

“I’m not a quiet woman”: an intersectional analysis of gender, class, and ageism in the Canadian workplace

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Abstract

This paper examines how ageism intersects with other forms of social inequality – particularly gender and class – in shaping the lived experiences of older workers (55+) in Canada. Based on semi-structured interviews with 10 older adults, the findings reveal that ageism rarely occurs in isolation. Participants described how their age was entangled with gendered expectations, workplace hierarchies, and economic vulnerabilities. Several women detailed the dual burden of being both older and female in a youth- and male-dominated workforce, while others noted the emotional toll of staying in physically demanding jobs due to financial necessity. Although a small number of participants identified as racialised, the data did not support an in-depth analysis of racialised ageism. However, some white participants explicitly acknowledged how their racial privilege insulated them from additional layers of discrimination. This insight reinforces the importance of intersectionality in policy design, even when

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a study's racial data are limited. By situating these narratives within the broader literature on workplace inequality, the study offers an intersectionality informed analysis and calls for targeted policy interventions that address ageism in tandem with gender and class-based exclusion.

Keywords: ageism, discrimination, intersectionality, labour, work

Introduction

Ageism in the workplace remains a pervasive yet often overlooked form of discrimination. Defined as prejudice or discrimination based on age, it primarily affects older adults who are seen as less capable or valuable within professional settings (Butler 1969). Despite legal protections against age-based discrimination in many countries, including Canada, older workers continue to face significant barriers to advancement, recognition, and employment, often being overlooked in favour of younger colleagues (Lagacé et al. 2019). In the Canadian context, the labour market has seen increased participation from adults aged 55 years and above, driven by economic pressures and longer life expectancies (Government of Canada 2022). Yet, this same demographic continues to face exclusion rooted in both implicit and explicit ageism.

This article explores how ageism intersects with gender and class to compound older workers' experiences of discrimination in Canada. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 10 older adults, it applies an intersectional lens to examine how gendered expectations, class-based vulnerability, and workplace norms shape perceptions of ageing. The analysis is motivated by participants' own insights – particularly the statement by one woman, "I'm not a quiet woman, but I'm not a racialized woman either" – which encapsulates how privilege and marginalisation can simultaneously coexist and interact.

While ageism often interacts with other social locations, such intersections are rarely explored in-depth in workplace policy or research. This article contributes to that gap by providing an intersectional analysis of how older adults navigate ageism in relation to gendered expectations and economic precarity. The analysis highlights the complex emotional and material dimensions of workplace exclusion and draws attention to the urgent need for workplace policies that are attuned to these overlapping

forms of marginalisation. This work is especially important given the changing face of older Canadian workers, who are increasingly diverse in terms of gender, race, immigration status, and employment background, making it imperative for policy responses to reflect this complexity.

Literature Review

Ageism and Intergenerational Segregation

Ageism, a term introduced by Robert Butler in 1969, refers to prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping based on age. Butler likened it to other forms of systemic discrimination, such as racism and sexism, recognising its pervasive and harmful impact (Malta & Doyle 2016). Ageism is commonly categorised into four types: personal (individual attitudes), institutional (policies and practices), intentional (deliberate stereotyping), and unintentional (unconscious biases) (Brownell & Powell 2013). While some scholars have pointed to the social segregation of age groups as a source of ageism – where different generations occupy distinct institutional and cultural spaces (Hagestad & Uhlenberg 2005) – others have noted that collaboration between generations is often mandated in professional settings. In workplaces, older and younger employees are frequently expected to work together, but such collaboration does not inherently challenge ageist stereotypes. On the contrary, it may reproduce them if younger workers are viewed as ‘innovative’ and older workers as ‘outdated’ or resistant to change.

