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## Women's Age as a "Double Jeopardy" – an Introduction

Forever young and carefree while, at the same time, motherly and caring, innocently pretty, sexually alluring, girlish, and wise all at once – women in our society are always constructed with regard to their age. As long as they are attractive and live up to the expectations of the public, as long as they meet social standards (by staying young, being slim and active, etc.), they can play their part in economy. When they get older, however, they drop out of sight and vanish into thin air.

As the title *constructions of women's age at the workplace* indicates, the contributions to this volume can be read with a constructionist framework in mind. Although not all authors take up a constructionist approach, it is what we had in mind when we compiled the volume. There is, of course, no single definition of constructionism that would apply to all the work carried out under this term. Still, if we want to name a key assumption of constructionism, it is that human beings do not perceive the world from an objective point of view, but construct it in cooperation with others as they assign meanings to everything they deal with. We live in a world imbued with meanings that have been transmitted to us by others and that we continue to reproduce – or change.

This also applies to the categories of age and gender. Like any other distinction that human beings make, age and gender are socially constructed, that is to say, they are made salient, and particular meanings are assigned to them through human interactions. Age and gender have no essence of their own; there is no fixed meaning on the basis of biological, historical, religious, economic, or any other reasons. Is strength male and empathy female? Is imaginativeness young and scholarship old? Is one worth more than the other? Our society tends to give particular answers, but these answers can always be questioned.

The contributions to this book are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that cover various ways of constructing women's age at the workplace. Together they contribute to a fairly broad picture of how constructions of age and gender work in our society.

The present volume is the result of an international and interdisciplinary conference entitled *fem\_research\_exchange06* held on October 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 2006 at Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration. The conference stood in a long tradition of feminist research conducted by scholars at our Univer-

sity. It was organized by *Florentine Maier, Linda Kreil, Bianca Gusenbauer, and Margret Beisheim* who had formed the *fem\_research\_exchange\_team* and now serve as the editors of this book. The conference was accompanied by an exhibition of artworks with the specific topic “Women and Age” by *Greta Znojemsky*, who has now contributed two pictures reproduced at the beginning and at the end of this book.

If there is one basic assumption that runs like a golden thread through all the contributions to this volume, it is the belief that age is something that matters especially to women. A woman is seldom perceived as “ageless”, but is habitually categorized and assessed according to her age. Age-specific expectations exist for her body, her behaviour, and her way of living. In an economic context, these social norms concerning age and ageing have important consequences for women. They affect the way positions (e.g. as employees and consumers), resources (e.g. salaries), and opportunities (e.g. career options) are distributed. What is noticeable, however, is that a woman’s age is always held against her: A woman is too young for leadership, too unreliable (in terms of a possible pregnancy) to be promoted, too old to be retained in the company’s work force.

Women in our society are often constructed as weak with regard to both their physical as well as their psychological powers. They always look young and friendly and are ever so ready to take over low-paid jobs and unpaid duties. In industries where the majority of employees are female, even the wages of male supervisors are low (cf. Ostroff/Atwater 2003). The very fact that the majority of people working in a certain profession is female (e.g. in child care) drastically reduces employee’s chances to receive a better income. This stands in direct contrast to the wages employees earn in technical professions, which still form a male domain.

Women often internalize this kind of discrimination and deliberately withdraw or reduce their claims. Especially for older women in work life, our society has developed stereotypes that work to their detriment: An older female worker is supposed to be frugal and flexible (see Ainsworth 2002, McMullin and Berger 2006). If she complains about being subjected to age or gender discrimination, she risks being labelled as a bitchy old hag. Such stereotypes silence older women and deprive them of their legitimate right to speak. Older women thus become invisible in social life. With this book, we also want to take up the cudgels for bitchy old hags and bring some of the concerns of older – and prospective older – women back into debate. The contributions to this collection aim to shed light on the multiple forms of distinctions – which easily become discriminations – our society creates when roles of women in their different stages of work life are assessed.

For employers and governments, there is a great deal at stake when it comes to the shaping of the working lives of older women. From an economic perspective, the skills and competences of these women will become increasingly important to organisations competing for their labour. Employers need to understand how to

create a positive and productive working environment to suit women of different capabilities. Governments need to examine how their policies can enable older women to enjoy their later years. They need to manage two competing objectives: One is to assist women in remaining in the workplace as they age, and the second is to develop financial strategies that enable them to retire when they need to.

Older women – no matter whether they are mothers or not – have often had to take up a disproportionately difficult role in supporting their families and maintaining a work career at the same time. Like others in the community, they deserve the best opportunities to fulfil their personal as well as their career aspirations. There are important questions concerning the next generation of older women that need to be considered now: How long are they to continue to work, or at what age are they to retire? What are their preferred work options as they become older? Which work options will they be able to manage – physically, psychologically, and intellectually? How will their career choices influence their retirement prospects? The situation the next generation will have to face will not be the same as that of the present generation of older women. Their future has not yet been clearly defined. We hope that our investigation of present day perspectives will be of assistance to them in their planning. And, indeed, one of our messages to them is that they need to plan ahead.

The aim of this book is to provide useful information and perspectives to policy-makers who may be able to influence future work, education, and retirement regulations of older women in the workforce; managers, employers, and academics whose attitudes may be crucial in developing new ideas and options for older women at work; and older women themselves and their younger colleagues who may gain new insights from understanding the forces influencing their options and the way in which these can be managed.

