

Gender inequalities in extended working life: a systematic review of qualitative studies

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Abstract

Extended working life (EWL) in old age is an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in aging populations. Gender inequalities constitute one of the most studied aspects of EWL. However, research on this issue has been predominantly quantitative, resulting in limited understanding of the situated meanings and experiences of work in old age for men and women. This article sheds light on the few studies that have explored gender inequalities in EWL qualitatively, systematically reviewing 47 articles.

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This study includes a meta-analysis of the papers reviewed, discusses the most frequent topics and content addressed by qualitative studies, and introduces a brief overview of the main findings on gender inequalities in the literature. These findings underscore that the literature has mainly been published in countries of the Global North, with data primarily focused on those nations. Additionally, there is an emphasis on research related to the meanings, decisions, policies, and narratives surrounding retirement, while only a limited number of articles have a defined theoretical framework. Finally, the limited number of comparisons between countries suggests a need for further research from these perspectives. We conclude this systematic review by discussing the main findings, suggesting policy implications of our work and identifying gaps that should be addressed in future research.

Keywords: extended working lives, gender, retirement, systematic review, qualitative research methods.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, many countries have witnessed an increase in labor force participation beyond the full pension age – that is, the age at which individuals qualify for a full pension (Baumann & Madero-Cabib 2021). Among the countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the labor force participation rate for individuals aged 65 and older increased by 75.8% between 2000 and 2019 (from 9.1 to 16.0%).

The extension of working life is primarily driven by the financial strains associated with pension systems, particularly in the context of rising healthy life expectancy and declining fertility rates globally. In response to recommendations from international organizations, policymakers and decision-makers in Western countries have, since the early 2000s, implemented various institutional measures to support employment among older adults. These measures include the gradual elimination of early retirement incentives, the implementation of lifelong learning programs, the enforcement of anti-age discrimination policies, and the increase of statutory retirement ages (Cabib 2025; Hofäcker et al. 2016; LaBond et al. 2022; Ní Léime et al. 2020). Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding

of the extension of working lives and its implications for future research seems crucial.

Extended working lives (EWLs) are influenced by both subjective factors (e.g. expectations about the future, identity roles, and financial needs) and socio-structural aspects (e.g. welfare regimes, employment, and retirement policies). There is no single route to retirement; rather, there are multiple pathways depending on factors such as educational level, health status, perceptions of retirement, and financial status for oneself and family members (Barlin et al. 2022; Koola & Moen 2016; Ortiz & Bellotti 2021; Quine et al. 2006). Factors that decrease the likelihood of continuing to work in old age include having sufficient pension income (Ní Léime & Street 2023), poor physical and mental health (Brown & Vickerstaff 2011), and the desire to pursue other life goals outside the labor market (Lundgren et al. 2018). In addition to structural macro-social factors and personal characteristics, research has highlighted that meso-social factors, specifically organizational factors such as working conditions and workplace characteristics, may play a significant role in shaping preferences and behaviors regarding the extension of working lives for both women and men (Ní Léime & Ogg 2019; Pietilä & Ojala 2023). Adverse working conditions that affect physical and mental health, as well as supervisors' attitudes, stereotypes, and ageism, may act as "push mechanisms" that drive older individuals out of work. In contrast, more favorable working conditions, such as flexibility, appreciation, and fulfillment, may operate as "stay factors," enabling older individuals to continue working in later life (Edge et al. 2021; Pietilä & Ojala 2023; Stattin & Bengtsson 2021).

There is an extensive body of evidence on gender inequalities in the extension of working lives. Scholars in this field have emphasized that gender norms are a key factor because, similar to earlier stages of the life course, labor market experiences in old age are highly gendered (Hokema & Scherger 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019). Research consistently shows that women face disadvantaged working trajectories in old age. For example, in Finland, older men are more likely to have a higher formal occupational status than women, while older women are more frequently responsible for informal caregiving and employed in informal jobs, which often involve financial difficulties (Kauppi et al. 2021). Informal activities are those without a contract,

payment, or integration into formal labor structures. In contrast, both older men and women are more likely to extend their working lives when they have high occupational status, good self-rated health, and the absence of depressive symptoms. In the Netherlands, older men tend to continue working beyond the retirement age due to high satisfaction with their work and income (de Wind et al. 2016; Pilipiec et al. 2022). Research also shows that working conditions can have gendered effects on the experience of older workers, as women face both age and gender discrimination while seeking employment and within the workplace (Edge et al. 2021; Pietilä & Ojala 2023).

Although these studies have contributed enormously to the understanding of gender inequality in EWL, most of this research has been conducted from a quantitative perspective, with limited exploration of the situated and in-depth meanings and experiences of later-life employment among men and women (Brooke 2017; Calasanti 2022; Edge et al. 2021; Lain et al. 2020). This article aims to systematically review the few studies that have qualitatively explored gender inequalities in EWL, providing a more profound understanding of this phenomenon and its determinants.