Impact of Ageism on Older Adults

Ageism has wide-ranging effects on older adults, negatively influencing their physical health, mental well-being, and overall quality of life. Studies have linked age-based discrimination to depression, anxiety, stress, and poor self-rated health (Bodner et al. 2021; Lyons et al. 2018; Shippee et al. 2019). Internalised ageism – older adults’ acceptance of negative stereotypes about ageing – has even been associated with shortened life expectancy (Levy et al. 2002). Stereotypes that portray older people as frail, cognitively impaired, or socially irrelevant contribute to their exclusion from meaningful activities, including work and civic engagement

(Horton et al. 2007). The media plays a significant role in reinforcing these stereotypes by underrepresenting older adults or casting them as burdens rather than contributors (Powell 2013).

At the same time, more recent cultural narratives depict ageing in a more positive, but still problematic, light. In the European and North American contexts, the distinction between the 'third age' and the 'fourth age' has gained traction (Gilleard & Higgs 2005; Laslett 1991). In this framing, 'third agers' – also termed 'best agers' or 'golden agers' – are those who remain productive, independent, and active, embodying ideals of successful ageing. Conversely, the 'fourth age' is associated with decline, dependency, and disengagement. While seemingly celebratory, these discourses function as a new mode of exclusion: they valorise only those older adults who are healthy, employed, and high-functioning, while further marginalising the 'old-old' as burdensome or failed agers (Katz & Calasanti 2015). This binary not only intensifies ageism but also intersects with class, gender, and race – since the ability to age successfully is often dependent on access to health care, financial security, and social capital.

Older Adults in the Canadian Labour Market

Labour force participation among older Canadians has continued to increase over the past two decades. According to Statistics Canada, the participation rate of individuals aged 55–64 years reached 67.5% in 2021, up from 47.1% in 1996 (Statistics Canada 2022). For those aged 65 years and older, participation increased from 6.0% to 14.9% over the same period. Several factors drive this shift: improved health and longevity, changing pension structures, the elimination of mandatory retirement, and financial necessity due to rising costs of living and insufficient retirement savings.

Participation also varies significantly by gender and occupation. Older women are less likely to remain in or re-enter the workforce, partly due to historical patterns of interrupted or precarious employment. In 2021, older women accounted for approximately 45.0% of the labour force aged 55+, with notable representation in care-related and administrative occupations (Statistics Canada 2022). Men were more concentrated in finance, management, and technical roles. These occupational distributions reflect broader gendered labour trends and have implications for how older adults experience ageism at work.

Not all older adults work by choice. For many, continued employment is driven by economic necessity or a lack of viable alternatives. The average retirement age rose to 64.4 years in 2021, although this number varies across sectors and income brackets. In Canada, the average retirement age has slowly risen over the past two decades in response to longer life expectancies and fiscal pressures on public pension systems. Workers in lower-wage, physically demanding jobs often retire later due to financial pressure, while those in professional or managerial roles may have greater flexibility. These trends underscore the relevance of class when analysing ageism, as the capacity to age out of the workforce is unevenly distributed across socioeconomic lines.

Ageism in the Workplace

Ageism is pervasive in many aspects of life, including the workplace, where older adults face age-based discrimination as they continue working longer. Dennis and Thomas (2007) emphasised that the workplace mirrors societal stereotypes, including ageism. Common forms of workplace ageism include covert, verbal, and physical hostility, as well as manipulative behaviours (Blackstone 2013). Many older workers experience being ignored, excluded from decisions, or talked down to by colleagues and supervisors.

Despite evidence showing no performance differences between older and younger workers, negative attitudes toward older employees persist. Malinen and Johnston (2013) found that implicit negative biases about older workers remain resistant to change, illustrating the unconscious nature of workplace ageism. Research also shows that age discrimination negatively affects job satisfaction, commitment, and work longevity, while social support can help mitigate these impacts (Choi et al. 2018; Macdonald & Levy 2016).

Berger (2021) has also highlighted that employers often hold stereotypes about older workers, viewing them as less productive, inflexible, and costly, despite recognising the benefits of an age-diverse workforce. These biases contribute to older workers being considered for positions only if they are “exceptional.” In addition, older workers face challenges in the job search process due to both subtle and overt age discrimination, particularly during job advertisements, interviews, and résumé reviews (Berger 2021).

