



Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace

How Age-Related Stereotypes, Biases,
and Discriminatory Practices Impede Success

WOMEN OF
INFLUENCE+

[WOMENOFINFLUENCE.CA](https://www.womenofinfluence.ca)

Source: Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace, a research project led by Women of Influence+. More than 1,250 respondents completed the survey between January 9, 2024 and February 4, 2024.

About Women of Influence+

For more than three decades, Women of Influence+ has been at the forefront of sharing the unfiltered success stories of diverse role models to illustrate the unique paths and challenges self-identifying women and gender-diverse individuals navigate to reach success. Our goal isn't to change the narrative – we are rewriting it.

We recognize the numerous challenges that women, with their diverse intersectional identities, face when trying to navigate advancement in their careers. Instead of watching from the sidelines, we take a proactive, inclusive, and multi-faceted approach to ensure women are supported and celebrated every step of the way.

Through our work – carefully curated success stories, our awards programs, learning and development events, and our research – we are providing a reimagined definition of what it means to be influential. This definition isn't static, it's inclusive and dynamic and deeply considers how influence is used to positively impact the world of business and work.

We equip women with connections, support, training, and tools to carve new pathways and excel within their careers on their own terms. No matter what stage you are at in your career when you discover the WOI+ platform, there is something here for you.

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Executive Summary

Numerous forms of discrimination can hinder professional success, and there is one that is particularly pervasive yet frequently overlooked – ageism.

According to the World Health Organization (2024)¹, ageism is defined as stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) towards others or ourselves based on age. Ageism can affect individuals at every age and stage of their career and is present across a wide variety of industries and sectors.

In a society where age is flippanantly discussed in the media, where individuals in power are often criticized for being too young or too old, and where billion-dollar cosmetic industries promote transformation and anti-aging, it's not surprising that ageism in the workplace is so widespread.

Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace is an international survey that explores the experiences of more than 1,250 working women from all demographics and industries to determine how their personal and professional lives have been impacted by age-related discrimination.

The results are striking. What we heard repeatedly from respondents is that they are facing a disproportionate level of age-related discrimination at all stages of their careers, and it is impacting both their personal and professional lives. Not only is ageism hindering women's ability to find new jobs and earn promotions, it is wreaking havoc on corporate cultures.

This paper highlights the stark realities of ageism faced by women in the workplace, and, more importantly, presents insightful solutions derived from these women themselves.

This is a call to action. If companies want to create equitable and supportive environments where women will thrive, they must consider the effects of ageism and take steps to foster an environment where women are not overlooked, belittled, or dismissed because of their age.

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/ageing-ageism>

Survey Methodology

The survey was conducted between January and February 2024. An online survey using a mixed-methods approach went live on January 9, 2024, and closed on February 4, 2024. The survey was sent via e-newsletter to Women of Influence+'s database and was also shared via social media channels. In the end, 1,258 respondents across 46 countries participated in the survey. Of those, over 98 per cent self-identified as women. This paper discusses the data revealed by the survey and examines the current landscape of ageism in the workplace including causes and potential solutions.

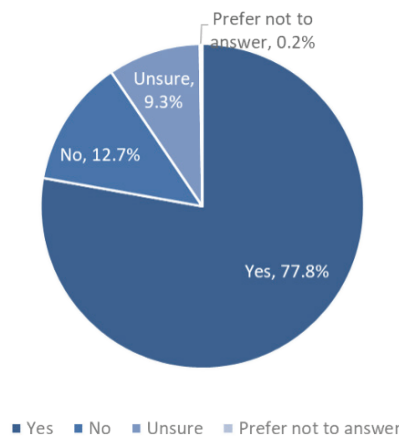
Does ageism exist in the workplace?

“Women become irrelevant after 40.”

Ageism is overwhelmingly present in workplaces across the globe.

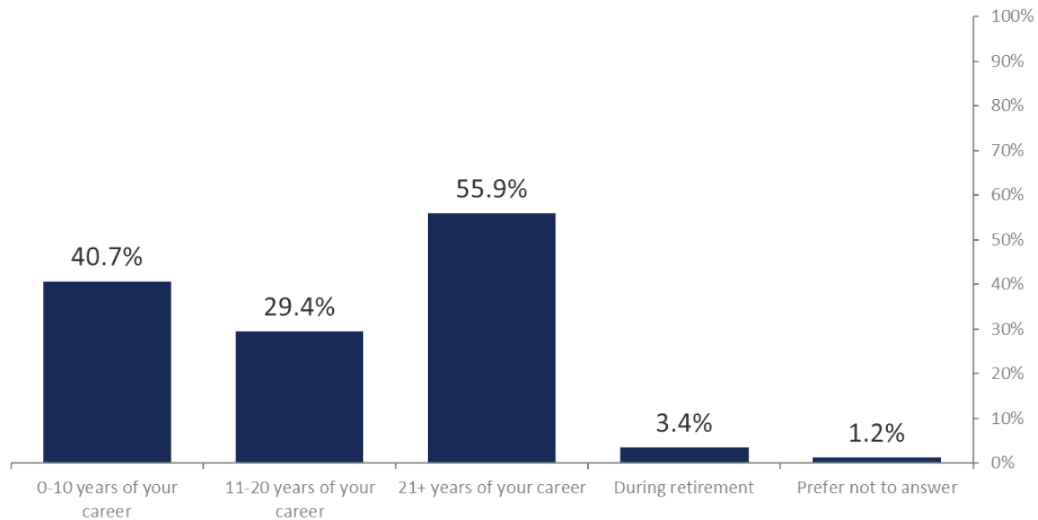
Out of the 1,258 participants surveyed, a staggering 77.8 per cent reported experiencing age-based prejudice or discrimination in the workplace at some stage in their careers. It is worth noting that only 12.7 per cent of those surveyed said they hadn't experienced ageism at all, while 9.3 per cent said they were uncertain.

Figure 1: Have you experienced age-based prejudice or discrimination in the workplace?