Focusing on the qualitative literature on this topic allows for a deeper understanding of the human experience, discourses, and practices, offering a more adaptable, bottom-up perspective on the findings. It also provides greater visibility to the findings of these studies. Where have qualitative studies on EWL been conducted? Is gender included in these samples? Is there any information on studies from Global South countries? Are there any gaps in the samples used by researchers? These questions will be addressed through the application of a meta-analysis of the reviewed papers. In the second part of the findings, we will answer questions such as: Are there any other common topics across the selected articles? Do some topics or methodological approaches require further attention in the literature? Finally, the core results will be used to address additional questions: How do women experience and interpret the extension of their working lives? Conversely, how do men experience and interpret extending working life? How has the literature identified gender inequalities in this context? What are the gaps in the findings about gender inequalities in the extension of working life? What has been revealed through comparisons between the experiences of women and men in extending their working lives? Are these experiences similar or different?

For this purpose, a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach was employed, focusing on three primary dimensions within the existing qualitative literature. First, we conducted a meta-analysis of the reviewed articles, providing descriptive insights, including information on the data collection sources, the countries studied, and the prevalence of female and male authors. Next, we examine the most prevalent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies. Finally, we present the main findings regarding gender inequalities as discussed in the literature. In the Discussion section, we explore the broader implications of these findings and suggest potential avenues for future qualitative research in this field.

Design and Methods

Sample and Materials

This study presents a systematic review utilizing a qualitative and mixed methods approach to explore the evidence on gender inequalities during EWL. To achieve this objective, the PRISMA approach (Page et al. 2020) was adopted for data collection, analysis, and reporting. PRISMA (Page et al. 2020) facilitates sharing findings with the academic community by drawing on a set of essential, evidence-based items for systematic reviews. Throughout the reporting stage, information was presented in accordance with PRISMA guidelines (see Supplementary Material 1).

Regarding the sample, inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to limit the search to articles relevant to this research. The following criteria were applied:

Inclusion criteria: (1) Studies examining the extension of working life. (2) Documents that consider gender as a significant research variable. (3) Texts incorporating qualitative and/or mixed methods as part of the research design. (4) Studies published in one of the five selected sources (explained subsequently).

Exclusion criteria: (1) Texts that consider gender solely as a descriptor of the sample. (2) Documents that do not employ qualitative or mixed methods approaches. (3) Documents that do not include individuals aged 60 and older in their samples. (4) Documents written in languages other than English and Spanish. (5) Books, book chapters, and articles that were unavailable for retrieval.

This research focuses exclusively on the qualitative aspect of these studies, as it allows us to concentrate on understanding the human experience, discourses, and practices, while also enabling a more flexible, bottom-up approach to the findings collected. A query using these criteria was executed to search for articles within the Web of Science and Scopus databases. Furthermore, we reviewed a selection of book chapters and books related to EWL and conducted an in-depth review of articles in the journal *Work, Aging and Retirement*. The data collection process is elaborated upon in the subsequent sub-section. We selected twelve book chapters, seven articles from Scopus, four from Web of Science, three from *Work, Aging and Retirement*, and 21 from a selection of journals (see Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of articles excluded/included for the analysis

Nº	Category	Number of articles found with query search	Number of articles excluded after review	Number of articles included for analysis
1	Books (chapters)	92	80	12
2	Articles from Scopus database	89	82	7
3	Articles from WoS database	24	20	4
4	Articles from Journal <i>Work, Aging and Retirement</i>	10	7	3
5	Articles from Key Gerontological and Life Course Journals	3751	3730	21
	Total	3966	3919	47

Note: Table prepared by the authors using the information provided by the systematic review.

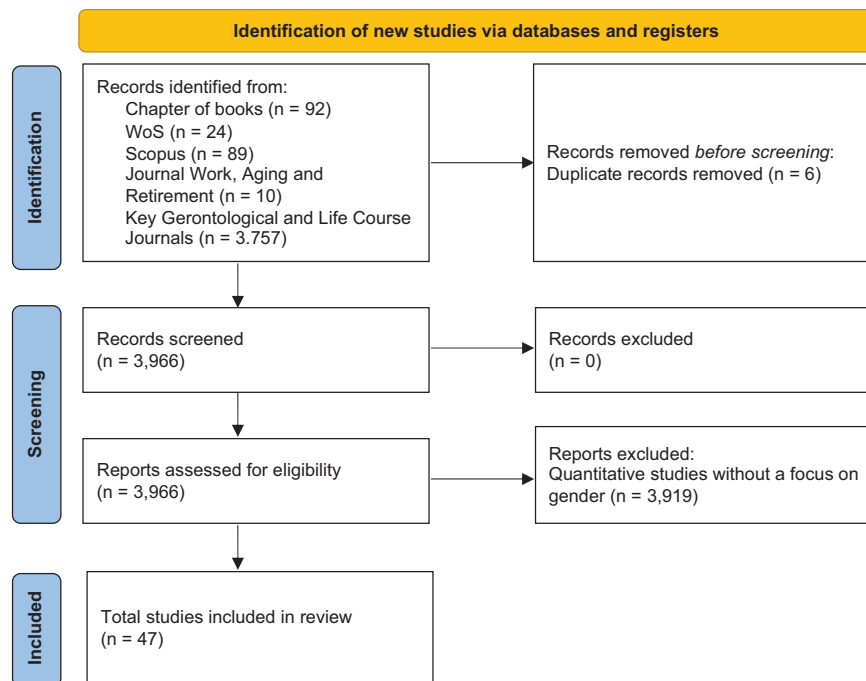
Data Collection

A selection of studies on the topic was made up until September 30, 2023. Adhering to the PRISMA systematic review approach (Page et al. 2021), the data collection process is outlined in Figure 1.

