

# Older women in the labour market

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# Labour force participation

The majority of older people (aged 55 years plus) in both the UK and the US are women.

In the UK, at the time of the last 2011 census, there were just over 9.5 million women in this age group compared to 8.25 million men.

In the US some 54 per cent of this age group are women and outnumber men by some 6.7 million.

# US

During recent times, the labour force participation of older women has grown rapidly and is projected to continue growing. The US Department of Labor reported that most of the increases in the labour force participation of the US population aged 55 and older will come from women. Amongst 55 to 64 year olds, the women's rate of labour force participation increased from 41.3 per cent in 1980 to 59.4 per cent in 2012, and is expected to reach 66.6 per cent by 2020. Increases in labour force participation are expected to be even bigger for those ages 65 years and older. For women, the rate was 8.1 per cent in 1980 compared to 14.4 per cent in 2012 it is expected to be 19.2 per cent in 2020.

# UK

In the UK some 79.8 per cent of women aged between 25 and 49 were now participating in the labour market. This compared with 72.4 per cent of women aged between 50 and State Pension Age and 11.0 per cent of women over State Pension Age. The increase in the participation rate for women aged 55 plus has been quite dramatic, increasing by some 20 per cent over the 10/15 years.

# Gender and ageing: problems, perceptions and policies\_

Older women's socio-economic status is partially rooted in the gender division of labour which assumes that women's primary involvement is in reproductive labour, unpaid household work, caregiving and unequal power relations at home. Such activities often restrict women's employment opportunities, mobility, educational attainment and skills development. When they actively participate in the labour market, most women are concentrated in low-wage, insignificant and demanding jobs, or are relegated to part-time employment with few benefits and little security. Nevertheless, during their lifetime, women spend more time on combined unpaid and paid work than men do. In their life cycle, women earn less and experience inequality at work, in the family and society. Thus, gender, ageing and poverty are interrelated.

# Retirement

For many women who have worked, retirement is hampered by the conditions that preceded it—significantly lower lifetime earnings, resulting in the accumulation of fewer assets, and periods of ‘unemployment, part-time employment, and absence from the labor market’, which are linked to conflicts between paid labour and caregiving. The assumption behind the statistics is that women and men age differently. Both can experience age discrimination and disadvantage, but for women this is exacerbated by the lifetime of discrimination.

It is important to focus on the fact that women are not an homogenous group of course, but the ‘discrimination older women experience is often intersectional, their old age compounding other forms of discrimination based on gender, ethnic origin, disability, marital status, levels of poverty or literacy. Often considered no longer economically or reproductively useful, many older women are seen as a burden on their families and communities, are marginalised, isolated and even abandoned’.

# Model of lifetime disadvantage

Gender-based factors	Incremental disadvantage factors
Education and training	Pay inequality
Stereotyping	Occupational segregation
Multiple discrimination	Nonstandard working
Caregiving roles	Career breaks
Career outcomes	Retirement and pensions

# Disjointed incrementalism

Disjointed incrementalism is policymaking characterised by: considering a limited number of familiar policy options, mixing goals and values with empirical analysis, emphasising the limited social ills to be cured rather than a grand goal to be achieved, proceeding slowly through trial-by-error and correction, examining only some of the potential effects of a policy alternative, and providing space for partisan interest groups to influence policymaking through negotiation. Policymaking thus takes place through small steps, not too far removed from the status quo; those making policy gradually learn from their mistakes, and make adjustments over time. In theory, disjointed incrementalism diffuses societal value conflicts by allowing multiple stakeholders to negotiate sequential rather than radical change.