Survey respondents report being employed across diverse industries, with the vast majority, 89 per cent, working within multi-generational workplaces. Most significant is the fact that the experience of ageism occurred at all stages of the women's careers, with notable peaks during their initial decade of work (0 - 10) and later years (21+).

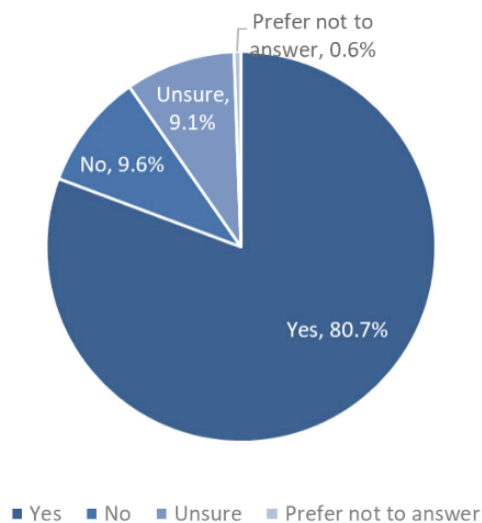
Figure 2: At what stage(s) of your career have you experienced ageism?



Not only does ageism exist, it is also more visible than we may want to believe. “I have never heard comments about male colleagues being too young or too old for their work,” said one respondent. “Women are either too young, too old, or may be in the age range of having children. All are viewed as negative.”

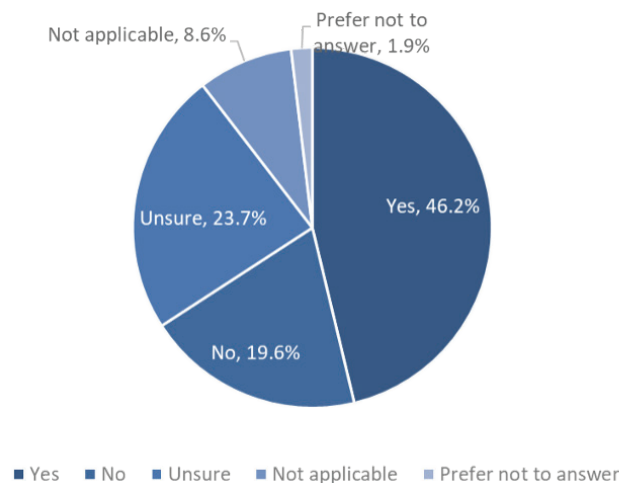
Of those surveyed, 80.7 per cent have witnessed women in the workplace being treated differently because of their age and 46.2 per cent report it to be an ongoing issue.

Figure 3: Have you witnessed women in the workplace being treated differently because of their age?



One respondent recalled, "I was told, 'I know I need to hire a woman for our senior leadership team; however, can you stop bringing resumes with women at the end of the runway? I want someone young, hungry, and preferably single with experience.'"

Figure 4: Is ageism an ongoing issue at your workplace?



It's clear that ageism exists, and the next step toward reaching a plan of action is understanding why and how age-related discrimination is showing up in the workplace.

Why does ageism exist?

"There are assumptions about what people are capable of based on their age."

Why is ageism showing up for so many women? One respondent explained, "Because ageism is one of the most socially acceptable forms of discrimination." Survey respondents shared a belief that a person's age will be directly linked to their perceived performance and success. This is amplified for women. Another respondent noted, "Women are never the right age. We are either 'going to get pregnant' or 'too old.'"

Perhaps it's the societal expectations heaped upon women to not only be everything to everyone but to do so without showing their age. One respondent commented, "Although there is still ageism out there, it's not as bad for older men, as they're more likely to be seen as 'distinguished' and 'very experienced,' whereas older women are just seen as past it or clinging on to something somebody else could be getting."

Another theory explaining the widespread presence of ageism in the workforce is the idea that the corporate world was designed by men, for men. In fact, one respondent said, "Workplaces were built for men." Another shared, "I work in the mining industry. It's just one more piece of the 'Old Boys Club.' #patriarchy." Another respondent said, "The old boys network still exists." And a fourth added, "It is a carryover from the age-old belief [that] women should not be in the workplace."

Other respondents questioned whether ageism is linked to pay equity and shared their concern that those who are entering the workplace are perhaps providing cheaper labour. We heard, “Companies choose not to pay what you’re worth, knowing the high value you bring to the table. Also, it saves money to terminate you and hire younger talent for less pay.”

What ageism ultimately comes down to is assumptions, stereotypes, and false perceptions.

However, there are two sides of this coin. On the one hand, a respondent said, “We are a youth-obsessed culture and do not value wisdom, experience, or old age. Negative stereotypes make it even worse and are reinforced by the media. Managers are typically young and inexperienced and do not understand how to manage older workers.” And, on the other hand, we heard, “People believe young workers don’t have enough experience when in reality, some of my experience outweighs that of my older colleagues – I just look younger.”

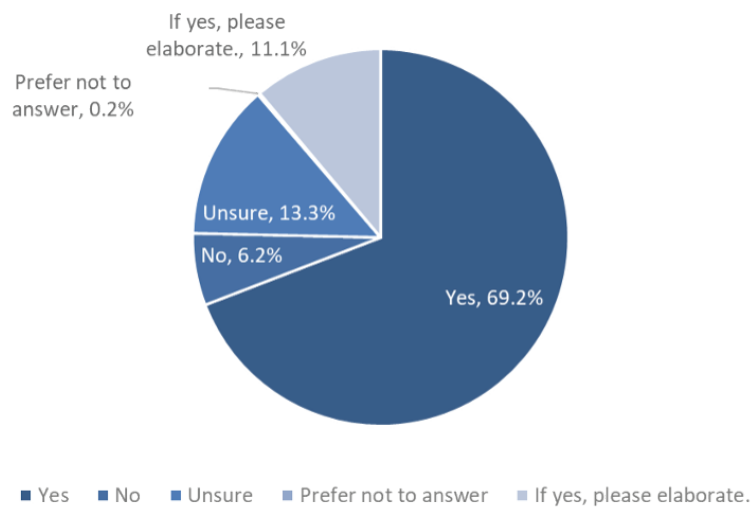
While ageism is detrimental on its own, the effects are compounded when additional factors of a person’s identity intersect with the experience of age-related discrimination.