All 47 articles selected and analyzed in this research are individually identified (see Supplementary Material 2). We used five different sources to collect these documents, each employing a different strategy, as detailed later.

Figure 1. Data collection process.

Note: This figure was obtained following the PRISMA approach (Haddaway et al. 2022; Page et al. 2021).



Web of science (WoS). The search query was applied exclusively to three WoS databases: Science Citation Index Expanded (SCI-EXPANDED), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI). The same query was used to search for specific terms in Keywords Plus (KP), Author Keywords (AK), and the Title (TI) of each paper. The query used was:

= (((extend* work* life) OR (old* work*) OR ("ewl")) AND ((gender) OR (women)) AND ((interview) OR (qualitative) OR (mixed method) OR (mixed methods) OR (narrative) OR (discourse) OR (qual) OR (life history)) AND ((aging) OR (ageing) OR (older worker) OR (elder) OR (old person) OR (older person) OR (old people) OR (older people)))

Scopus. The same query as for Web of Science was used, focusing on identifying the core concepts in the title and keywords.

Articles from key gerontological and life course journals. Articles from journals indexed in WoS and categorized in the Gerontology or Geriatrics & Gerontology fields were reviewed. A total of 95 journals were reviewed. A search was conducted on each journal's official website using all combinations of terms from the previous query, focusing on titles and keywords.

Book chapters. Books relating to EWL were identified, and from those, a selection of chapters that focused on gender aspects and adopting a qualitative (or mixed methods) approach was made. The chosen books were identified through internet searches and by reviewing the reference lists of articles already selected for this research.

Publications in the journal *Work, Aging and Retirement* were also reviewed. As with the other journals, its official searchable website (<https://academic.oup.com/workar>) was used, and it was last visited on October 13, 2023. This search employed terms from previous queries and focused on titles and keywords.

The decision to review articles from *Work, Aging and Retirement* and key gerontological and life course journals was made to ensure that articles from these WoS-indexed and/or Scopus-indexed journals were included in our systematic review. This step ensured that these articles were included in the data collection, as they are key journals that focus specifically on aging and work topics.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two steps. The first step involved a meta-analysis of the information collected. The second step employed thematic analysis to explore the most prevalent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies as well as their main findings regarding gender inequalities. Both analyses were conducted according to PRISMA guidelines followed in this study.

All the researchers participated actively in both the data collection and data analysis processes. These processes were led by the first and second authors of this study. The documents were distributed among them, and each researcher identified responses for the categories created based on the aims of the study. As each researcher populated the document with the respective responses, the team held regular meetings to collaboratively develop the responses and address any uncertainties. Data for each research question were mapped by deciding on categories or codes to be collected from them, which were discussed within the research team. This ensured that all of the authors would be able to suggest modifications and clarify the definitions of each category, helping to avoid misunderstandings. These categories were:

(1) Reference information: ID number, year of publication, authors, title, journal, volume, number, webpage, the researcher who reviewed the document, whether the article was included, reason for exclusion, and the download date.

(2) Meta-analysis: abstract, keywords, country of publication, authors' affiliations, authors' genders, countries of the primary institutional affiliation of the authors, funding, and acknowledgements. Available meta-data, including variables like authors' gender and country of affiliation, allowed us to examine gender and Global North/South disparities in publications, as noted by Espinosa and Ortiz (2022).

(3) Content of the article: theoretical framework, main objective or research question, how "gender" is used in the article, notion of work, central concepts, whether the study is primarily quantitative or qualitative, the methodological approach, methods, sample, data collection, the country where the data are collected, framework for the data, analysis techniques applied, main conclusions (in terms of theory, methodology, and results), limitations, future research, and other relevant observations.

The prevalent topics and content were analyzed using content analysis, which helps identify the presence and meanings of themes and concepts (Drisko & Maschi 2016; Stemler 2015).

Assessment of Research Bias

To minimize biases in this systematic review, two distinct tools were employed for evaluation. First, we detail the research practices and validation methods implemented in this study, following Hannes (2011). Second, we apply the three stages of the ROBIS tool, as outlined by Whiting et al. (2016), to enhance the transparency of the research. Both techniques are briefly summarized in the following sections.

