Commentary

Employment Challenges and Workplace Bullying among Older Women During the Pandemic

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DESCRIPTION

Grassroots research ran a study of Australian women over 40 called Generation Expendable? In 2020, the pandemic fallout was being described in many countries as a "shecession" recognising the particular impacts on younger women and mothers who were more likely to be working in more casualties' sectors and therefore vulnerable to job losses. In addition they faced a sharp increase of unpaid work in the home. But what of older women, already known to face "dual discriminations" at work? How did the pandemic shape their employment experiences? Would the combination of older age and gender render them a 'generation expendable' in such a stressed labour market? .The older women to our survey went into the pandemic with good job security: 90% were employed and 70% of those in permanent contracts.

A majority retained or regained work across the two year period of the study, but often at a cost in hours/income, job security and in personal health. With older women's capacity to earn already constrained by factors such as disability (17.8%); care commitments (19.1%); and lack of housing security, it was unsurprising that 44% felt the financial impacts of the crisis would negatively affect their life outcomes into retirement. Many participants worked the 'pandemic 'frontline', as teachers, health workers and delivering community care and 42% cited increased Occupational Health And Safety (OHS) risks as a core outcome of working during the pandemic. However these risks weren't only around coronavirus infection, but surprising, also described as psychological risks resulting from workplace bullying. A shocking 52% of women surveyed had experienced behaviours or cultures at work aligned with Australian legislation related to workplace bullying, as criteria cited in UK research. While we had of course anticipated a sharp increase in workplace 'stressors' during this period, the poor work conditions impacting women over 40 during this time far surpassed official statistics in terms of bullying at work.

More shockingly, interviews with respondents to better understand the extent the phenomenon suggested that bullying workplace cultures had in fact preceded the crisis and could therefore even be extrapolated to typify the Australian workplace. While direct correlation was out of scope for this small study, the high rates of bullying identified and predominantly in the (feminized) sectors of health and education, suggest a deeper examination of Australian institutions is urgently needed. With bullying characteristically coming from managers to subordinates, researchers explored the target's relationship to the perpetrator. We expected some of the bullying of women to come from men, who still dominate leadership roles in the feminized sectors. And while this hypothesis bore If the patterns identified in Generation Expendable? are indicative of a broader crisis in employment, this begs the question of whether workplace ergonomics needs to consider employees beyond their circumstances at work including their gender. Employees in the feminised workplaces of Australia not only face a particularly high burden of work but also, typically, hold leadership positions only up until the middle management, or operational tier. Additionally women also experience subordinate power relations in the home and bring their experience of that into the workplace. Understanding these factors, burnout may be a driver of workplace bullying for both targets and for perpetrators.

CONCLUSION

The commodification of women's labour and, conversely, growth capitalism dependence on women's unpaid labour, work to this end. If we are to address this burnout, we will need transformative workplace policies which reach beyond individual responses to workplace bullying to rethink the systems structuring workplace cultures. As in many countries of the global North, neoliberal values of competitive individualism are intrinsic to the way Australia works. To drive equitable outcomes for women workers and minimize risk of workplace bullying, it may be the more horizontal structures of workplace hierarchy and 'feminine' notions of collaborative leadership are needed.

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