Ageism and intersectionality

“Men are viewed as wise. Women are ancient.”

The impact of age intersects with other facets of a person’s identity, such as race, ability, and gender. Intersectionality can intensify the negative effects of ageism and respondents are noticing this in their workplaces. Of those surveyed, 69.2 per cent believe ageism disproportionately affects women. One respondent told us, “Ageism is so intertwined with sexism, so it is hard to separate the two.”

Figure 5: In your opinion, does ageism in the workplace disproportionately affect women?



We heard from respondents that ageism can unfairly impact racialized women. One commented, “Ageism is proportionally much higher for racialized women.” Another said, “The perfect age in the workplace for a woman is a perpetual 34-years-old. But that’s too young to be in the C-suite or in a senior position. Women of colour need to be older, but still look full of vitality.” Lastly, a respondent told us, “Leaders might say they want diversity, but what they want is the look of diversity – not the actual voices of diversity.”

Ageism at every stage

“It’s an overall attitude of exclusion, not one event.”

While we often think of ageism as something that impacts people in the latter years of their careers, the reality is ageism can have negative implications at all ages and stages.

For women in the earlier years of their careers, ageism can be debilitating and demotivating. A respondent told us, “On many occasions, I have been told that I am too young to understand issues properly or to be able to execute my work due to lack of experience. This is incorrect and often assumed because I am young-looking. No one has ever said this to a male counterpart even if they are 10 years my junior. Comments like this massively increase levels of self-doubt and stress associated with projects.”

With fewer years of experience, women often feel the need to prove their worth, despite having the skills and expertise to do the job well. A respondent told us, “I was 24 working in the financial sector and was a manager. I was constantly looked down on or had jokes [made] at my expense due to being a young professional. It is still happening currently at 27, where I have been passed up for promotions or career growth because I am ‘too young’.”

Age can also impact a woman’s chance of promotion, even when she’s more than deserving. One respondent said, “I appear much younger in age than I am, so I find senior staff often dismiss the need for me to be given opportunities to help me progress or to promote me because they assume I still have more years of work left and need to gain more experience. When I have had conversations with other staff about my career progress and then somehow my age comes up, they are often shocked when I share my actual age and then look like they feel guilty for some of the comments they made and try to brush them off.”

The irony is not lost on these women. The need to look older to appear qualified is immediately contrasted with the need to look young enough to be considered of value. One respondent said, “We need a little grey hair in order to have credibility.” But for many others, hiding their grey hair is the solution to “appearing young.”

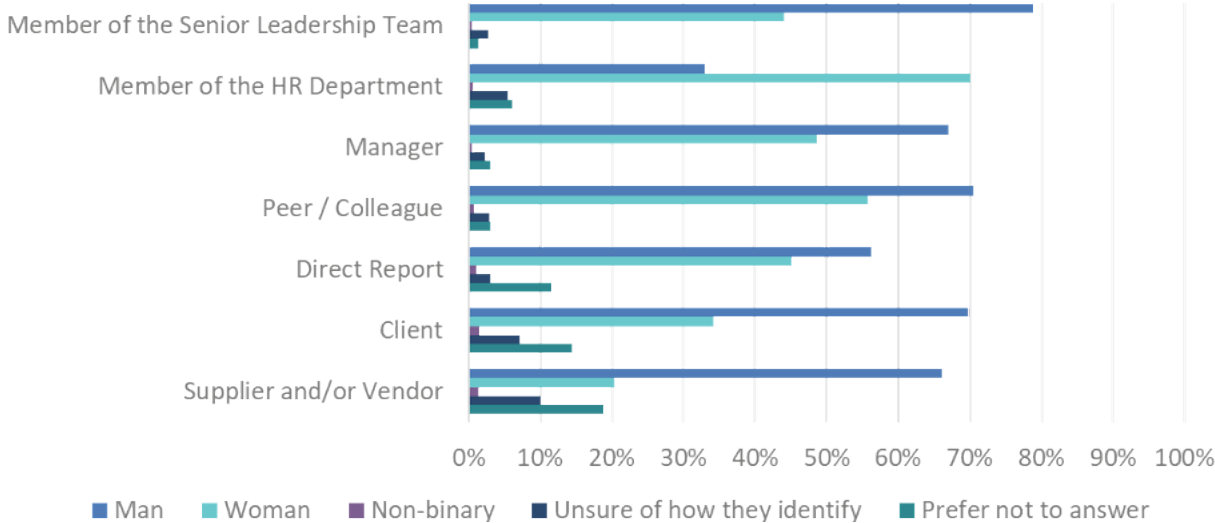
Alongside being made to feel ‘less than’ because they haven’t been in the workforce long enough, women who have worked for decades are also being discriminated against. One respondent said, “With 30-plus years of work experience, I am often overlooked or ignored for high-profile special projects within my department. Those projects are given to younger people ‘building their careers.’ To stay engaged with my work, I have had to seek opportunities and alliances outside of my department just to feel valued.” Another said, “I made a comment about ageism. [My colleague] looked directly at me and said, ‘Well, technology is a young person’s game.’”

Who are the perpetrators of ageism?

“I was told by an executive recruiter that women should retire after 50 because they are no longer marketable.”

The survey reveals that the perpetrators of ageism are identified across all levels of seniority, from the HR department to co-workers and clients, to managers and executives. The majority were identified as being men, especially in the categories of HR, leaders/executives, and clients/suppliers. But, there were also women in every category discriminating against others because of their age. Respondents added recruiters to the list of those engaging in age-based discrimination.

Figure 6: Think about the person(s) who discriminated against or showed prejudice towards you based on your age. How do they identify, and what was/is their relationship to you? (Select all that apply).