Assessment of Research Credibility

Building on Hannes (2011), four key aspects of this systematic review were assessed to evaluate its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability:

- (1) Credibility: To establish credibility, four essential measures were implemented:
 - Weekly peer debriefings allowed the researchers to share progress and address concerns collectively.
 - Particular attention was given to excluded studies; decisions regarding their exclusion were reviewed by at least two researchers.
 - Data collection and analysis were independently conducted by all researchers across multiple stages.
 - Verbatim quotes from analyzed articles were prioritized whenever feasible over interpretations or rephrasings.
- (2) Transferability: To ensure the transferability of our results, we have provided comprehensive details on data collection in our study. Additionally, once published, a GitHub repository (ANONYMIZED) containing the database and further details on the research process will be made accessible.
- (3) Dependability: The dependability of our research process was reinforced through two measures:

- Application of multiple methodological approaches during data collection to investigate the topic from diverse information sources.
 - Regular meetings among all authors to encourage self-critical reflection.
- (4) Confirmability: Confirmability was ensured through rigorous training efforts among all team members. Prior to data collection, comprehensive meetings were held to establish consensus on all systematic review steps. Additionally, weekly meetings provided a platform for ongoing discussions about the researchers' influence at each stage.

Assessment of Risk of Bias in the Systematic Review Using the ROBIS Tool

Finally, to enhance the transparency of our research, we applied the ROBIS tool, version 1.2, following the recommendations of its authors (Whiting et al. 2016). The three stages of the tool were employed, and Table 2 presents a summary of concerns identified during phase 2, along with an overview of the risk of bias in this review.

Results

The results are presented in three sections to address the central aim of the study. First, we begin with a meta-analysis of the reviewed articles, providing descriptive information such as the data collection sources, the countries observed, and the prevalence of female and male authors. Second, we discuss the most frequent topics and content addressed in qualitative studies. Third, we present the main results on gender inequalities discussed in the literature.

Meta-Analysis

All 47 publications were written in English. Since 2012, the number of articles on this topic has increased, peaking at five in 2016. Within the sample, 20 articles were published in journals based in the United States, 14 in the United Kingdom, and one in Australia. As shown in Table 3, the majority

Table 2. Summarization of the concerns of risk bias in the systematic review (ROBIS tool phase 3)

Domain	Concern	Rationale for concern
1. Concerns regarding the specification of study eligibility criteria	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
2. Concerns regarding the methods used to identify and/or select studies	LOW. Only two concerns were reported.	Two limitations have been reported: (1) There is potential to enhance the database search process further in order to identify more relevant articles. (2) It appears that we could have expanded the search terms to include articles with low indexation, such as those provided by Web of Science.
3. Concerns regarding the methods used to collect data and appraise studies	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
4. Concerns regarding the synthesis and findings	LOW. No concerns reported.	NA
Risk of bias in the review		
Describe whether conclusions were supported by the evidence:		
A. Did the interpretation of findings address all of the concerns identified in Domains 1 to 4?		YES
B. Was the relevance of identified studies to the review's research question appropriately considered?		YES
C. Did the reviewers avoid emphasizing results on the basis of their statistical significance?		YES
Risk of bias in the review		RISK: LOW
Rationale for risk:		
Overall, low concern regarding the study eligibility criteria, the methods used to identify and/or select studies, the methods used to collect data and appraise studies, and the synthesis and findings.		

Note: This table was obtained following the ROBIS tool, version 1.2 (Whiting et al. 2016).

Table 3. Number of articles by journal

Journal	Total number of articles
Journal of Aging Studies	5
Ageing and Society	5
Journal of Women and Aging	4
Work, Aging and Retirement	3
Ageing International	3
Research on Aging	2
Journal of Gerontological Social Work	2
Work Employment and Society	2
Gender, Work & Organization	2
Australasian Journal on Ageing	1
Maturitas	1
International Journal of Aging and Human Development	1
Journal of Intergenerational Relationships	1
Anthropology & Aging Quarterly	1
The Sociological Review	1
Journal of Population Ageing	1

Note: Prepared by the authors using the information provided by the systematic review.

of articles were published in *Journal of Aging Studies* (5), *Ageing and Society* (4), *Journal of Women and Aging* (4), and *Work, Aging and Retirement* (4).

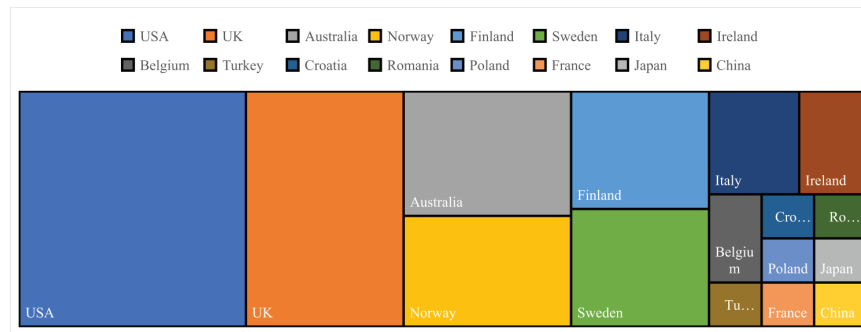
Of the 47 articles, 24 (51%) were written by a single author. The majority of the authors in the sample were affiliated with institutions in the United States (23 authors), the United Kingdom (15), Australia (9), Norway (8), Finland (7), and Sweden (7), as shown in Figure 2. Regarding the gender of the authors, most were women; of the 99 authors in the sample, 74 (75%) were women and 25 (25%) were men.

Content of the Articles

To describe the content of the reviewed articles, we analyzed each of them in detail. First, only a portion of the articles presented a clear theoretical

Figure 2. Countries of affiliation of the authors.