Methodology

Method

This study adopted a social constructionist perspective, which emphasises the “social, historical, and collective nature of human consciousness” (Durrheim 1997: 175). Social constructionism challenges the idea that knowledge is solely derived from objective, impartial observation (Burr 2015). Instead, it asserts that no single ‘true’ account of any phenomenon exists; rather, multiple perspectives emerge from social life and human interactions (Burr 2015). This perspective directly aligns with the study’s objectives, which aim to explore the intersectional intricacies of ageism in the workplace.

While much of the current research tends to focus on the biological aspects of ageing or on quantifying instances of ageism (Krekula et al. 2018), the social constructionist approach offers a distinct way of examining this issue. By investigating how social constructions shape older workers’ experiences of ageism, this research contributes to expanding and deepening the academic discourse on this topic.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 older adults (aged 55+) residing in Ontario, Canada. Participants were recruited via convenience sampling through professional networks, social media platforms, and partnerships with local organisations such as the Hamilton Council on Aging. The interviews, conducted over Zoom because of COVID-19 restrictions, lasted approximately 1 hour each and were audio recorded with participants’ consent. Interview questions focused on participants’ experiences of ageism, intersections with other forms of discrimination, and coping mechanisms within the workplace. Conducting interviews via Zoom shaped participants’ comfort levels differently; some appreciated the privacy of home, while others noted limits in building rapport through screens.

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from McMaster University Research Ethics Board, ensuring that all participants were fully informed about the study’s objectives and provided their consent prior to participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary

nature of their involvement, with the option to withdraw at any time. The extracts provided in the results sections are identified by the participants' selected pseudonym and age.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the semi-structured interview data due to its capacity for providing detailed descriptions of data through identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns, or themes (Sparkes & Smith 2014; Vaismoradi et al. 2013). While various scholars have outlined processes for conducting thematic analysis, this study followed the steps established by Braun and Clarke (2006), alongside guidance from Aronson (1995) and Sparkes and Smith (2014). These steps include: (1) becoming deeply familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) identifying potential themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Following data collection, the lead researcher (ACB) immersed themselves in the transcripts to gain a thorough understanding of the content (Aronson 1995; Braun & Clarke 2006; Sparkes & Smith 2014). Initial patterns, or codes, were generated for the entire data set (Aronson 1995; Braun & Clarke 2006; Sparkes & Smith 2014). After this coding phase, the codes were grouped into broader themes and sub-themes, helping to construct a comprehensive view of the participants' collective experiences (Aronson 1995; Sparkes & Smith 2014). The themes were then examined to ensure consistency with the corresponding coded data extracts. It was crucial to ensure that these extracts formed a coherent pattern and that the researcher (ACB) could identify how the themes interconnected to tell a cohesive story about the data (Sparkes & Smith 2014). Once the themes were finalised and reviewed, the analysis was organised into a structured narrative (Aronson 1995).

Results

Participants

The sample for this study included 10 individuals with varied backgrounds in terms of age, gender, marital status, race, education, and employment

status. Just over half were aged 60 years and above; the rest were between 55 and 59 years. Majority (70%) identified as women and 30% as men. Most participants were white ($n = 7$), with the remaining identifying as Black ($n = 2$) and Latino ($n = 1$). Educational attainment was high overall, with one person holding a high school diploma, three holding graduate degrees, and the remaining six having completed some college or undergraduate university degrees. Participants worked in sectors ranging from healthcare and education to manufacturing and finance. Employment status was split between those working ($n = 4$), retired ($n = 2$), or unemployed but seeking work ($n = 4$).

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling methods via professional networks, social media, and local organisations. While this approach helped reach participants with relevant lived experience, it also introduced limits to representativeness – particularly regarding race and occupational specificity. The small number of racialised participants prevented a robust intersectional analysis of racism and ageism, though relevant insights emerged and are addressed cautiously.