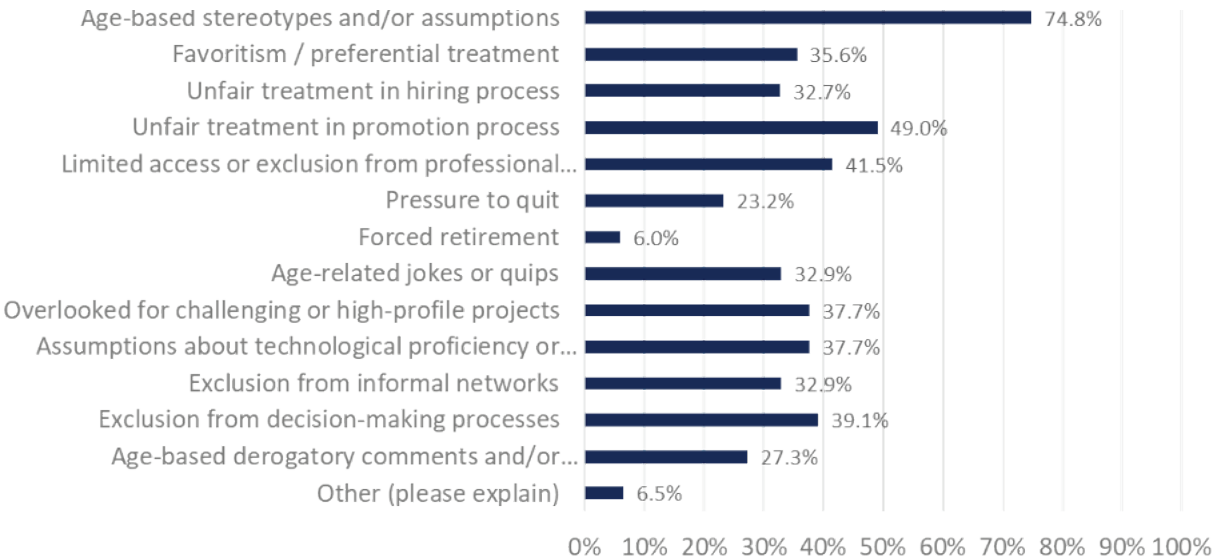
There’s no role or sector where ageism doesn’t exist and as such, there are a multitude of ways in which it can present itself.

How does ageism present itself at work?

"[Women are] given less resource support and budget than male peers at the same level."

Ageism can show up in a wide variety of ways and can have a significant impact on a woman’s career. The repercussions can be far-reaching – from unfair treatment in the promotion process, to exclusion from professional development opportunities, to being overlooked for high-profile projects, and even assumptions about technological proficiency or adaptability. Some respondents also reported feeling invisible.

Figure 7: In what way(s) have you experienced ageism at work? (Select all that apply.)



"I was recently told that my 'age' made me overqualified, but they were willing to offer a rookie salary; it was insulting," explained one respondent. "I have white hair and I have been advised to colour my hair to make me look younger as it may help me secure employment. This comment came from an HR Professional," said another.

The impact of ageism is being felt across all aspects of women’s personal and professional lives, and we need to pay attention to how destructive it can be.

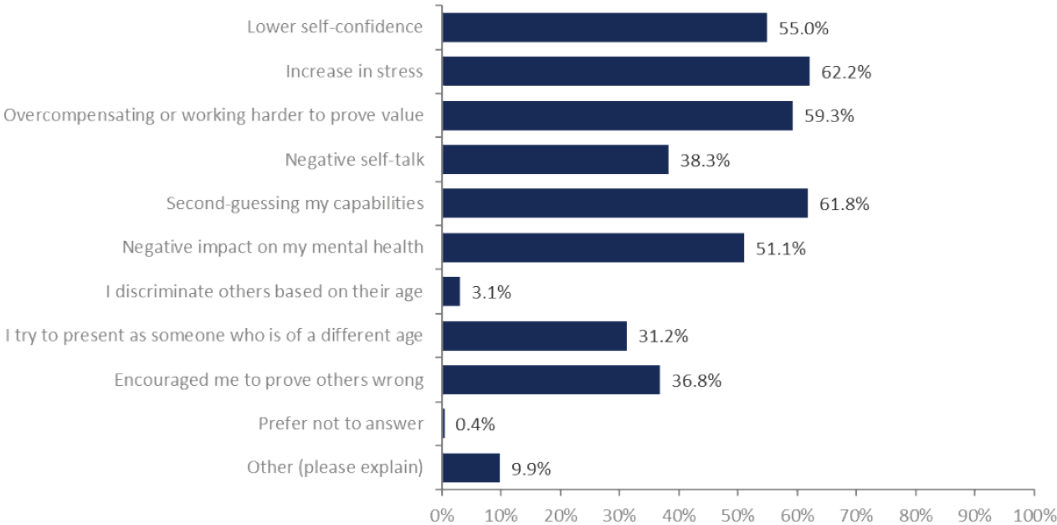
How is ageism impacting women?

“I’ve taken credentials that would help me land a job off of my resume as they age me. I’ve gotten injections to appear younger.”

Ageism can be detrimental to a woman’s overall sense of self and well-being and can have significant personal repercussions. Whether it’s taking steps to appear younger or older, women are often forced to make changes to themselves to look like they’re the “right age” for a job. This is often referred to as the “pink tax” – the money and time women spend on physical enhancements to meet societal expectations.

Of the respondents surveyed, 55 per cent reported experiencing lower self-confidence as a result of experiencing ageism, 62.1 per cent reported an increase in stress, and 59.3 per cent reported having to overcompensate or work harder to prove their value. Furthermore, 61.8 per cent reported second-guessing their capabilities, and 51.1 per cent reported ageism having a negative impact on their mental health.