Note: Prepared by the authors with information from this study.



framework. However, in qualitative research, the absence of a predefined theoretical framework is not necessarily a limitation. For instance, in qualitative studies based on a grounded theory approach, the research may not require a theoretical framework before analysis, as it emerges from the results.

The theoretical frameworks most frequently used were the life course perspective (14 articles), gender theories (15 articles), the phenomenological approach (4 articles), and ageism and representations (6 articles). Regarding methodological approaches, 32 studies were entirely qualitative, including data collection, analysis, and composition. The remaining articles were primarily qualitative but incorporated different methodological perspectives. Ten articles employed a mixed methods approach, integrating predominantly qualitative techniques – such as interviews – as a complementary method alongside quantitative data obtained from surveys. Finally, seven articles were nonsystematic reviews, which lacked methodical rigor. This finding underscores the importance of a systematic review that allows for a focused examination of how gender inequalities are studied in the context of EWLs.

Among the studies using qualitative and mixed methods approaches ($n = 42$), 37 articles used interviews as the primary source of data. Of these, five studies adopted a biographical approach in the interviews, focusing particularly on work-life trajectories. Four articles did not use interviews; instead, they analyzed texts or documents. Finally, only one

paper employed ethnography. With regard to the timeframe of the data, the majority were collected between 2010 and 2020 (21 articles). Additionally, one paper used data from before 1989, six sourced data from 1990 to 1999, four from 2000 to 2009, and two from 2020 onward. In 15 articles, the timeframe required clarification. Regarding the participants, all studies focused on older workers of both genders, with five papers examining only older women and one focusing exclusively on older men. Discrepancies were noted in the definition of an “older person,” with some studies defining it as ranging from 50 years of age and others as over 60 years old.

Additionally, the country of origin for the data was identified for each publication. Of the studies conducted using data from a single country, eleven focused on the United States, eight on the United Kingdom, and two each on Ireland, Australia, Finland, and Sweden. One study each focused on Turkey, Croatia, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Poland, Italy, and China. There were only four articles comparing case studies, all of which were limited to comparisons between two countries. Those comparisons were United States/United Kingdom, United States/Ireland, Finland/Japan, and United Kingdom/Germany. Furthermore, six studies did not report the countries where the data were collected, and two articles used data from Europe as a whole.

Another noteworthy aspect of the reviewed articles is the limitations they acknowledge. Of the 47 articles, 26 discussed specific limitations related to their studies. The primary constraints identified can be categorized into two groups: First, non-representative sampling; second, potential biases within the samples, which hinder comparisons and replication in other cases. Both of these limitations are inherent to qualitative research. However, studies employing a mixed methods approach did not encounter these limitations, underscoring the substantial potential of this type of research in addressing sampling biases and enhancing replication.

Although some studies address gender dimensions in EWL, numerous questions remain unanswered. Several articles converge on particular aspects that require further exploration in future research on extending working lives. Some of the most common gaps reported in the papers within the sample are as follows:

- There are insufficient studies considering a diversity of participants and countries in their samples to allow for meaningful comparisons (Calasanti 2022; Lain et al. 2020; Lee & Prashant 2021; Ní Léime & Street 2019; Ojala et al. 2016; Stattin & Bengt 2021; Vickerstaff & van de Horst 2022).
- There is a need to enhance the understanding of the cumulative nature of disadvantages and inequalities over the long term (Brooke 2017; Edge et al. 2021; Hokema & Scherger 2016; Lain et al. 2020; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019).
- Researchers should incorporate structural categories (such as gender, race, class, and other relevant categories) within the process involving EWL (Hokema & Scherger 2016; Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015; Stattin & Bengt 2021; Wildman 2019).
- Studies need to be framed through an intersectionality perspective, considering the dynamics of gender, age, health, and education at different stages of the research (Calasanti 2022; Herbert 2021; Hokema 2017; Ojala et al. 2016).

Furthermore, the literature on EWL has primarily focused on formal work and the experiences of older men, leading to a gap in studies addressing informal work and the realities faced by older women. Additionally, most of the studies analyzed mentioned a lack of in-depth analysis of the content that qualitative studies could provide.

Gender Inequalities in Extending Working Lives

As previously mentioned, the objective of this article is to examine the presence of gender inequalities during the extension of working life and understand this phenomenon and its determinants. This third section of the results is aimed at synthesizing the evidence concerning gender inequalities during EWL, specifically from research employing a qualitative or mixed methods approach. These findings are divided into three subsections: (1) studies comparing the experiences of older women and men; (2) research focusing on the experiences of older men; and (3) articles examining the experiences of older women.

Results Comparing Genders in Extending Working Lives

Some gender differences have been identified in the motivations behind extended work beyond retirement age. While women in England tend to emphasize maintaining social connections, men in Germany more frequently mention the desire to stay physically fit and active (Hokema & Scherger 2016). It has been established that the majority of older men pursue flexible working arrangements through self-employment, characterized by higher levels of choice, autonomy, and control. In contrast, older women often work in less financially and educationally advantaged contexts (Loretto & Vickerstaff 2015). According to another study, men tend to highlight the negative aspects of aging, such as loss of social networks and diminished physical capacity, while women view aging more positively, seeing it as an opportunity for an active and healthy life (Craciun & Flick 2016). Stattin and Bengs (2021) found that older women working in a Swedish healthcare organization systematically display a preference for earlier retirement compared with older men in the same setting. The exception was single women with children, who expressed a preference for late retirement. The authors interpreted this as a constraining mechanism due to economic pressures that prevented them from retiring earlier.

