have lower salaries and less access to a range of benefits, including health coverage, flexibility, and vacation. They have less generous retirement packages, reflecting their lower lifetime earnings. In addition, they tend to have less autonomy—a key to dealing with stress.

Women are also disadvantaged because they are more likely than men to accommodate any caregiving duties by cutting back at work (Hill et al., 2003; Messing, 2004). Not surprisingly, women are overrepresented among part-time workers. Whereas women constitute 44 percent of the full-time workforce, they account for 70 percent of all part-timers. Many part-time jobs are dead-end jobs, and part-timers also suffer monetarily; hourly wages are 20 percent lower for part-time than for full-time workers. Also, women are more likely than men to work part time during their peak earning years: Some 30 percent of women ages 25–54 work part time, compared to only 13 percent of men in the same age group. Moreover, women tend to work part time because of family and personal obligations, whereas men are more likely to do so because of school attendance. Thus, part-time employed women and men may suffer an earnings decrement in the short run, but men are more likely to make up for the reduction in the long run by virtue of having increased their value as workers during the time they spent working part time. Finally, again for family reasons, women, especially low-income women, also experience considerable job change (Bravo, 2003), which has a dampening effect on earnings and benefits.

Women’s ability to both give and receive care is affected by their disadvantaged state. As caregivers, women in general have fewer material resources to draw upon. It is therefore harder for them than for their male counterparts to pay for services when a dependent is in need of care. Not surprisingly, women are more likely (and may also prefer) to provide personal care. In addition, as they themselves age and need care, they have fewer resources of their own. As a result, they may be forced into financial dependence on others, a difficult psychological situation for women who see themselves as care providers. Financial hardships as a result of caregiving are experienced primarily by women, who from age 85 outnumber men by two to one (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

In sum, although there is some movement toward convergence, the typical work patterns for men and women still differ in ways that have important consequences for employees as they age. Specifically, compared to men, women are more likely to work part time to accommodate family demands; take seasonal or part-year work for family reasons; change jobs more frequently,
both for family reasons and as a result of gender discrimination at the workplace; and work in small as compared to larger businesses.

WORKPLACE POLICIES

The differences in the employment situations of women as compared to men also place women at a disadvantage with respect to their eligibility for key public policies that, at least ostensibly, are designed to make it easier for employees to meet their family responsibilities while maintaining their connection to the workplace. One such policy is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).

How does FMLA work? FMLA is a federal leave-of-absence policy that provides twelve weeks of unpaid job-protected leave per year to care for a seriously ill child, spouse, or parent; to stay home to care for a newborn, newly adopted, or newly placed foster child; or take time off when an employee is seriously ill. However, there are multiple exclusions that tend to affect women more than men.

For example, not all firms are eligible, and not all workers at eligible firms are covered. To be eligible, an employee must have worked for an employer for at least 1,250 hours during the year preceding the leave. In effect, this restriction means that FMLA benefits accrue only to full-time, full-year employees; part-time and seasonal workers are excluded. It is estimated that this restriction reduces the percentage of covered workers by 46 percent (Han and Waldfogel, 2003). Moreover, to be eligible for coverage, a workplace must employ fifty or more persons in twenty or more workweeks in the current or preceding calendar year. One estimate is that women constitute roughly half of all workers in very small firms (i.e., those with ten or fewer employees). More generally, small businesses are most likely to generate jobs for young workers, older workers, and women (www.dol.gov/odeh).

This small-firm exclusion alone eliminates over 40 percent of private-sector workers, including the self-employed (Han and Waldfogel, 2003); it may not be too surprising that women's share of total self-employment increased from 22 percent in 1976 to 38 percent in 2000. Because of these restrictions, many women are completely ineligible for any job protection during a leave for any of the reasons nominally covered by FMLA. Without job protection, a woman who takes a leave to fulfill her caretaking responsibilities often has to find a replacement job when she is ready to return to work. Moreover, as a new employee, she is likely to have to take a salary reduction. Over the years, these discriminatory policies have a cumulative effect on women's earnings, exposing women to increased risk for poverty as they age.