Figure 8: How has your experience with ageism impacted you personally? (Select all that apply):



One respondent told us, “I would dress and act overly conservative to make up for the stereotypes I experienced.” Another said, “I try not to sound old when I speak. [I] do not use examples that date me. [I] try to keep up with social/cultural trends, so I know current music, movies, and other things that suggest I am not old and out of touch.” Another said that ageism has “increased my fear of becoming irrelevant and not needed in the world.” Additionally, we heard, “I now hide my age. Many people assume I am young, but they still think I’m five to eight years older than I am. I’m terrified of people finding out my true age and losing respect for me.”

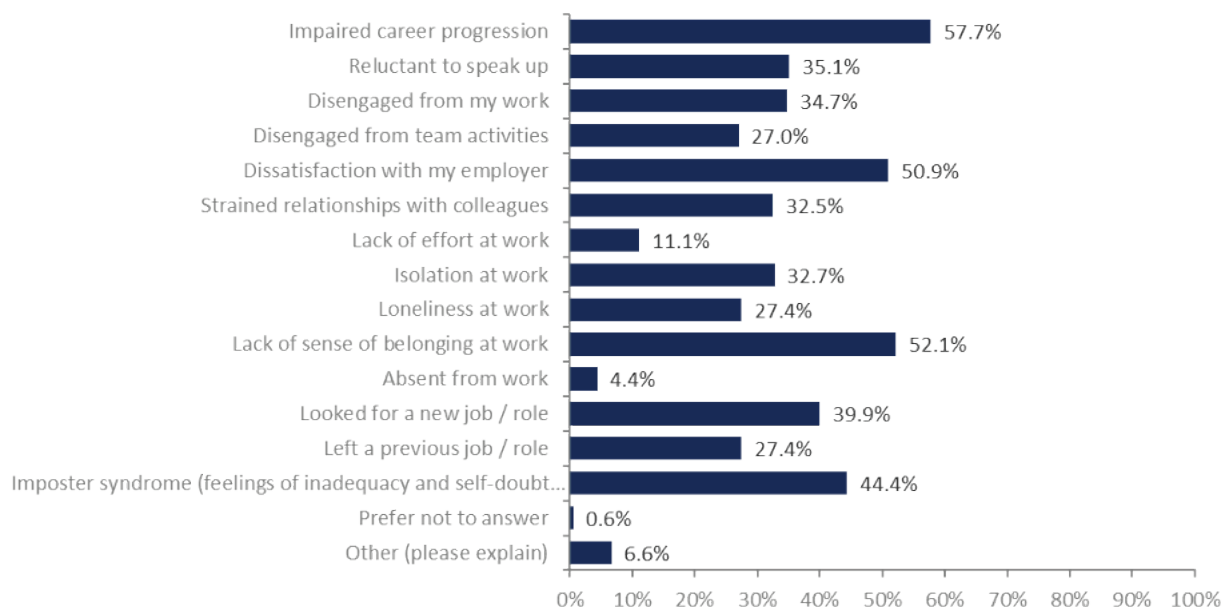
What are the effects on women’s professional lives?

Professionally, women also report significant impacts when it comes to ageism. Whether it’s applying for new jobs, being considered for promotions, or being tasked with important projects, a woman’s age often comes into play.

“[I] retired just to get away from a toxic work environment,” one respondent told us. “I am reaching a point where, sadly, I am considering giving up,” said another. “I was told that I would not be promoted or work on important projects because I could potentially become pregnant and not be available,” said another. Finally, one respondent noted, “I can’t be considered for the director’s position because I’d be busy raising a family and wouldn’t have time to dedicate to the company.”

Of the respondents surveyed, 57.7 per cent reported impaired career progression, 52.1 per cent reported a lack of sense of belonging at work, and 50.9 per cent reported experiencing dissatisfaction with their employer. Other effects included feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt despite evidence of success (imposter syndrome), feeling like they had to look for a new job or role, as well as feeling reluctant to speak up, disengaged, and isolated at work.

Figure 9: How has your experience with ageism impacted you professionally? (Select all that apply):



But, it’s not all bad news. It is worth noting that while ageism can be destructive, some women are taking matters into their own hands.

Some respondents found ageism to be an impetus for change, the nudge they needed to set out on their own, or advocate to improve the situation for others. One respondent said, “I climbed the ladder into a more senior role to make it better for the next generation.” Another added, “[It] inspired me to create my own opportunities and be my own boss.” A third commented, “It has made me a promoter of pro-aging and combating ageist behaviour[s] and attitudes.”

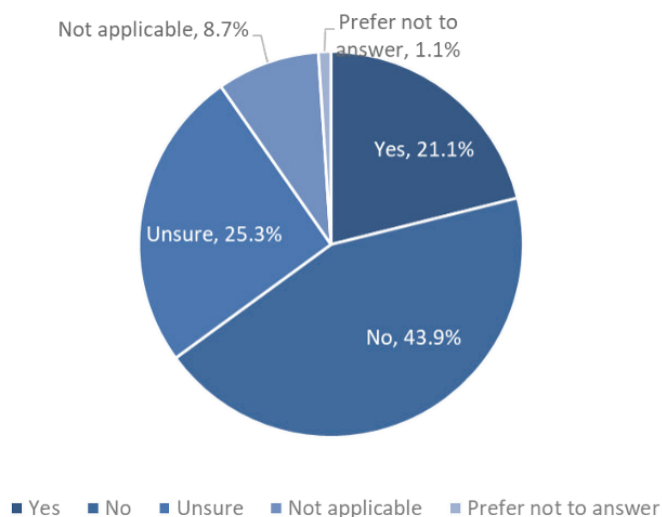
Experiencing ageism was a catalyst for some women to turn a negative experience on its head.

What’s being done about ageism?

“Make noise about this.”

Not enough. When we asked respondents if their workplace has policies to address ageism, only one-fifth of those who took the survey (21.1 per cent) said yes, while 43.9 per cent said no and 25.3 per cent said they were unsure.

Figure 10: Does your workplace have policies to address ageism?