While the sample reflects demographic diversity, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The small number of racialised participants limits the depth of racial analysis possible in this paper. This reflects both the constraints of the snowball sampling approach and the specific social networks from which participants were drawn. Future studies should purposively sample racialised older workers to examine how racialised ageism manifests across different sectors and regions. Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the intersecting dimensions of age, gender, and class, while also highlighting where further inquiries are needed.

The composition of the sample was similarly shaped by both ethical and logistical considerations during recruitment. In addition to recruiting those individuals who were comfortable meeting over Zoom (given pandemic restrictions), concentrating on a single occupation or background – while potentially beneficial for analytic clarity – would have excluded the very diversity that this study aimed to capture. Instead, this approach prioritised capturing a range of experiences and identities, which, while broad, allows for an exploratory analysis of how intersecting forms of discrimination shape older adults' workplace experiences.

The thematic analysis of participants' narratives revealed three key, overlapping themes: the intersection of gender and ageism, the role of class and economic vulnerability in shaping age-based exclusion, and the ways in which racial privilege or marginalisation influence experiences of ageing in the workplace. These themes do not exist in isolation; rather, they intersect in ways that intensify marginalisation or, conversely, provide protective buffers. Emotional responses and individual coping strategies were also woven throughout these narratives and offer further insight into how older workers manage daily experiences of exclusion. What follows is a discussion of each theme in turn, with particular attention to how structural inequalities and identity-based expectations shape the lived realities of older adults in the Canadian workforce.

Gendered Ageism: The Double Burden of Being an Older Woman

Older women in this study frequently described how ageism was compounded by gendered expectations around appearance, behaviour, and emotional deference. Several participants noted that their skills and professional experience were overshadowed by assumptions about their diminished relevance.

Marion (67), who worked in a male-dominated industry, reflected: "It's that dismissal ... I felt like it was more the older female." This comment came as Marion described repeated moments of being interrupted or dismissed in meetings, suggesting her gender and age combined to undermine her authority. Her insight illustrates the intersecting forces of gender and age in shaping how credibility and expertise are socially assigned. Several women noted a growing invisibility as they aged - what Sontag (1972) termed the "double standard of aging" - but emphasised that this invisibility was enforced, not passive.

The pressure to maintain a youthful appearance emerged as a persistent theme. Winter (67), a consultant in a predominantly younger workplace, described how appearance became a survival strategy: "I still do what I can to make sure my hair looks good and that my skin looks okay when I have meetings on Zoom." Küpper's (2016) notion of "age mimicry" is relevant here: older women attempt to align their appearance

and demeanour with youth-centric norms not simply out of vanity, but to signal ongoing employability and stave off exclusion. While these efforts reflect agency, they also reveal the emotional labour required to navigate ageist and sexist expectations. As Hochschild (1983) theorised, emotional labour involves managing feelings to fulfil the emotional requirements of a role, a burden often intensified for women.

Importantly, not all ageism coping strategies were appearance-based. Participants also discussed seeking validation through professional mentorships, external friendships, and creative work. For instance, one participant mentored younger colleagues as a way to affirm her relevance, while another turned to painting and writing as outlets for self-expression beyond work. Lacy (56) noted, "Even when I know I'm the most experienced person in the room, I start doubting myself because I don't see people like me in positions of power anymore." This statement underscores how symbolic erasure – the subtle but persistent absence or underrepresentation of marginalised groups in positions of visibility and power – particularly the absence of older women in leadership, affects self-perception and workplace engagement.

These findings indicate that gendered ageism operates not only through overt exclusion but also through subtle expectations around how women should look, behave, and communicate as they age. While some coped through self-care or mimicry, others disengaged or turned to external support. The broader implication is that emotional survival strategies, while effective in the short term, often reinforce the very norms they are designed to resist.

Class and Economic Vulnerabilities: Comparing Ageism across Occupational Contexts

The experiences of ageism also varied depending on participants' class and the nature of their work. For those in physically demanding jobs, ageism was often intertwined with economic vulnerability. These workers described being pushed out of their roles as they aged, despite still needing to work due to financial necessity. This was particularly pronounced in sectors such as manual labour, where physical stamina can be prioritised over experience.