In achieving these aims, our first task was to identify some of the theoretical limitations inherent in various concepts of aging and in the manner in which these concepts are interpreted by society. What emerges most clearly is that there is great variability among women and that a woman’s date of birth is an unreliable and limiting descriptor of her capabilities and aspirations.

Secondly, we isolated some of the aspirations and experiences of older women in the workforce as well as the factors that influence their work force options. In exploring these issues we did not confine ourselves to the situation in Austria but also included investigations into the issues with which women in Finland and Australia are confronted. What situation do women face in an aging workforce, how much flexibility do they possess, and what issues do they need to deal with?

Our third task was to define the government policies and other contextual factors which can limit or expand the options we take for granted in our home country. As discussed in the chapter by *Helga Eberherr*, *Roswitha Hofmann*, and *Alexander*

*Fleischmann*, governments in the EU and elsewhere have – at some stage – begun to take measures that address the specific issues arising from population ageing.

Lastly, we identified some of the developments that may make choices in late work life more interesting and pleasant. We identify ways of how organisations can make work life more acceptable for older women, and offer suggestions as to how women can actively manage their careers with an eye to their future and how the concept of career capital can assist them.

The first chapter in this volume presents different conceptualizations of age and ageing and can also be seen as a framework for the following chapters. *Helga Eberherr*, *Roswitha Hofmann* and *Alexander Fleischmann* provide insights into the European Union EQUAL project *AGEpowerment* and lay the ground for the discussion on women and age. They do this by showing that age has many different meanings, depending on the given context: We can conceptualize age as a chronological data, as a status quo in a person's life, an ability to work, an indicator for decay and old age, etc. or – in a broader view – as a phenomenon of intersectionality which is linked to gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Ageing in our eyes is not seen as a chronological data but as a process. In the very first chapter, the concept of intersectionality is being discussed. Being female and old at the same time is, after all, a double jeopardy (Onyx 1998).

In the next chapter, *Monika von Bonsdorff*, *Sirpa Koponen*, and *Iiris Aaltio* raise the question of how older women can be retained at the workplace. She presents a quantitative study on Finnish nurses which shows that retirement plans of older nurses are dependent on the quality of their working conditions.

*Irene Kloimüller* then examines very similar questions from a practical human resource management perspective. The author presents a framework for active ageing at the workplace from a consultant's perspective. She identifies health promotion, work organization, personnel development, and organizational culture as central criteria that allow active ageing at the workplace and reports the most promising results achieved in a pilot study with nurses in an Austrian hospital based on this approach.

How much are women worth in our society? How are their contributions valued? How come women, when they get older, lose their career aspirations and withdraw from the workplace? The chapter by *Marilyn Clarke*, *Linley Hartmann*, and *Margaret Patrickson* examines these questions. In particular, they investigate the factors influencing the decisions of older Australian women academics to retire or to stay at the workplace.

*Linley Hartmann* and *Helene Mayerhofer* discuss older women's career opportunities in the labour markets of Austria and Australia. They look at different forms of career systems, especially at the concepts of the "boundaryless" and "protean career", and demonstrate how women can use concepts taken from contemporary career management to plan ahead and manage their careers.

The contribution by *Linda Kreil* takes up a legal perspective. The author shows that in Austrian labour law, women’s age is treated differently from men’s age when it comes to dismissals. She shows how age and gender discrimination intersect in Austrian labour law, resulting not in an adding up but in a multiplication of women’s discrimination. The author highlights some legal regulations which were once developed to protect women from the strain of the workplace but now assist in discriminating against them.

No matter whether we take an economic, social, or a legal perspective – women are subject to specific role assignments in our society. In the final chapter, *Florentine Maier* undertakes a discourse analysis in a hairdresser’s shop, which shows that women have special rules in mind when they obey social constructions of what an older woman should look like in order to be perceived as “decent”. She points out alternatives to the dominant discourses of “successful ageing” and “ageing as decay”, but also identifies the limitations of the new approach to ageing, which she refers to as “emancipated ageing”.

All the contributions to this book in some way aim at de-constructing women’s age to uncover women’s social circumstances at the workplace – which, after all, can be seen as a mirror of society as a whole.

What *functions* do these constructions of women’s age have? Is it only to reduce complexity that we put women into ‘boxes’ and subject them to stereotypes? Is it the cliché that women have to conform to, the pre-conceived ideas we have in mind when dealing with young and old women? Or is it because women and men alike are afraid of a change of power relations and prefer things to stay the way they are?

Perhaps the demographic changes in the labour market – with a decreasing number of young and a steadily increasing number of older workers as well as a stagnating or diminishing total labour supply – will help to bring about a change in attitudes. Perhaps these economic pressures will be a convincing enough argument that our society cannot afford to fade out a significant part of its members. However, several more years will have to pass until the demographic trend towards an ageing workforce will become fully effective. Moreover, economic and political developments (such as the transferral of jobs to newly industrializing countries and the enlargement of the European Union) may, to some extent, offset the ageing of the labour force. What is more, while the demographic trend points towards a higher labour force participation of (older) women, it says nothing about the quality of this employment, for example with regard to wages, job security, and opportunities for development. We, therefore, cannot sit back and wait for demography to solve all problems for us.

A lot needs to be done to improve older women’s roles at the workplace – by employers, political decision-makers, male and female workers of all ages, researchers, teachers, consultants, personnel managers, etc. (Naturally, this enume-

ration does not imply any order regarding the weight of their responsibility.) With this book we hope to contribute to this momentous task.

## Literature

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