While there’s no denying that ageism exists in the workplace, it seems the only antidote is action – and that starts with awareness. One respondent said, “Many people are unaware of their own ageist biases or the impact of ageism on individuals and society. This lack of awareness can perpetuate discriminatory practices in hiring, training, and retention.” Another added, “[We need] education and awareness. Ageism comes in subtle forms. There isn’t a week that goes by that I am not asked when I will retire.”

An action plan for organizations

“We can’t change our age; I think employers need a change in attitude.”

As with many organizational issues, there is value in listening to those experiencing the problem firsthand. We compiled the information gathered in this survey to create actionable steps organizations can take to counter ageism. When asked what support or resources would be helpful for those experiencing ageism in the workplace, respondents had a lot to say. From “clearly identifying who to go to for support,” to implementing “work policies that address ‘isms’ in general,” to providing “more information and training for HR professionals regarding the impact of ageism.” Recommendations from respondents also included reverse mentorship programs, formal sponsorship, and mental health support.

One individual told us, “The workplace needs to stop compartmentalizing people by generation, age, race, gender, etc. Accept people for what they bring to the table, hire more thoughtfully, support those who are hired, [and] train management to manage, guide, and support.”

With these five actionable recommendations, real change begins.

- 1. Raise awareness and provide training and education.** The first step is to accept that ageism is a real issue and is having more of a significant impact than we think. “Recognize it and name it,” said one respondent. From recognition comes action. “Educate employees,” said another. “Provide training and workshops to raise awareness about ageism and its impact on individuals and the organization. Help employees recognize and challenge ageist stereotypes and biases.”
- 2. Implement preventative policies and hold people accountable.** Armed with the knowledge that ageism exists, the next step is to put policies into place and adhere to them. “Understand that a policy only translates to action if it’s proactively applied by senior people in an organization,” said one individual surveyed. “You can have the best policies in the world, but it can still be awful for people in practice if you have inadequate or poorly trained managers who don’t think discrimination is a big deal,” shared another respondent. A policy is only as good as the action that follows.
- 3. Develop reciprocal mentorship programs.** A call for mentorship as a solution to ageism came through loud and clear. “Have mentorship programs to ensure both ends of the spectrum can learn from each other and respect each other,” said one individual. The key, said another, is “connecting on a human level to learn about different experiences.” Another respondent shared, “The C-suite needs to create a culture of multigenerational employees and mentorship for ageism to become irrelevant.”

4. **Focus on competencies over age when recruiting and hiring.** What we heard repeatedly is that professionals want to be recognized for their abilities rather than their age or years of experience. It's time to look past these distracting numbers and seek out examples of success instead. "Start looking at talent, knowledge, and wisdom rather than 'years of experience' to prove that a candidate is valuable or worthy of a position," said a respondent. Individuals urge employers to restructure the hiring process by "seek[ing] skills over stereotypes."
5. **Include ageism as a part of DEI strategy, initiatives, and programs.** The need for ageism to be included as a pillar of DEI was agreed upon by respondents across the board. "Ageism [can be] as damaging as racism and sexism and should be recognized as such," said a respondent. Another added, "[Ageism] seldom forms part of DEI programs or anti-bias training." The call for action was clear. "Truly walk the talk about diversity and inclusion."

With these steps in mind, organizations can initiate the promotion of a more inclusive culture where age is not a barrier to success. Moreover, as one respondent suggested, it is crucial to "promote it as a good thing," and "celebrate the benefits it brings!"

Conclusion

This survey conclusively demonstrates that ageism is an ever-present form of discrimination that workplaces can no longer afford to ignore. It is impacting women-identifying professionals across countries, organizations, industries, and sectors. And, the data reflects that there is no age or stage in a woman's career where she's immune to it.

Although ageism has traditionally been overlooked, its impact on women's personal and professional lives is significant, ultimately influencing broader workplace dynamics. Women are often compelled to leave jobs or accept less senior roles simply because they are perceived as not being the "right age". In addition, ageism is detrimentally impacting their success.

The next step is action – for the sake of this generation and the next. As one respondent powerfully stated, "I hope that by the time my daughters are my age, they'll be able to work doing anything they wish, anywhere, without anyone – including themselves – giving their career paths a second thought because of their age or gender."

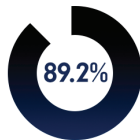
While some suggest it starts at the top, we firmly believe that each individual has a responsibility to combat age discrimination and in doing so create a culture that truly values diversity in all of its forms.

Appendix A: 2024 Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace Infographic

Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace

77.8%

of respondents have experienced **age-based prejudice** or **discrimination** in the workplace.



of respondents work in a **multigenerational workforce**.



have witnessed women in the workplace **being treated differently** because of their age.

Who are the culprits?

The perpetrators of ageism are identified across all levels of seniority, from members of the HR team, to co-workers and clients, to managers and executives, and the **majority identified as men**.

Only **one-fifth (21.1%)** of respondents reported having **policies to address ageism at work**.



The repercussions are far-reaching:

How has your experience with ageism impacted you personally?

- 62.2% Increase in stress
- 61.8% Second-guessing my capabilities
- 59.3% Working harder to prove value
- 55.0% Lower self-confidence
- 51.1% Negative impact on my mental health

How has your experience with ageism impacted you professionally?

- 57.7% Impaired career progression
- 52.1% Lack of sense of belonging at work
- 50.9% Dissatisfaction with my employer
- 44.4% Imposter syndrome
- 39.9% Looked for a new job/role

It's not all bad news.

Respondents found **ageism to be the nudge they needed** to set out on their own or **advocate to improve the work environment for others**.

What can organizations do?

1. Raise awareness and provide training and education.
2. Implement preventative policies and hold people accountable.
3. Develop reciprocal mentorship programs.
4. Focus on competencies over age when recruiting and hiring.
5. Include ageism as a part of DEI strategy, initiatives, and programs.

