



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
15 December 2024

English only

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-ninth session

10–21 March 2025

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Eloise Hylton Inc, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Eloise Hylton Inc, is an NGO dedicated to the advocating for the advancement of the rights and wellbeing of older adults. Today, we will explore the untapped potential of older women in the workforce, the systemic barriers that hinder their reintegration, and the targeted policies and programs that will lead to a more inclusive labor market and accelerate the achievements of gender equality. We live in a world where, despite all the advancements in gender equality, women over 50 are disproportionately excluded from the workforce. Ageism intersects with gender discrimination in ways that severely limit opportunities for older women to re-enter or continue in the workforce, particularly for those who have taken time off for caregiving responsibilities. But it is not only the women who lose in this equation. Economies miss out on their knowledge, skills, and contributions, and societies bear the cost of underutilizing this valuable demographic.

The Economic and Social Impact of Excluding Older Women from the Workforce

The exclusion of older women from the workforce represents not only a moral issue of fairness and gender equality but also an economic challenge. According to the World Health Organization, the global population is aging at an unprecedented rate, and by 2050, one in six people worldwide will be over the age of 65. In many countries, particularly in high-income economies, this demographic shift is already in full swing. Yet, older women, especially those above the age of 50, continue to face significant barriers to workforce participation.

The labor force participation rate for women declines markedly after the age of 50. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), women's employment rates drop by 10-20 percentage points between the ages of 55 and 64 in many countries, with much steeper declines observed in low- and middle-income countries. This decline is particularly pronounced for women who have left the workforce to care for children, elderly relatives, or spouses, and who wish to re-enter the job market later in life. Once out of the workforce, these women face considerable challenges, including outdated skills, reduced networks, and biases against older workers.

This exclusion has wide-ranging consequences. For older women, it results in increased poverty, social isolation, and a loss of financial independence. The World Bank estimates that 10.3 per cent of women globally live in extreme poverty, and many older women are particularly vulnerable because they lack sufficient pensions or retirement savings. In many cases, these women also bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, further deepening their economic insecurity. For economies, the underutilization of older women in the workforce represents a missed opportunity. The report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) highlighted that the global economy could benefit by up to 20 per cent in GDP per capita across all regions by closing gender gaps in employment.

Ageism and Gender Discrimination: The Barriers

First and foremost, ageism remains a deeply entrenched issue. Stereotypes of older adults as less adaptable, less productive, or technologically challenged still persist, even though research shows that older workers bring a wealth of experience, loyalty, and stability to the workplace. For women, this bias is compounded by gender discrimination, which has been well-documented throughout the life course. Older women, especially those who took breaks from their careers for caregiving, are often

deemed as "outdated" or "unskilled" in today's rapidly changing labor market, despite their valuable contributions.

Moreover, the double burden of unpaid care work disproportionately affects older women. Many older women left the workforce to care for children, spouses, grand children or elderly parents, and when they attempt to re-enter the workforce, they find that their years of caregiving, though socially valuable, do not count as work experience. A 2020 report from the World Economic Forum (WEF) noted that caregiving, which is still disproportionately carried out by women, limits women's access to jobs, reduces their lifelong earnings, and weakens their economic security in old age.

Compounding these barriers are structural inadequacies in education and training systems. Older women often lack access to continuous professional development, making it difficult for them to keep pace with technological advancements or changing workplace demands. Unlike younger workers who have more time to adapt and recover from employment gaps, older women are often penalized for lacking the most up-to-date skills.

Reimagining the Role of Older Women: Policy and Program Solutions

The time has come to reimagine the role of older women in the economy. By addressing the barriers that keep them out of the workforce, we can unlock a pool of untapped talent, accelerate economic growth, and create a more equitable society. Here are several key policy areas and programmatic interventions that can facilitate the reintegration of older women into the workforce.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Many older women, particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities, need greater flexibility in their work schedules. Governments and businesses should promote policies that allow for flexible work hours, telecommuting, and part-time employment. A study by AARP found that women between 50 and 64 are more likely than men to prefer part-time work. Offering such options can help older women balance paid employment with caregiving and other personal responsibilities.

Targeted Training and Upskilling Programs

Older women face the challenge of outdated skills, particularly in industries that have been significantly transformed by technology. It is the responsibility of both public and private sectors to invest in targeted training programs that focus on reskilling older women for the modern workforce. For instance, in Germany, the government's Skills Initiative for Older Workers provides vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities for older adults, with a special focus on women returning to the workforce. Such programs could be expanded globally, with tailored curriculums that address the unique needs of older women.

Tax Incentives for Hiring Older Workers

Governments can play a crucial role in encouraging employers to hire older women by offering tax incentives and subsidies for businesses that hire or retain workers over the age of 50. In the United Kingdom, for example, the 50 Plus: Choices initiative includes tax breaks for companies that hire older workers and offers support to older adults seeking employment. Similar programs could be adopted in other countries, helping to shift employer perceptions about the value of older workers.

Pension Reform and Social Security

One of the most pressing issues older women faces is financial insecurity. Many women retire with inadequate pensions due to time taken off for unpaid care work and lower lifetime earnings. Governments must consider pension reforms that recognize unpaid care work as contributory to pension entitlements. Sweden's gender-responsive pension system accounts for periods of unpaid caregiving, ensuring that older women do not face extreme poverty in their later years. Expanding such reforms could provide older women with greater financial independence and security.

Combating Ageism through Public Awareness Campaigns

Changing societal perceptions of older women is critical to dismantling the stereotypes that keep them out of the workforce. Public awareness campaigns that emphasize the contributions of older women, both in the workforce and society, can help reduce ageism. For example, AARP's Disrupt Aging campaign seeks to challenge outdated views on aging and highlight the continued value of older adults in society. Such initiatives, if adopted more broadly, can help shift cultural norms around aging and work.

The Path Forward: A Call to Action

We cannot look to a future without addressing the present. It is essential that we address the barriers keeping older women out of the workforce, not only as an issue of gender equality but as an economic imperative. Older women bring wisdom, experience, and dedication that are essential to our economic and social well-being. By reintegrating them into the workforce through targeted policies, tax incentives, and training programs, we can empower them to regain financial independence and accelerate national economic growth.

It is time for governments, businesses, and civil society to recognize the value of older women and to invest in their potential. We must create inclusive labor markets that are free of age and gender discrimination, where older women can thrive and contribute meaningfully. The future of work must include women of all ages, and we must ensure that our economic systems are built to support them. We should think less on if older women will be able to 'catch up' and focus more on ensuring that they keep advancing.