The concept of retirement is also perceived differently by older women and men. Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015) found that whether they were retired or still working, many respondents were strongly attracted to the freedom that life after work provided or was expected to offer. Retired women experienced this freedom as an escape from low-quality and unsatisfying jobs, while men expressed a sense of having “done their bit.”

Studies concur that the reform of institutional policies for older individuals and the pension system must account for the distinct experiences of older women and men in work. For example, Ní Léime and Ogg (2019) noted that institutional reforms would only prove effective if both women and men held stable jobs. In Croatia, “Gender equality arguments have not been central and were typically purely instrumental, used either to ‘defend’ features of the ‘old’ system (e.g. when opposing the increase in retirement age) or argue for policy instruments that could serve employment-oriented or demographic goals” (Dobrotić & Zrinščak 2022: 205). When comparing policies for older workers across different countries, Ní Léime and Loretto (2017) concluded, “Even though the work-life

trajectories of men and women are typically different, most countries seem to have adopted pension policies designed with the homogeneous, individualized adult worker in mind. There is little evidence of recognition of gendered life courses in these policy reforms" (p. 70). The gendered dimension of institutional strategies for working and post-working life will continue to exist if there is no support for older workers from various stakeholders, such as industries and other macro-organizations (Brooke 2017).

Regarding workplace characteristics, the only article including an analysis of gender differences was by Loretto and Vickerstaff (2015), which examined how women and men perceive and experience flexible work in later life in the UK. They found that gender roles related to caregiving still shape attitudes and behaviors regarding work, particularly flexible work, in old age. Older men tend to work in flexible jobs characterized by higher levels of choice and autonomy than older women, such as self-employment. In contrast, for women, narratives of choice and autonomy around flexible work in later life were still conditioned by the blurred boundaries between paid and unpaid work. This led them to consider options such as part-time work as undesirable in old age, either because they wanted to take advantage of new work opportunities in "proper" jobs after completing their childcare responsibilities or because they perceive these jobs as unsuitable for fulfilling new caregiving roles (partners, parents, grandchildren, etc.).

Findings on Men Extending Working Lives

In the case of older men, experiences of ageism seem to affect them as well, but depending on the context, ageism practices within families are often naturalized (Ojala et al. 2016). Regarding the experience of EWL for men from a meso-social perspective, ageism in the workplace also appears as a relevant factor affecting older workers' motivation. A study in Finland examining the experience of male metal workers and engineers in old age found that a lack of respect and social appreciation for older workers was a significant aspect (Pietilä & Ojala 2023). Particularly among metal workers, there was widespread dissatisfaction with work, occupational identity, and employers, as they felt that their skills and knowledge were not

being respected because of difficulties in managing new technologies and supervisors' assumption of older workers' lower motivation.

Similarly, other studies on older men have shown that career progression norms within work organizations create regimes based on younger age groups' expectations. These regimes limit older men's career advancement opportunities, often leading to fewer promotions and less access to challenging projects (Krekula 2019; Ní Léime & Ogg 2019). As a result, older employees may feel undervalued and marginalized, which can significantly diminish their motivation to extend their working lives (Cabib & Ormeño 2025). This lack of motivation can impact their overall job satisfaction and productivity, ultimately affecting the organization's performance.

The intersection of working conditions and health in old age was also addressed by the Finnish study on metal workers and engineers by Pietilä and Ojala (2023). While long-term high physical demands causing musculoskeletal disorders were naturally highlighted by metal workers, engineers tended to emphasize the psychological distress caused by the progressive accumulation of work tasks in new managerial senior positions. They concluded that there is a need for age-friendly work environments that take into consideration the unique needs of older workers, creating a better experience for those who extend their working lives (Pietilä & Ojala 2023).

Findings on Women Extending Working Lives

Differences in working trajectories also influence women's extension of their working lives. As Vlachantoni (2012) argues, "Gender differentials in financial resources in later life have emanated from a combination of factors which include an increasing diversity in women's work and care patterns, and the inability of modern pension systems to take such diversity into account" (p. 107). Ní Léime (2017) found that women without a partner often return to lower-paid, short-term jobs to extend their working life for financial reasons, as well as for social interaction, structure, and enjoyment. Craciun and Flick (2016) compared the work experiences of older women in precarious jobs with older women in jobs with non-precarious situations. While the former group viewed aging as a continuation of active life for earning money and being autonomous, the latter group

saw it as a period for volunteering and leisure activities. The choices available to older women regarding the extension of their working lives are constrained by prevailing gender inequities related to pension gaps and entitlements, which often compel them to remain active in the labor force (Edge et al. 2021). Some female workers, in particular, entered the workforce later in life and thus have lower pension earnings, a situation that motivates them to remain employed (Furunes et al. 2015). However, extending work life is not solely driven by financial necessity, as work also provides older women with economic autonomy, temporal structure, purpose, personal agency, social connectivity, and self-identity (Herbert 2021).