One participant (age 56) working in construction noted, "I can't retire early because I need the money, but they're making it clear that they don't want me here. They see me as slowing down, even though I know my job better than anyone." This statement reflects the precarious position of older workers in lower-income jobs, where ageism manifests in both overt and covert ways, often through pressure to leave before they are ready. Unlike their counterparts in white-collar jobs, these workers do not have the option to transition into roles that require less physical exertion, leaving them with few alternatives.

In contrast, participants in white-collar occupations described more subtle forms of ageism, where they were passed over for promotions or excluded from leadership opportunities due to perceptions that they were not up to speed with modern technologies or new ways of working. A female participant (age 56) in a corporate role explained, "They don't say it outright, but you can tell when they think you're too old to understand how things work now. I'm good at my job, but they want younger people who they think have more energy." This narrative underscores the different manifestations of ageism across class lines, where older workers are devalued for different reasons based on the type of work they do.

Racial Privilege and the Limits of Inclusion

Although this study did not explicitly aim to centre racialised experiences, participants' reflections on race emerged in revealing ways – particularly among white women who identified racial privilege as a buffer against compounded discrimination. Denise (64) reflected, "I'm not a racialized woman; there I think there'd still be big issues," acknowledging that her whiteness shielded her from experiences that racialised women might endure in the workplace. Other white participants echoed this sentiment, recognising that although they faced ageism and sexism, their racial identity protected them from more severe marginalisation.

However, the perspectives of racialised older workers were notably limited in this study, with only three participants identifying as Black or Latino. These three participants did not consistently articulate experiences where racism and ageism intersected – either due to interview dynamics or individual interpretations of workplace encounters. As a result,

the discussion of race in this paper primarily reflects how whiteness operates as a protective factor rather than how racism compounds ageism.

Although the examples are limited, they nonetheless point to a broader issue: the absence of robust data on racialised ageism should not obscure the fact that race matters. Whiteness in this study often functioned as an invisible safety net – shielding participants from compounded exclusion and affording them a default legitimacy not extended to others. Future research must be explicitly designed to centre the experiences of racialised older adults, across sectors and regions. The protective function of whiteness, as recognised by multiple participants, only reinforces the need to understand how race and age intersect in shaping labour market outcomes.

Gendered Coping Strategies: Seeking Validation and Community

Participants – particularly women – described a range of coping strategies in response to workplace ageism, often centred on seeking support and reclaiming self-worth. Many older women articulated emotional responses shaped by both internalised ageist beliefs and gendered expectations around appearance and behaviour. They reported turning to friends, social networks, and personal wellness routines to counteract the devaluation they felt at work. While these accounts were most common among women, some men also described strategies to cope with age-based stigma – though often in less emotionally expressive terms. Further research is warranted to examine potential gender differences in emotional expression and coping mechanisms, particularly in how men and women are socialised to navigate vulnerability in professional environments. As such, this section avoids suggesting an essentialist divide and instead points to coping as both gendered and context-dependent.

Marion (67) described how her community of friends became a crucial source of emotional resilience: “I had a whole community of friends ... from whom I got validation.” For her, the validation and emotional support from this network were essential in maintaining self-esteem when the workplace consistently devalued her contributions due to her age. This form of external validation helped counteract the internalised feelings of worthlessness or invisibility that are commonly experienced by older women in professional settings. Marion’s story suggests that

older women, perhaps more than men, may be inclined to seek emotional support from trusted personal relationships when navigating workplace challenges. However, further research with a larger sample is needed to fully explore this potential trend. This social coping mechanism offered a sense of belonging and self-worth that was denied to them at work, allowing them to sustain a positive self-image even in hostile environments.

For many women, these external support systems were more than just emotional buffers; they represented spaces of solidarity where experiences of ageism and sexism could be shared and validated. The conversations with friends often included discussions of workplace frustrations, the lack of professional advancement, or the constant scrutiny placed on their appearance. These communities, whether formed through long-standing friendships, family networks, or social groups, provided psychological safety and a necessary counterbalance to the rejection they faced in professional settings. By finding strength in these networks, older women could combat the isolation that came from being overlooked and undervalued at work.