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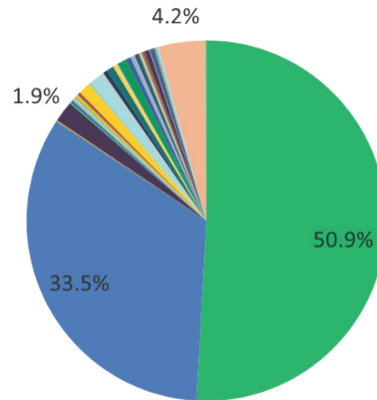
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for more information

Source: Exploring the Impact of Ageism on Women in the Workplace, an international research project led by Women of Influence+. More than 1,250 respondents completed the survey between January 9, 2024 and February 4, 2024.

Appendix B: Demographic Data

Question: What country do you live in?



Canada: 50.9 per cent

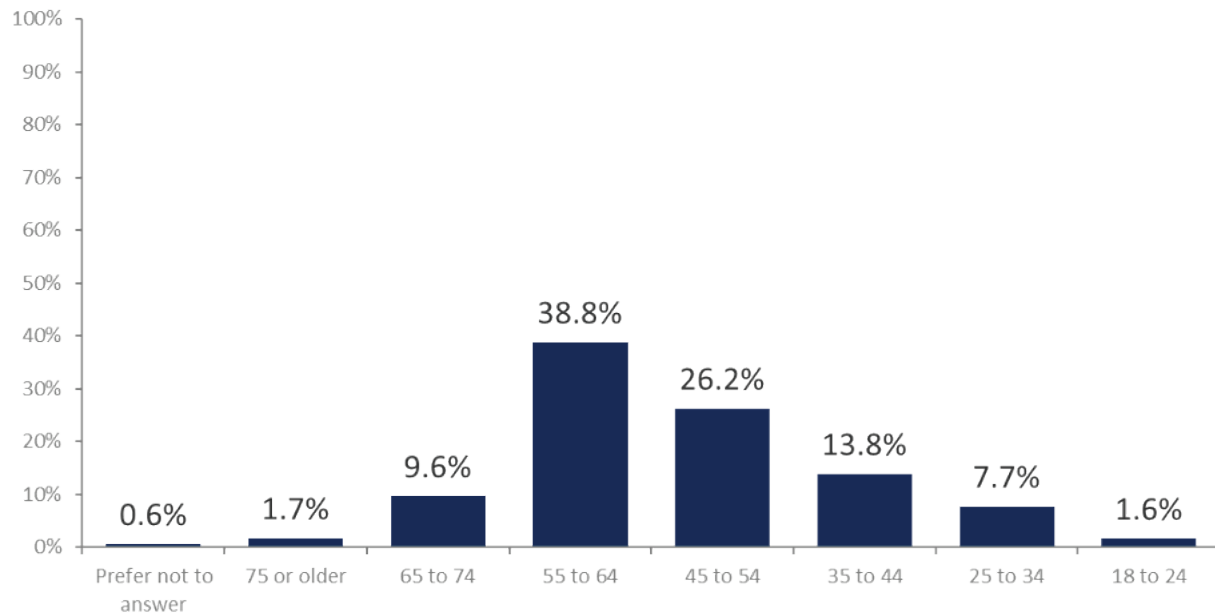
United States: 33.5 per cent

United Kingdom: 4.2 per cent

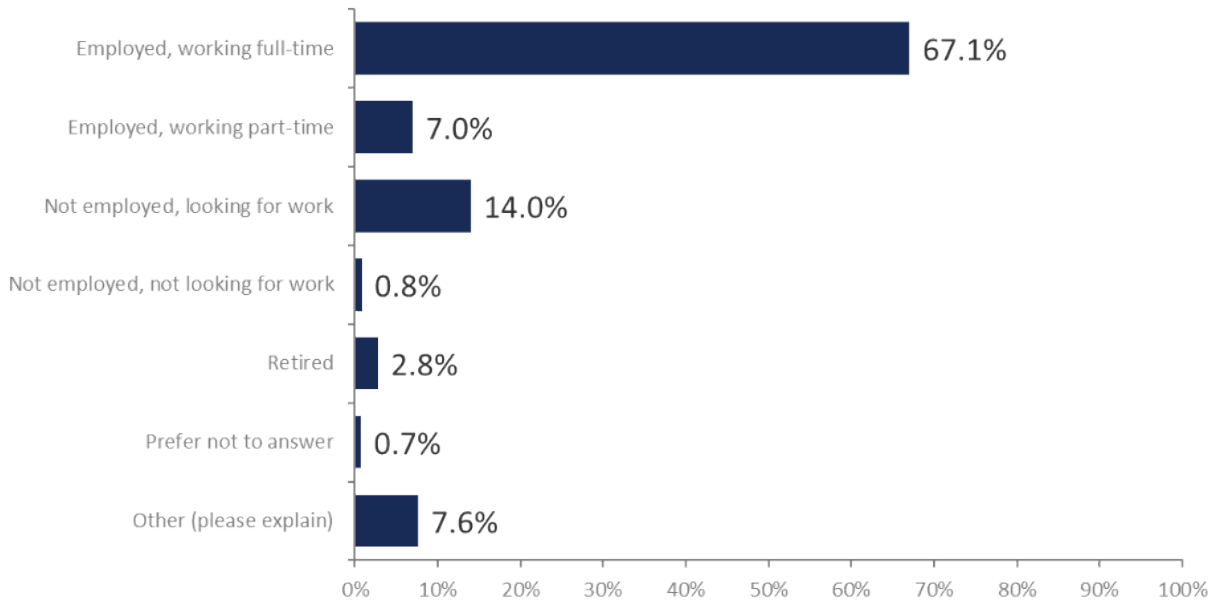
Australia: 1.9 per cent

Note: The total number of respondents include individuals living across 46 different countries.