Altschuler (2004) found that older women reported gaining independence from their partners, achieving economic autonomy and having the opportunity to fulfill their dreams. However, they also expressed remorse over their job trajectories, as they had not previously had the chance to be autonomous. A recent study highlights that the “lack of family-friendly policies in the United States, such as paid maternity leave made it more difficult for women, whether paid caregivers or teachers, to combine caring for children with paid employment” (Ní Léime & Street 2023: 39). Evidence from Germany indicates that “women and lower-qualified workers tend to leave the labor market earlier. If they do work, it is more often in part-time or marginal work arrangements that are increasingly part of German employment. However, atypical working arrangements are penalized by the German pension system” (Hokema 2017: 111).

Articles also explored women’s experiences in workplaces from a meso-social perspective. Organizational cultures and stereotypes that are detrimental to older workers may act as significant barriers to their intentions to extend their working lives (Edge et al. 2021). In the case of women, research shows that they experience the intersection of age and gender discrimination. Regarding the job-seeking process, some older women reported feeling discriminated against due to their physical appearance as they aged, pushing them to engage in “anti-aging measures” to appear younger, such as coloring their hair or undergoing facelifts (Altschuler 2004). In Poland, Robbins-Ruszkowski (2013) argues that older women have been marginalized from the present and future image of the nation, which has negatively affected their confidence in seeking employment.

Within the workplace, as shown by Edge et al. (2021) and Altschuler (2004), many older women reported experiencing intergenerational issues in their interactions with younger colleagues, such as lack of respect or awareness of the difficulties older workers face. For example, in both studies, some older women noted that they were perceived as mother or grandmother figures rather than colleagues. While this perception had positive outcomes for some – such as colleagues being more attentive to their needs – for others, it resulted in undesired expectations, such as being left to do the “cleaning up” (Altschuler 2004; Edge et al. 2021). Research indicates that employers can implement changes to create more inclusive workplaces for older employees, which, in turn, can foster motivation to extend working lives. For instance, they can offer “working conditions and time schedules that the older workers can arrange according to their preferences and employment opportunities enabling workers to demonstrate their competence and fulfil their potential” (Barlin et al. 2022: 172). As discussed in the literature, older women are often the primary caregivers of others, so making changes of this nature in working conditions and time schedules may be particularly critical for them. Older women have reported low self-efficacy beliefs regarding their skills, which can decrease their confidence in finding other jobs and lead to high levels of depression during these processes (Rife 1992). In Hong Kong, women face an increasing risk of job loss as early as age 40, and their representation in the labor market steadily declined throughout the 1990s (Chiu & Ngan 1999). For rural women, self-employment and remote work are two alternatives that may help them continue working and maintain the economic stability derived from employment (Herbert 2021).

Kean et al. (1993) established a strong connection between the desire to be recognized as contributors and the well-being of older women. A study conducted in the United Kingdom (Wildman 2019) found that older women predominantly continued working out of financial necessity. However, the qualitative “data support the contention that life-course proximity to the labor market is frequently not reflective of a preference for paid work over unpaid caring” (p. 13). In another study on home care workers, Butler (2013) found that older women perceived themselves as more experienced in their roles. However, they also reported an employment history characterized by low salaries and economic insecurity, particularly during periods of family change.

Discussion

Summary of the Main Findings

The primary aim of this systematic review was to analyze qualitative studies examining gender inequalities during the extension of working life and to understand the determinants of these inequalities. Our findings provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on this topic and highlight several critical areas of concern.

First, our meta-analysis of the reviewed articles reveals a significant increase in research on EWL since 2012, with a notable concentration of studies conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom. The predominance of female authors in this field suggests strong engagement from female scholars in exploring gender dimensions of EWL. However, the geographical focus on Western countries indicates a gap in the literature concerning the Global South, where different socioeconomic and cultural contexts may shape gender inequalities in EWL. This gap underscores the need for more diverse and inclusive research that considers a broader range of experiences and perspectives.

Second, our content analysis highlights the diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches employed in the studies. The frequent use of the life course perspective and gender theories underscores the importance of examining EWL within the broader context of individuals' life trajectories and gendered experiences. The predominant reliance on qualitative methods, particularly interviews, facilitates an in-depth exploration of personal narratives and experiences. However, the limited use of mixed methods and the scarcity of systematic reviews indicate potential areas for methodological advancement. The identified limitations, such as non-representative sampling and potential biases, not only are inherent to qualitative research but also highlight the need for more rigorous and comprehensive studies.

Third, our detailed examination of gender inequalities in EWL reveals distinct differences in the motivations and experiences of older men and women toward employment. Women often extend their working lives for financial reasons, social interaction, and enjoyment, while men are more likely to seek flexible working arrangements for autonomy and control.

These differences are rooted in broader gender inequalities, such as pension gaps and caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women.

