

AGE

A Gendered Perspective

OUT-R-AGE

Age discrimination works in two ways, the first way is based purely on the age of the person in question and is rooted in the idea that people who are too young and people who are too old are not as useful to society as those that rest in the middle. This kind of age discrimination is economic in focus and is primarily concerned with whether a person is productive and contributing financially to society (by working and paying taxes) or if they are taking from society (by accessing state pensions or benefits). Both sexes experience this kind of discrimination and the associated ideas that certain groups in society are of less use and therefore value to society – for example lazy teenagers and dodderly old people are discriminatory stereotypes common to both sexes. However, age discrimination is also a gendered process that relies on gender stereotypes for its meaning. In general the stereotypes that are used to discriminate against boys and young men are focused around youth culture and the threat that young men in particular pose to each other and the safety of other citizens. Inner city gang culture is increasingly used to demonise young men (especially BME and working class young men), and terms such as ‘hoodie’ have been used by the media to create a visual reference for young men who signify increasing violence and lawlessness in our society. As young men stop being teenagers and enter their mid to late twenties the discrimination that they face is rarely attributable to their age, and certainly not in any systemic way until they are older men. In this middle period of their life men are understood to be at the height of their productive and reproductive powers; they are no longer young and a potential threat to the established patriarchy, nor are they past working age and a ‘drain’ on society. In this way concepts of masculinity are intrinsically linked to age, and in the same way femininity is also intrinsically linked to age and so age related discrimination and sex discrimination are closely bound for women. How a woman is discriminated against in terms of her sex is dependent upon her age, and because of this link, sexism and ageism affect women differently at different stages of their lives, and at every stage of their lives. Therefore age-based discrimination cannot be seen as occurring only in young age or old age for women and women are never really seen to be at ‘the right age’ unlike the middle years of men.

The socialisation of children includes their immersion into stereotypical gender roles from birth. They are dressed in different colours and different clothes, praised for different behaviour, given different role models, encouraged to play different games and sports and play separately in the playground, they are read different books and given different toys to play with, etc. The gender roles that are taught and enforced from childhood mean that male and female children are seen very differently and see themselves as very different from a very young age; these different identities allow girls to be discriminated against in ways that boys are not. The physical appearance of girls and the idea that being pretty is a positive female attribute has always been a focus of femininity in our society, and there is increasing pressure on girls and young women to be thin and pretty. This is mirrored by the increasing sexualisation of young girls and teenagers and the additional pressures that that places on them. Although attractiveness is also valued in boys and young men, the outside pressure and the links between attractiveness and self-esteem are not as great. Nor is there a concurrent sexualisation of young boys; bras for pre-pubescent girls exist (as do thongs for 3 year old girls!); posing pouches for pre-pubescent boys do not.

The pressure to be attractive follows women throughout their lives, and coincides with age related discrimination again when they reach middle age. From this point women who age naturally are seen as unattractive and there is a growing stigma attached to women looking old, or even being happy to look their age. Women are encouraged to use anti-aging face creams, dye their hair, diet, exercise and even undergo surgery in order to look younger than their years, allowing the discrimination that binds their worth with their attractiveness to continue from young age to old age. The menopause is often understood to be the point at which women stop being attractive and sexually useful and the fixation with women looking young feeds upon the idea that youthfulness and fecundity are essential to the worth of a woman and how she is valued (or devalued) by our society. The growing pressure for older women to rework their appearance and present themselves as younger women discriminates against both their age and their sex. It encourages women to value how they look over

their life experience and works to infantilise women by asking them to devalue and deny the learning and experience that comes with age.

When the behaviour of girls and young women challenges gender norms, their age, and therefore age based discrimination, is often a factor. There is a growing fear that children and especially teenagers are getting out of control and one of the ways that this conclusion is reached and the idea furthered is through the assertion that teenage girls are behaving more like teenage boys by becoming much more violent and more involved in under age drinking, smoking, drug taking, theft etc. The implication is that teenage behaviour as a whole is getting worse, but the fact that teenage girls are involved too makes it even more worrying for the future of our society. The demonisation and scape-goating of children and young people has begun to take a gendered perspective and the implication is a society that can’t control its young women is even worse than a society that can’t control its young men. Similarly, the decline in birth rates in Scotland and the fears that this has generated around the need for immigration and our ability to finance state pensions for an increasing older and non-working population, have seen hostility and discriminatory attitudes towards women choosing not to have children, or to have children later in life, grow. Despite the fact that higher numbers of men are choosing not to have children, the burden of not producing children is placed on women in their thirties who are childless. The difference in attitude towards older fathers and older mothers is also dictated by gender and there is much more acceptance of older fathers than older mothers. Older mothers are often portrayed as selfish because of the increased chance of birth defect in the children of older mothers, a factor that is rarely given consideration in relation to older fathers.