In addition to seeking validation from external communities, many female participants described engaging in self-care practices as a way of coping with the pressures of ageism. Winter (67) emphasised the importance of maintaining her physical appearance, particularly in response to gendered societal expectations. "Women do whatever they can to make sure... they look younger," she explained. This highlights how older women, in response to deeply ingrained cultural ideals, may feel compelled to engage in efforts to preserve a youthful appearance, even in professional settings. The expectation for women to "look the part" is not only age-based but is also highly gendered, placing older women in a double bind: they must navigate both the stigma of ageing and the societal demand to maintain youthfulness.

For women like Winter, self-care became both a form of resistance and a survival mechanism, offering a way to reclaim agency in the face of ageism. However, there is also a subtle tension here – while self-care empowers them to push back against societal pressures, it simultaneously reflects a form of acquiescence to those very expectations, as women may feel compelled to invest in maintaining appearances to remain valued in a youth-centric workplace culture. By adhering to appearance-based norms, older women attempted to mitigate some of the discrimination

they faced, believing that looking younger might help them be taken more seriously or perceived as competent in their roles. However, this also reflects the internalisation of ageist and sexist standards, where women feel the need to alter their physical appearance to fit into a workplace that values youth over experience. As Dolan (2017) observes, discourses of “successful ageing” are deeply gendered: women are expected not only to age well but to look as though they are doing so, embodying ideals of grace, beauty, and self-discipline that align closely with neoliberal expectations of self-care and self-management. The emotional labour involved in constantly managing their appearance added to the broader emotional toll of ageism, as these efforts were not just about self-care but about meeting the unrealistic expectations placed upon older women in the workforce.

For other participants, self-care extended beyond physical appearance to include practices that nurtured their mental and emotional well-being. Engaging in activities such as exercise, meditation, or hobbies outside of work were common strategies used to maintain emotional balance. These practices allowed women to distance themselves emotionally from the negativity experienced at work and focus on cultivating a sense of personal fulfilment and control over their own lives. This was particularly important for those who felt disempowered in their professional roles.

While self-care and external validation provided emotional respite, these coping mechanisms also highlighted the inadequacy of workplace support for older women facing ageism. Many participants expressed a desire for more formal structures within their workplaces to address ageism, such as mentorship programs, anti-discrimination policies, or training for managers on the value of older workers. The absence of such measures left these women feeling that their only recourse was to turn to personal strategies, which, while helpful, did not address the systemic nature of the problem.

In essence, the experiences of women in this study illustrate how deeply intertwined ageism and sexism are in shaping their daily lives. Their coping strategies – whether seeking external validation or engaging in self-care – reveal both their resilience and the heavy emotional labour required to navigate workplaces that marginalise them based on age and gender. By relying on external networks and self-care practices, these women found ways to sustain themselves emotionally, but their stories

also reflect a larger societal failure to fully value older women in the workplace, forcing them to bear the burden of managing the emotional consequences of ageism on their own.

Coping with the Intersections of Class and Ageism

Economic vulnerability shaped how working-class participants navigated ageism, particularly in physically demanding jobs. For these individuals, continuing to work was driven less by personal choice than by financial necessity. Lacking the means to retire or shift into less taxing roles, they found themselves caught between physical fatigue and workplace discrimination. This intersection of class and age resulted in a precarious dependence on employment, compounding the emotional toll of enduring daily microaggressions and stereotypes about ageing.

Scott (55), who worked in a physically intensive role, recounted: "I always feel like I need to go home because these guys keep making these jokes about me being the grumpy old man." While framed as humour, the repetition of these ageist remarks created a hostile atmosphere. For Scott, the workplace became not just economically essential but emotionally draining – a space marked by isolation and diminishing self-worth.