Of course, the same scenario would also apply to men. However, males typically work full time, full year, and would therefore not be excluded from FMLA because of the hours requirement. Moreover, more men than women have access to paid vacation and other flexibility benefits and so tend to use paid time off (sick days, vacation days) to cover the leaves that they do take. When men need time away from work, they are less likely than women to have to reduce their work hours or leave their jobs to fulfill family responsibilities (Hill et al., 2003; Messing, 2004). Thus, overall, men are less likely than women to suffer the effects of job interruptions, salary reductions, and possible long-term negative career consequences as a result of their caregiving activities. However, if they do interrupt their careers or take a leave of absence, they, like women, are exposed to the same negative effects.

Although enactment of the Family and Medical Leave Act constituted a substantial first step in providing a safety net for caregivers, the law has many obvious shortcomings. In particular, a woman who works less than full time so that she can provide care is penalized in several ways: First, she is likely to be paid low wages. Second, she is probably ineligible for or less likely to receive promotions, other opportunities for advancement, and a variety of workplace benefits. And, third, she is ineligible for FMLA, even if her place of employment is covered. As a consequence of these penalties, the financial contribution to her retirement will also be reduced. In its current iteration, FMLA unfairly discriminates against women for the caregiving that culture asks and expects that women do. Moreover, FMLA is not alone in this regard.

The provision of government unemployment insurance, another policy aimed at softening the shock of job loss, also discriminates against mid-
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dle-aged and older women. For example, quitting a job because of family caregiving responsibilities is typically considered to be a "voluntary" severance, which makes workers ineligible for unemployment insurance. Also, many workers in nonstandard work arrangements (e.g., temporary help, on-call or day laborers, self-employed workers, independent contractors, or through a contract company) are ineligible. Because one in eight employed women work in these nonstandard jobs, this issue is an important concern for women's economic security (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2001).

The net effect of pervasive stereotypes and discriminatory workplace policies and practices is to perpetuate a system in which women bear an unfair burden at home and at work. At least for older women, the reward for doing more than their fair share is often poverty or at best financial insecurity. The double whammy of ageism and sexism is built into our public policies and workplace practices. They must be rectified.

THE FUTURE

Although they are entering and remaining in the workforce at higher rates than males, women are still largely represented in female-dominated, or as they have disparagingly been called, "pink collar" professions such as teaching, nursing, and secretarial work, where wages are low. As a result of occupational sex segregation and of both informal and formal policies governing leave taking, many women are economically disadvantaged and cannot afford to retire. In the year 2000, almost 11 percent of the workforce was over the age of 55. Projections suggest that by 2030, more than 20 percent of the general workforce will be 55 years old or older, and roughly 12 percent will be at least 65 years old.

So, because of inadequate retirement savings, many older women may find themselves in the workforce beyond age 65. And often, because of a lack of other options, many of these women will find themselves in low-pay work as caregivers to other older women. Of course, some women stay in the labor force beyond the conventional age of retirement for reasons other than financial hardship. These other reasons include changes in generational concepts about the role of women in our society, increased levels of educational attainment, and the need to successfully sustain a decent quality of life throughout the lifespan.

Changes in the prevalence and manifestations of ageism may be on the horizon. Certainly, it is possible to observe a number of trends. However, partly because some of these trends could be interpreted as leading to opposing effects, it is difficult to predict whether ageism will increase or decrease over time. On the one hand, increased longevity and economic necessity suggest that older people, many of them employed, will be a more visible presence in the lives of most younger Americans. Older workers, especially those without pensions and in low-paying jobs, may postpone or forgo retirement. As younger members of the society get to know older people as vital and productive, ageism may decrease. On the other hand, severe cost-cutting measures in many workplaces have led to disproportionate layoffs of older, more expensive workers. As a result, the remaining workforce, at least in certain sectors, is considerably younger than it used to be. The ready dismissal of older employees encourages the belief that with age workers are dispensable. This trend might lead to an increase in ageism. It is too early to tell what the net effect of such offsetting trends will be.

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