As previously stated, age discrimination has a strong economic basis and is in part determined by the economic and financial structures of our society (that is who is capable of earning and spending money and who is a drain on our resources both within the family and in terms of the State). Economic theory looks at and is based upon the lifecycle of men because that has been the preconceived dominant

lifecycle and the lifecycle that allows for production and maximum earning capacity because there is very little responsibility for and acknowledgement of the unpaid work of the social reproductive economy. This renders the economic experience of women irrelevant and helps to mask the inherent financial discriminations that they face. The statistics that are used to generate policy in this area are gathered through the analysis of paid work, and the unpaid contribution made primarily by women in creating and caring for the workforce is ignored. This is illustrated by the common understanding that the taxes garnered by ‘real’ work are used to fund the welfare system, which makes token financial gestures towards women, both older women of retirement age and to women who are working in the social reproductive system caring for children, people and our communities, and that this fairly remunerates women for the unpaid work that they undertake in the social reproductive economy. Indeed the money spent on welfare benefits is often presented as a ‘loss’ to the real economy.

In reality this economic system discriminates against women of all ages, but especially at the ages when women have breaks from working to have and to care for children, and as a consequence of these breaks when they are of pensionable age. Because women tend to have shorter working lives due to unpaid responsibilities, work in less well paid industries and jobs and are paid less on average than their male counterparts, so as a group have less money to pay into private pension funds (and consequently less access to the associated governmental tax relief), poverty in old age is becoming a growing area of concern for women. In old age, women are literally paying the price for a system that doubly discriminates against their sex and their age.

Despite the fact that girls outperform boys at school and at university women are valued less in the workplace and find gaining employment (other than low paid employment) harder than their male counterparts. When they are younger they find advancement is harder because employers fear that they will leave or request time off for maternity leave, this translates into reduced expectations that impact on their careers through to middle age. Even then

women find it harder to find work during middle age than men and younger women, despite the fact that this is one of the periods when women are most able to work (i.e. after children have left home and the amount of unpaid work that women are expected to undertake lessens). Women are not just blocked out of paid work because of their unpaid responsibilities but also out of unpaid areas of work like volunteering and activism. When women have children many of the discriminations that are faced by women shift into focus (e.g. the burden of childcare responsibility, loss of earnings and pension, discrimination in the workplace, the gendered expectations of partners, family and society etc.) but their responsibilities do not allow for active engagement in campaigning and highlighting gender discrimination. When they are able to retire the age discrimination faced by older women works to disempower their voices and in this way the social and reproductive lifecycle of a woman limits the engagement that they can have with politics and legislation and the changes that might happen were women able to put forward their perspective in this arena. It is also important to note that retirement often means very different things for women and men. Most retired women still undertake the bulk of unpaid work that needs to be done to run a home and look after the people with whom she lives, and so in this sense never retire. The low pay of female workers and the high cost of private childcare means that grandparents and especially grandmothers who are retired are picking up the slack and providing unpaid childcare for their grandchildren. Again both of these factors inhibit a woman's ability to engage with interests outside her unpaid responsibilities, and show age-based gender discrimination between the sexes.

Many of the critiques to do with women and age are based on economic arguments about valuing what women put into society through the social reproductive economy. However it is important that an overemphasis is not put on only looking at ways to make remuneration for work undertaken in the social reproductive system fairer to women. Addressing this financial discrimination would not provide a solution to sexist and ageist discrimination because this discrimination only exists in this way because women are systematically devalued by gender roles and the sexism and ageism that they support. Although it is important to push for the work that women undertake in the social reproductive economy to be recognised financially, it is important that it is understood that financial recognition can only meet its aims if it goes hand in hand with raising the value of women socially and politically and recognition of the importance of the work that is done to care for children and other vulnerable people in our society. Without this recognition the burden of work undertaken in the social reproductive economy will continue to fall on women because it will remain undervalued, and by association so will women. The two sectors need to work together to understand how to tackle inequality for older women currently living with the effects of gender and age discrimination, whilst moving beyond the financial toleration of women in an unfair system to the creation of a society that values young, middle age and older women and does not use their age and their gender to oppress and discriminate against them.

OUT-TO-AGE