Importantly, while men like Scott were vocal about ageism in physically strenuous jobs, the sample also included women in professions that entailed similar physical demands. Their experiences, though not as explicitly articulated in gendered terms, underscore that physically strenuous work is not exclusive to men. Gender must therefore be considered when examining class-based ageism, as the expectation to remain stoic or physically resilient may affect older men and women differently, while exposing both to risks of burnout and injury.

Coping mechanisms in these contexts were shaped by both identity and material necessity, as social position and economic pressure intersected to limit agency. Participants often downplayed or normalised ageist remarks to retain employment. Some took on more responsibilities to demonstrate value – though this sometimes led to overexertion. Others remained silent, fearing job loss. These strategies underscore how economic insecurity can constrain resistance and how class amplifies the vulnerability of ageing in the workplace.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal the complex and intersectional nature of ageism within Canadian workplaces. Rather than existing in isolation, ageism intersects with other social markers – especially gender and class – to create layered, context-specific disadvantages. Participants described a shared experience of age-related bias, but its intensity and expression varied based on occupational context, social identity, and economic vulnerability.

For women in the study, ageing was not simply a chronological process but a shift into social vulnerability. Their experiences reflected what feminist gerontology has called the “invisible older woman” phenomenon (Arber & Ginn 1995; Sontag 1972) – but participants made clear that this invisibility was enforced. It manifested in being overlooked for leadership, scrutinised for appearance, and increasingly excluded from decision-making. As Lacy (56) noted, “Even when I know I’m the most experienced person in the room, I start doubting myself because I don’t see people like me in positions of power anymore.” This sense of social erasure was compounded by appearance-based pressures, where women were expected to conform to youthful ideals to be perceived as competent.

Here, Küpper’s (2016) concept of age mimicry is particularly salient. Older women’s efforts to maintain a youthful appearance – despite personal exhaustion or workplace dismissal – reflect a form of survival within cultures that equate youth with value. However, these practices also reproduce the very standards they resist; highlighting the double bind of resisting ageism through conformity.

Class also shaped how participants experienced and responded to ageism. Working-class participants – both men and women – expressed that financial insecurity severely constrained their options. Older workers in physically demanding roles described being pressured to perform beyond their capacity while simultaneously being stigmatised as ‘slowing down’. They could not afford to retire early, nor could they easily transition into less strenuous roles. These dynamics resonate with Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of social capital, which he describes as the resources and advantages that stem from belonging to durable networks of relationships and mutual recognition. In this context, those with greater institutional,

educational, or social resources were more equipped to manage or resist ageism, while others remained structurally trapped in marginalising roles.

Importantly, the data revealed that older adults' coping strategies were shaped by gendered social norms. Many women turned to emotional networks, self-care routines, or peer support as a means of resisting internalised ageism. These spaces – though informal – provided critical validation, enabling women to retain a sense of dignity and self-worth. Yet, as participants noted, the necessity of such strategies also pointed to the absence of formal institutional protections or acknowledgements. While some men employed humour or overwork as strategies of inclusion, these too reflect gendered expectations around stoicism and performance.

Although race was not a central analytic category in this study due to sample limitations, the few racialised participants' stories – as well as the reflections of white participants – highlight the protective role of whiteness in shaping workplace experiences. White women often acknowledged that, while they experienced gendered and ageist marginalisation, their racial privilege insulated them from further scrutiny. Racialised participants, on the other hand, described how assumptions about competence or authority intersected with their race, limiting advancement and exposing them to subtle but persistent forms of exclusion. As Moore (2009) and Gee et al. (2007) have argued, ageism cannot be fully understood without considering how racial hierarchies shape its expression and impact.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the necessity of an intersectional approach to workplace ageism. They suggest that anti-ageism policies must not only protect against overt discrimination but also dismantle the cultural and structural norms that render older workers – especially women, racialised individuals, and the working poor – invisible or expendable. They also caution against the rhetoric of 'successful ageing' or 'best agers', which may valorise a narrow, privileged experience while marginalising those who cannot or do not conform.

