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Gender, Age and Ageism: Experiences of Women Managers in Two EU Countries

Marjut Jyrkinen and Linda McKie

Abstract

In this paper we explore the intersectionality of gender and age in work and careers of women managers. Interviews were conducted with women senior managers in two EU countries, namely Finland and Scotland. These countries have demographic and economic similarities, but there are differences in welfare regimes, economies and employment policies. Using the approach of biographical matching we compare how women managers in these countries encounter gendered ageism in the different stages of their careers. Data illustrates the myriad ways in which women experience ageism and lookism. In the conclusion we reflect upon these processes of gendering management which persist across these two labour markets.

Key words: Age, Biographical matching, Careers, Gender, Women managers, Work

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When I was younger, having many children was a threat [to employers]. But then there is also the issue that many employers do not realise that when women are in their 40s and 50s and their children have grown up, this is the best age [for women managers]. And at that time one encounters [age] discrimination. This is something that I can't understand. (NGO manager, Finland, 59)

Introduction

The study of gender in organisations and work is in the process of notable revision. Demographic, social and economic trends have a variety of impacts on workers, sectors, economies and countries. While there is growing research and policy interest in age and ageing, less focus has been paid to the intersection of gender and age in management and organisation studies. Recent debates, however, in *Work, Employment and Society* have considered non-standard employment (Hogue and Kirkpatrick, 2003), gender role attitudes and work-life 'balance' (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005), and older women in labour markets and organisations (Moore, 2009). This paper seeks to develop these debates and offer a contribution to empirical evidence and theoretical possibilities.

Research demonstrates that women and men experience age, ageing and ageism in different ways in organisations and management (Itzin and Phillipson, 1995). Duncan and Loretto's (2004) study of the financial sector in the UK found out that women experience more age discrimination than men do. Granleese and Sayer (2005) concluded that women working in higher education are discriminated against in different ways than men in that they experience a triple jeopardy of discrimination of age and gender discrimination and 'lookism', which is prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of appearance. The importance of appearance in worklife is gendered, and women managers often encounter at least implicit demands for elegant image, 'beauty' and slimness (see Shilling, 2003). Lookism and 'aesthetic labour', that is, how organisations develop and take advantage of their employees' corporeality, has been recognised in the sociology of work. This form of discrimination seems highly evident in the service sector among others. Organisations may use aesthetic labour to create a distinct (sexualised) company image with the intention to increase their competitive advantage (Warhurst et. al, 2009; Warhurst and Nickson, 2009).

Issues of ageing and ageism have become increasingly topical: with attitudes and prejudices about age, together with concerns about income in later life, they are pertinent issues for employers and workers (Wilkinson and Ferraro, 2002). Age is also relevant in recruitment, selection and retention, in performance and appraisal and in training and career development (Perry and Parlamis, 2006). Current demographic trends may well induce competition pressures among workers and organisations in the EU. These trends will intensify as many more of the baby-boom generation of the 1940s reach retirement in the coming decade.

We explore these intersectionalities of gender and age in the careers of women managers in the private sector and NGOs through data from interviews undertaken with women senior managers in two countries, namely Finland and Scotland. The theory of intersectionality addresses the simultaneous existence and occurrence of multiple social divisions, such as gender, race/ethnicity, age and class. This allows for the reconceptualisation of identities

through the analysis of social categories and divisions, and attention to multiple marginalisations (Crenshaw, 2000). Richardson and Loubier (2008: 143) define it thus:

[t]he premise of intersectionality theory is that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structured power. In other words, people are members of more than one category or social group and can simultaneously experience advantages and disadvantages related to those different social groups.

Our research project also draws upon the work of Crompton (2001: 167) and the idea of biographical matching. This can be defined as a crossnational case study approach to data analysis in which the ‘cases’ are women biographically matched, in this paper across Finland and Scotland. In addition, we have also considered the call by Esping-Andersen (2009) to reflect upon the ‘contrasts of contexts’ of welfare state regimes in any crossnational project. We open the paper with a review of the economies and labour markets of Finland and Scotland. The study and data are then presented followed, in the concluding section, by implications of the research for theory and research.