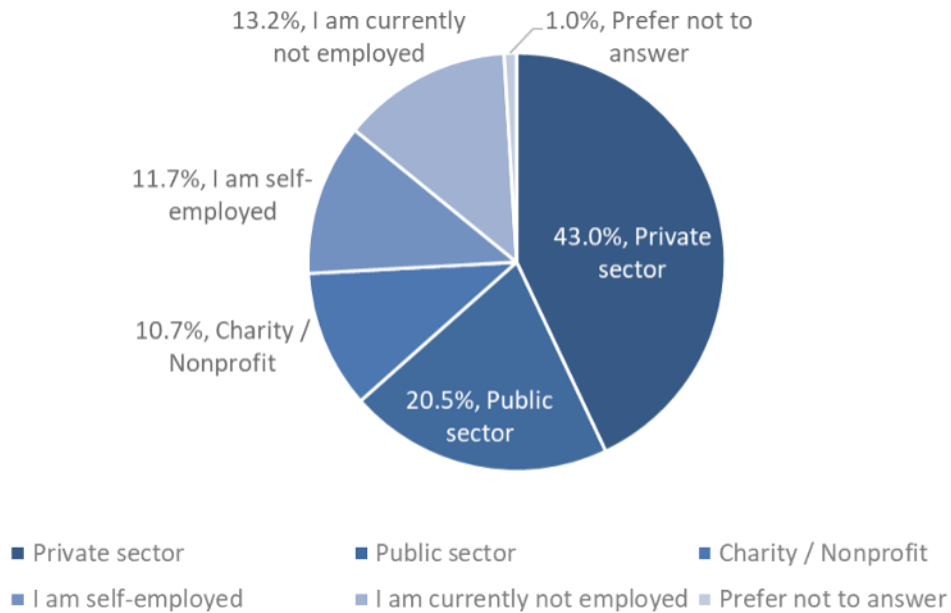
Question: What is your age?



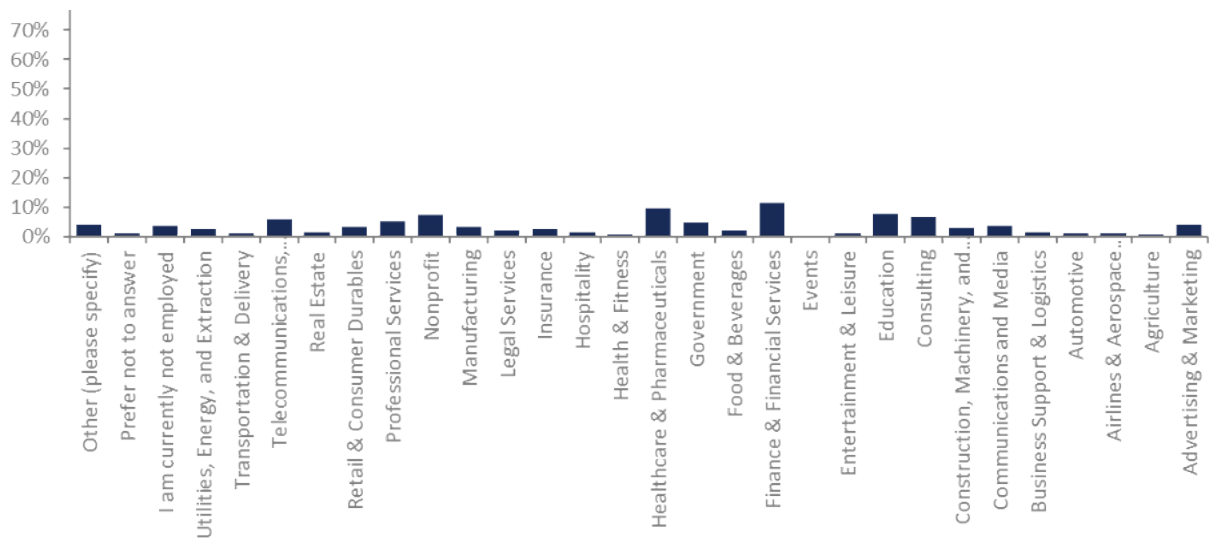
Question: Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?



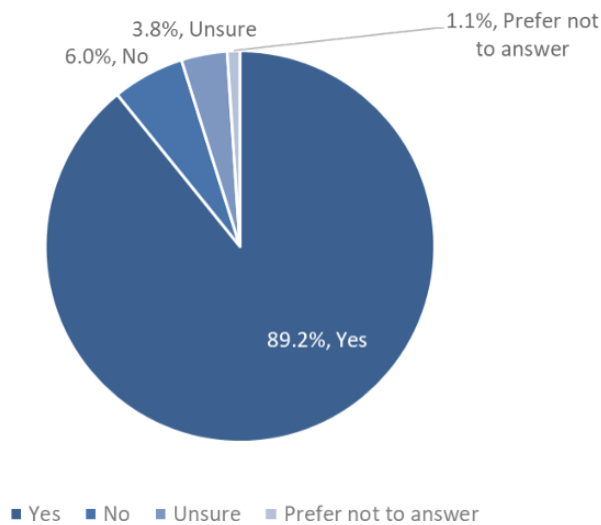
Question: Is your employer:



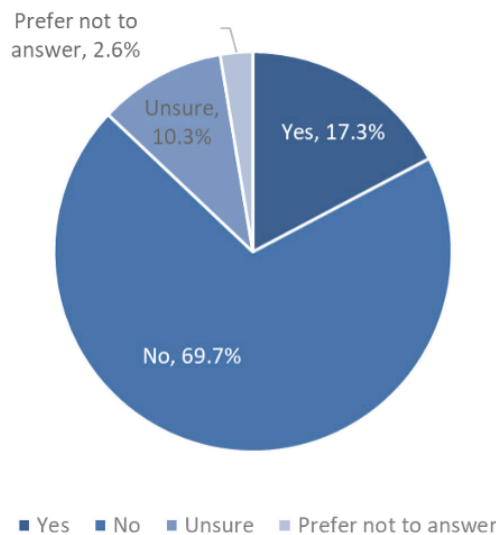
Question: Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?



Question: Do you work in a multigenerational workforce?



Question: Do you identify as a racialized person?



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