



Women Over Forty in the Labour Market: What the Evidence Shows

*A global review of research on age
and gender discrimination in
employment*

Women over the age of forty typically enter the labour market with the qualifications employers claim to prize most: two or more decades of tested professional experience, established expertise, and, in many cases, a reduced burden of childcare responsibility relative to earlier in their careers. On the logic that experience and reliability are valued traits in a workforce, this group of women should represent one of the strongest available pools of talent. The available research, however, describes a persistent and well-documented pattern in which women in this age group face measurably reduced access to employment, beginning earlier and more severely than the equivalent decline affecting men. This article sets out what that evidence shows, considers the explanations that have been proposed for it, and examines how the pattern varies across regions and across groups of women who face compounding forms of disadvantage.

Establishing the pattern

The clearest evidence on hiring discrimination by age comes from a research method known as the résumé correspondence study, in which researchers submit fictitious but realistic job applications to real employers, varying only the stated age of the applicant, and measure the rate at which each version is invited to interview. Because the employer is unaware that they are participating in a study, this method allows researchers to isolate the effect of age from other factors that might otherwise explain differences in hiring outcomes.

Joanna Lahey's widely cited 2008 study, published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, found that a younger applicant was more than forty percent more likely to be invited to interview than an older woman applying for an identical entry-level position. A substantially larger study conducted by David Neumark, Ian Burn, and Patrick Button, involving more than forty thousand job applications submitted to over thirteen thousand postings across the United States, found that the disparity in callback rates was consistently larger for older women than for older men across every occupational category tested, including administrative and retail positions.

Comparable findings have emerged outside the United States using the same experimental method. A study by Carlsson and Eriksson, based on six thousand fictitious résumés submitted to Swedish employers, found that callback rates

decline becoming substantial from the early forties onward. A nine-country survey of hiring managers across Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, published in the *European Sociological Review*, similarly confirmed the existence of age-based hiring discrimination and its disproportionate effect on women.

The pattern is not confined to Europe and North America. A cross-national study conducted by the workforce organisation Generation, in partnership with the World Economic Forum, surveyed employed and unemployed workers as well as hiring managers across Brazil, India, Italy, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and found a consistent pattern of bias against workers aged forty-five and older across all seven countries, despite considerable differences in labour market structure and culture. In South Korea, where women's labour force participation follows a well-documented "M-shaped" curve involving a marked withdrawal from paid work around the age of marriage or childbearing and only partial re-entry later, the gender pay gap is the largest recorded among OECD member states. In China, a survey conducted by the China Youth Daily's Social Investigation Center found that eighty-six percent of nearly two thousand white-collar professionals surveyed believed that career opportunities for women contract sharply after the age of thirty, a threshold notably earlier than the one most commonly identified in European and North American research.

Taken together, these studies, despite differing in method, geography, and the precise age threshold identified, converge on the same underlying finding: labour markets treat women's professional value as declining earlier, and more steeply, than men's.

Explaining the pattern

The persistence of this disparity, given that it does not correspond to any demonstrated decline in productivity or competence among women in this age group, has prompted a body of research seeking to explain its underlying mechanisms.

One influential framework, Stereotype Content Theory, holds that social groups are evaluated along two dimensions: perceived warmth and perceived competence. Research applying this framework to age-based hiring bias has found that older workers are consistently rated as warmer, but less competent, than younger workers, and that this competence-based stereotype substantially predicts hiring discrimination even in roles for which warmth, rather than competence, is the primary job requirement. Notably, the same research found that this bias persisted regardless of the age or professional human-resources experience of the person making the hiring decision, suggesting that the effect

does not simply reflect a lack of awareness of one's own bias. A meta-analysis by Ng and Feldman, reviewing 418 empirical studies encompassing more than two hundred thousand participants, examined whether commonly held stereotypes about older workers, including assumptions about reduced motivation, adaptability, and willingness to undertake training, are supported by evidence. The analysis found little empirical support for most of these stereotypes.

A related explanation concerns what economists term statistical discrimination, in which an employer evaluates an individual applicant according to an assumed characteristic of their broader demographic group, such as an assumption that older applicants will struggle to adapt to new technology or are approaching retirement and therefore represent a poor return on training investment. Lahey's original study tested whether résumé elements designed to counter such assumptions, including references to computer certification or willingness to adapt, altered employer response rates for older applicants. They did not produce a measurable effect, suggesting that the bias in question does not respond readily to countervailing information provided by the applicant.

A further explanation, specific to the disparity between older men and older women, concerns the role of appearance-based judgment. Several studies have found that women are evaluated more critically than men on the basis of visible signs of ageing, and that this evaluation interacts with, and reinforces, competence-based stereotyping in a manner that does not have an equivalent effect for men, for whom visible ageing is more often associated with authority and seniority rather than diminished capability. This appearance-based dimension of ageism is frequently proposed as the explanation for why the discrimination threshold identified in most studies begins roughly a decade earlier for women than for men.