Ultimately, ageing at work is not experienced equally. While all older adults face ageism, some are equipped to navigate or mitigate its effects

through social capital, racial privilege, or professional status. Others are left with only coping strategies – emotional, aesthetic, or behavioural – to endure workplaces that devalue them. Understanding these dynamics is essential for moving beyond generic age-inclusion efforts and toward structural change that accounts for the full complexity of ageing, identity, and inequality.

Implications for Anti-Ageism Policies

The findings from this study suggest that anti-ageism policies must be designed with a nuanced understanding of how ageism is experienced differently depending on gender, class, and, to some extent, race. Participants' use of coping strategies – such as maintaining youthful appearances, seeking validation from peers, or emotionally withdrawing – reveals not only the individual burdens of navigating workplace ageism, but also the broader absence of institutional supports. While these strategies allowed some older workers, particularly women, to manage the emotional toll of age-based exclusion, they simultaneously pointed to the failure of workplaces to provide formal mechanisms of protection, inclusion, and redress.

A meaningful policy response must address the gendered dynamics that contribute to older women's workplace marginalisation. This includes recognising how the pressure to appear youthful is not merely about personal preference, but is tied to deeper structural biases that equate competence with youthfulness, particularly for women. Addressing these dynamics requires workplace cultures to move beyond surface-level diversity commitments and engage in substantive changes to hiring, promotion, and leadership development processes. Policies must actively dismantle ageist beauty norms and challenge stereotypes that frame older women as inflexible or outdated. Training programmes that address implicit bias must explicitly include ageism alongside sexism and racism, as these forms of exclusion often operate together rather than in isolation.

In addition to gendered experiences, economic vulnerability emerged as a critical factor shaping how ageism was experienced and resisted. Participants in physically demanding jobs expressed that they could not afford to retire or take less strenuous work, even as their bodies struggled

to keep pace. Policies must therefore attend to the material conditions of ageing at work, offering flexible scheduling, accommodations for physical strain, and phased retirement options that allow older workers to transition gradually without financial penalty. These supports are especially important for workers in low-income or non-unionised roles, where social capital is limited, and formal protections are often lacking.

Moreover, anti-ageism policies must be sensitive to how racial privilege or marginalisation mediates experiences of ageing in the workplace. Although the small number of racialised participants in this study limited the depth of racial analysis, the findings nonetheless suggest that white older workers may benefit from a form of racial buffering that protects them from compounded forms of discrimination. Racialised older workers, by contrast, may face intersecting ageist and racialised assumptions that limit their access to advancement, authority, and recognition. Policies that promote diversity in leadership must consider age as a dimension of equity, ensuring that older workers – particularly those who are also racialised – are not excluded from opportunities under the guise of needing ‘fresh’ or ‘modern’ perspectives.

Finally, the narratives in this study caution against one-size-fits-all approaches to workplace ageism. Older workers are not a homogeneous group, and policies that fail to consider how age intersects with gender, class, and race will ultimately reproduce the very inequalities they aim to redress. The goal of anti-ageism policies in the workplace should not merely be to retain older workers, but to positively transform the conditions under which they are able to thrive. This requires a shift away from framing ageing as an individual deficit or a productivity challenge, and toward understanding it as a socially patterned process shaped by power, privilege, and structural exclusion.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of workplace ageism by showing how it intersects with gender, class, and race to shape the lived experiences of older workers. Women described the dual pressures of invisibility and appearance-based scrutiny; working-class participants revealed how financial necessity limited their agency in resisting ageist environments; and white participants acknowledged the privileges

that buffered them from compounded discrimination. While the small sample limits generalisation, the narratives offer valuable entry points into the everyday realities of intersectional ageism.

To meaningfully address ageism, workplace interventions must be designed with these intersections in mind. One-size-fits-all strategies will fail to reach those who experience ageism most acutely: older women, low-income workers, and racialised employees. Rather than relying on individual coping strategies, institutions must take responsibility for fostering inclusive cultures, removing systemic barriers, and redistributing resources to ensure that all older workers – not just the most privileged – are seen, supported, and valued.

Ethical Statement

This study was reviewed and approved by the research ethics board at McMaster University (MREB #5881).

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