The findings regarding men's experiences highlight the impact of ageism and a lack of respect in the workplace, which can hinder their motivation to continue working. In contrast, women's experiences are shaped by economic pressures, caregiving roles, and workplace discrimination. The intersection of age and gender discrimination creates additional barriers for older women, affecting their job-seeking and workplace experiences. Organizational cultures and stereotypes further exacerbate these challenges, underscoring the need for supportive policies and practices that address the unique needs of older women.

Policy Implications

The findings of this systematic review of qualitative studies on gender inequalities during the extension of working life underscore the importance of designing policies that are sensitive to gender differences and the unique challenges faced by older men and women.

One of the most pressing issues highlighted by our review is the gender disparity in financial resources during later life, largely stemming from differences in work and caregiving patterns. Modern pension systems often fail to account for these differences, resulting in significant pension gaps that disproportionately affect women. Policymakers must consider reforms that recognize and address the diverse work trajectories of women, including periods of unpaid caregiving.

Our review also reveals that older men and women have different motivations and preferences for extending their working lives. While men often seek flexible work arrangements that offer autonomy and control, women are more likely to be driven by financial necessity and caregiving responsibilities. Policies promoting flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work, remote work, and job-sharing, can support older workers in balancing work with other life commitments. Employers should be encouraged to adopt age-friendly workplace practices that accommodate the needs of older workers, particularly women, who may have additional caregiving responsibilities.

Finally, a critical policy issue involves addressing workplace discrimination. Ageism and gender discrimination in the workplace are significant barriers to extending working lives. Older women, in particular, face the intersection of age and gender discrimination, which affects their job-seeking efforts and workplace experiences. Anti-discrimination policies must be strengthened and rigorously enforced to protect older workers from bias and unfair treatment. Training programs for employers and employees can raise awareness about the value of older workers and promote inclusive workplace cultures. Additionally, initiatives that support intergenerational collaboration and respect can help mitigate the negative impacts of ageism.

Research Gaps

In this systematic review, we identified several research gaps in the reviewed articles that should be addressed in future research. Despite many articles including both women and men in their samples, gender was not always a primary focus, and gender comparisons often lacked depth. Some populations were underrepresented in the existing research, such as samples from countries and with participants in the Global South, or studies that could allow comparison between countries or diverse populations. There is a need for research focusing on Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. (LGBTQIA+) groups, exploring the relationship between older workers and their communities and investigating rural/urban disparities. The connection between age discrimination and gender has not been adequately studied, despite suggestions that it should be compared with sex discrimination and sexual harassment (Encel 1999). Additionally, another gap is the lack of theoretical and methodological development in the study of gender inequality in EWL. The absence of theoretical and conceptual advancements may explain the lack of a common foundation upon which to construct empirical evidence on extending working life from a gender perspective. Finally, more information is needed on how men and women perceive the influence of working conditions on their expectations and decisions about how extending their working life may enhance the value of their work. Recent research, specifically in Chile (Cabib 2025; Cabib

et al. 2024), has made important progress in this direction, although it remains insufficient.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, literature in languages other than English did not emerge during the search, likely due to the prevalence of English as the primary language in many journals and databases. Additionally, this limitation also applies to the exclusion of journals indexed outside of Web of Science and Scopus. Second, the inclusion of book chapters in the search made it impossible to capture all relevant titles. There is no comprehensive global database of books that can be consulted, and many important resources were inaccessible for inclusion in this research. Finally, although the review considered research on non-binary genders, all of the studies reviewed used a binary gender approach. Therefore, future research should not only deepen the understanding of gender inequalities in women's experiences but also explore comparisons across genders, masculinities, and, in particular, non-binary genders.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this systematic review highlight the complex interplay of financial, social, and organizational factors contributing to gender inequalities in EWL. The dominance of research from Western countries, coupled with the limited focus on the Global South, emphasizes the need for more diverse and inclusive studies. The gaps identified in the literature, such as lack of representative samples and the need for a deeper analysis of qualitative data, point to critical areas for future research. Moreover, incorporating a broader range of methodologies to approach this topic could enhance our understanding of gender inequalities in EWL. By addressing these gaps and implementing supportive policies and practices, we can help mitigate gender inequalities and create more equitable opportunities for older workers to extend their working lives.

Ethical Approval

This research project was approved by the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts Ethics Committee at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (institutional review board [IRB] approval number: 210612002), which conforms to the provisions of the Declaration of Helsinki, the Declaration of Singapore, and the Nuremberg Code.

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Declaration of Contribution of Authors

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design or data analysis and interpretation, as well as the drafting and approval of this article.

Statement of Competing Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

The data, analytic methods, and materials used in this study are available in an open repository via the following GitHub account: <https://github.com/FranciscaOrtizRuiz>. The data can be accessed by downloading the repository. This study was not pre-registered, as the need for pre-registration was not recognized at the time the study was initiated in December 2021. However, to minimize potential biases in this systematic review, two distinct evaluation tools were employed. First, we outline the research practices and validation methods applied in this study, based on Hannes (2011). Second, we use the three stages of the ROBIS tool, as described by Whiting et al. (2016), to enhance the transparency

of our research. Both techniques are briefly summarized in the Methodology section.

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