An emerging development: algorithmic hiring

A body of recent research indicates that the introduction of artificial intelligence into hiring processes has not reduced this disparity and may be reproducing it at greater scale. A study conducted at Stanford University and reported in October 2025 found that automated résumé-screening tools rated older male candidates more favourably than both older female candidates and younger applicants of either gender, indicating that the bias identified is not a general preference against age, but specifically disadvantages the intersection of age and gender.

This finding has practical consequences that are already the subject of legal proceedings. A collective action lawsuit against Workday, whose applicant-screening software is used by a number of major employers, centres on allegations

that its algorithmic tools produced age-based rejection patterns; some claimants have reported receiving automated rejection notices within minutes of submitting an application. Separately, data reported by the recruitment platform Glassdoor indicate a 133 percent year-over-year increase in the frequency with which job seekers referenced ageism in employer reviews between the first quarter of 2024 and the first quarter of 2025.

Compounding disadvantage among specific groups of women

The disadvantage described above is not evenly distributed among women over forty, and several groups face additional, compounding barriers that merit separate consideration.

Migrant women face what the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) describes as intersectional discrimination, in which gender, migration status, ethnicity, and age operate simultaneously rather than as separable disadvantages. A briefing published by the European Parliamentary Research Service found that migrant women are more likely to be unemployed or economically inactive than any other group within the EU labour market, and that many are concentrated in low-paid, unregulated, or informal employment substantially below their level of qualification.

Women who have taken career breaks, most commonly for caregiving responsibilities that continue to fall disproportionately on women, face a separately documented penalty. Research summarised by the Harvard Kennedy School's Gender Action Portal has found that employers reduce the likelihood of interview even for transitory, well-explained employment gaps, and separate field experiments have found that mothers receive measurably lower callback rates than childless women with otherwise identical qualifications, across a range of occupations and wage levels.

The pattern also varies considerably by region. In the South-West Asia and North Africa, women have in many countries closed or reversed the gender gap in higher education, yet the region continues to record among the lowest rates of female labour force participation in the world, a divergence that researchers have termed the "MENA paradox," pointing to structural and normative barriers to employment that operate independently of educational attainment or qualification. In Sub-Saharan Africa, by contrast, the relevant barrier is less frequently exclusion from formal hiring processes and more frequently exclusion from the formal labour market altogether, with the majority of working women remaining in agricultural, informal, or unpaid family labour.

It is necessary to note, in the interest of methodological transparency, that the strength of available evidence varies considerably by region. The most rigorous causal evidence, derived from randomised résumé-correspondence experiments, is concentrated in North America and Europe, reflecting the research infrastructure available in those regions rather than necessarily reflecting the true severity of discrimination elsewhere. Evidence from East Asia, Latin America, and the South-West Asia and North Africa relies more heavily on observational wage-gap and labour-participation data, which is suggestive of similar underlying mechanisms but does not permit the same causal inference. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa is comparatively the least developed in relation to hiring discrimination specifically, though considerably more developed in relation to structural labour-market exclusion.

Compounding disadvantage among specific groups of women

The evidence reviewed above concerns access to new employment. A separate body of research addresses what happens to women who, rather than experiencing a discrete rejection, remain in employment that no longer suits them, out of a rational assessment that alternative employment may be difficult to secure.

This phenomenon has been studied under the label of job lock, referring to a state in which an employee would prefer to leave their position but does not do so. Longitudinal research has found this condition to be more prevalent among older workers, and has identified mental health strain and diminished self-confidence as factors that increase the probability of remaining in this state over time, a relationship that is plausibly reinforced by continued exposure to unsuitable employment.

The underlying apprehension driving this behaviour is well documented empirically. Research summarised by the Economic Policy Institute has found that nearly half of workers aged fifty-five to sixty-four, and a majority of those over sixty-five, believe they would not be able to secure comparable employment were they to lose their current position. A scoping review of the barriers facing older workers seeking employment identifies what its authors describe as a form of double disadvantage specific to older women, in which appearance-based and competence-based hiring bias not only reduces the probability of a successful job search but also measurably diminishes the applicant's confidence in undertaking one, compounding the original disadvantage.

A related and distinct concern involves involuntary job loss arising from circumstances outside an individual's control, such as illness or organisational

restructuring. Research on the psychological experience of job loss has found that older workers experience a more intense and prolonged grieving process than younger workers following the loss of employment, and separate research on reemployment outcomes has found that the practical difficulty of securing new employment following an involuntary job loss increases measurably with age.

Conclusion

The evidence surveyed in this article does not support the proposition that women over forty are, as a group, less valuable to employers than their qualifications and experience would suggest. On the contrary, the research indicates that the disadvantage this group experiences in the labour market is attributable to persistent stereotyping, unexamined assumptions about adaptability and cost, and appearance-based bias specific to women, none of which withstand direct empirical testing. The consistency of this finding across résumé-correspondence studies conducted in different countries, using different methodologies, over more than a decade, indicates that the phenomenon in question is systemic rather than incidental, and that the burden of demonstrating continued professional value has been placed, without empirical justification, on the women affected rather than on the hiring systems that continue to overlook them.

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