



Challenging Age and Sex Discrimination is Essential for Efforts to Promote Healthy Aging

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Biases against people because of their age or sex are among the most commonly reported types of discrimination in the United States. In 2017 alone, 25,605 people filed charges of sex discrimination with the [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) and 18,376 people filed charges of age-based discrimination. These and other forms of discrimination can profoundly harm victims – by worsening health or inflicting psychological stress, job loss, or economic hardship. Moreover, the consequences of discrimination are not restricted to the targeted individuals. In addition to being unfair – and often illegal – discrimination takes a financial and psychological toll on entire families and can undermine workplace morale and productivity.

In combination, age and sex-discrimination are particularly detrimental to women as they grow older. Organizations and policies designed to promote healthy aging stand to gain by addressing sex discrimination and gender biases. But what does that actually involve? Building on my research and the work of others, I identify three specific ways that countering sexism can help promote healthy aging.

The Economic Impact of Sex Discrimination Cumulates over the Life Course

Gender bias takes many forms and includes things such as discrimination in hiring, pay, promotion, career training and professional development. Also parts of the picture are experiences of sexual harassment and being unfairly fired. Events such as these often have both short and long-term consequences. Discrimination can negatively affect a person's educational and career trajectories – for instance, by leading women to [change fields](#) or leave the workforce altogether. Sex discrimination in hiring and firing, pay, promotion, and access to training opportunities also translates to reducing savings and lower contributions to Social Security, both problems especially experienced by women.

Important concepts in aging research are “[cumulative advantage](#)” and “[cumulative disadvantage](#).” In brief, people who are advantaged early in life tend to see their advantages grow as they age, while those who experience significant disadvantage early in life tend to fall ever further behind. The process is relatively simple, but the consequences are profound, and help to explain socioeconomic disparities in aging populations. Because disadvantages associated with sex accumulate over the life course, addressing sex discrimination is one way to help ensure that women have sufficient resources to draw upon in later life.

Sex Discrimination Harms Health – and Age Bias Compounds the Problem

Sex discrimination takes a toll not only on the wallet but also on people's physical and mental health. Numerous [studies](#) show that individuals who perceive they have experienced discrimination are at increased risk of suffering a range of health problems, including anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, and strokes. Moreover, the added effects of aging for women who have experienced sex discrimination can exact an especially severe toll on health.

A recent [study](#) I did in collaboration with epidemiologist João Luiz Bastos investigated U.S. patterns of workplace discrimination and the consequences for physical and mental health. We analyzed data from the U.S. General Social Survey, a large-scale survey of English- and Spanish-speaking adults, to assess the prevalence and consequences of workplace discrimination. Women workers, we found, were significantly more likely than men to report recent experiences with workplace discrimination or harassment (23% vs 16.5%).

We also found that women's greater exposure to sex discrimination took a toll on their mental health. When asked, "Now thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?" women reported an average of 3.6 days of poor mental health in the past 30 days. Men, in comparison, reported an average of 2.8 days, significantly less. Women who experienced both age and sex discrimination in their workplace reported even worse mental health: a staggering nine days of poor mental health, on average, in the past 30 days.

As is the case with the economic consequences of discrimination, the harms to mental and physical health associated with discrimination can be long-term. Discrimination decreases the quality of life for women – and men – as they age. Addressing the persistence – and joint effects – of age and sex discrimination is one key to enhancing health for aging people.

Challenging Social Stereotypes

Neither sex discrimination nor age discrimination is inevitable. They stem from broader social inequalities, and are maintained, in part by socially created stereotypes. Just as age discrimination and gender discrimination combine to shape poor economic and health outcomes for women, so too do gender- and age-based stereotypes.

Consider some of the ways in which stereotypes reinforce one another: Young women are more likely than older women, or men of any age, to be viewed as immature, weak, and naive. Older women workers are often stereotyped as grandmotherly, technologically incompetent, and unable to learn; or they may be overlooked entirely. In between, women are often stereotyped as moms or soon-to-be-moms, presumed to be less committed to the paid workforce. As noted by scholars [Colin Duncan and Wendy Loretto](#), stereotypes about age and gender infuse one another so tightly that women's age can be held against them at all points of life. Because gender- and age-based stereotypes are often intertwined, tackling one requires tackling the other.

The Upshot

Gender inequality and age inequality are often discussed in isolation. But research from the social and health sciences shows that these two forms of disadvantage are intertwined – a fact that healthy aging efforts must recognize. Gender discrimination early in life affects the financial resources women have in their later years; and this kind of bias also takes a significant toll on women's mental health and well-being, especially when they are older.

Read more in Catherine Harnois and João L. Bastos, "Discrimination, Harassment, and Gendered Health Inequalities: Do Perceptions of Workplace Mistreatment Contribute to the Gender Gap in Self-reported Health?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 59, no. 2 (2018).