A Contrast of Contexts: Women and Work in Finland and Scotland

The term a ‘contrast of contexts’ was developed by Esping-Andersen (2009), drawing upon debates and ideas in comparative historical research. The term refers to the unique features of welfare states: the Scottish/UK welfare system would be considered liberal with limited government intervention and state supportⁱ and Finland categorised as social-democratic given the higher level of public sector support for a range of services and policies. This classification also draws on welfare responses to women’s changing roles and the limits of state recognition and support for increased participation in paid work while ageing ensures care responsibilities will grow. Beyond the differences in their welfare regime classifications, these nations have contrasting economies, with differences such as UK being outside both the Euro currency and the Schengen agreement.

Finland and Scotland have a number of geographical, social and political parallels. Both countries have a similar population size (over 5 million) with a concentration of around 40% of the population in a core urbanised area of each country: in Finland, the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the cities in southern-mid Finland; in Scotland the ‘Central Belt’ that runs between Edinburgh and Glasgow. Large remote and sparsely populated areas pose particular issues for service delivery and economic development.

The governments of both countries are negotiating through a period where not only are their populations ageing, but there are economic and social changes: families and relationships are shifting with divorce, serial monogamy, co-habitation, family re-formation and an increase in solo living. Changes pose particular issues for women who are expected to work, and who themselves wish to work, throughout adult life. The question of planning for income relates to retirement and gender pay gap – on average 17.8% in the EU, 20% in Finland and 21.4% in the UK taken as a wholeⁱⁱ – as the pensions of many women remain lower than those of men (European Commission, 2009)

Women make up half of the workforce in Finland and in Scotland, but 81% in Finland work full-time while this is the case for 59% for Scottish women (Romans and Kotecka, 2007; Scottish Government, 2007). This notable contrast in part or full-time working is due to the

Finnish provision of universal day care and a parental leave system that enables either of the parents to stay home until their child is three years old, and the other parent to work meantime. However, only 6.1% of parental leave days are used by fathers (Haataja, 2009). Finnish women's full-time work is also based upon history and the evolution of the economy and welfare system in the last 70 years. Women's participation in worklife formed the basis to policies and services supported and promoted by the high educational attainment of women, and an individual-based taxation system (Lammi-Taskula, 2004).

There are also a number of other obvious contrasts related to approaches to gender equality and issues of work and well-being. For example, the Scottish approach is less regulated and more based upon advice, support and awards. Finland has significantly greater welfare provision than the UK, but this does not mean that the state system has been able to effectively tackle well-being and work issues and problems – mental ill health and suicide are major concerns. The contrasts are notable, particularly the greater regulation of workplaces in Finland and differences in health and safety, and in equality and diversity. For instance, organisations employing 30 or more workers in Finland, must, by law, have an equality plan in place.

Finland's image of having a relatively gender-equal society cloaks high levels of gender segregation in the labour market in which, as in Scotland, women are overrepresented in lower paid caring and service forms of employment. The Finnish labour market is the sixth most gender segregated in the EU-27, with women dominating public sector jobs and men the private and public sectors in construction work, logistics and traditional manufacturing industries. Similar trends exist in Scotland, but the UK is 20th in this ranking having witnessed change in the opposite manner to Finland concerning gender segregation. In 2005, in the UK 33.1% of managers were women, including 14.4% of directors; in Finland, women hold 29% of managerial positions (Romans and Kotecka, 2006). On the other hand, nearly 40% of employees have a woman as their immediate superior in Finland, which is highest rate in the EU. In the UK this figure is 34%, and the average in the EU is 24% (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007).

Gendering and Ageing Organisations

Gender is integral to policies and practices of inclusion and non-discrimination, diversity and equality in organisations. Despite all the progress in EU equality directives, national legislation and policies, professional association and trade union responses, being female can still be a major obstacle to career advancement, in particular progress to senior management (Wahl, 2003). Women and men are situated differently, hierarchically and vertically, in management and leadership. Their career paths and family relations often differ. For instance, a 2008 study by Hearn et al. found differences between top women and men managers in their work and home life situations: all the men were married and their partners were mainly housewives who worked part-time or were involved in voluntary work and took care of the home and family tasks and responsibilities. In case of women top managers, if they had a partner, they were most often living in a dual career relationship with fewer children and shared care responsibilities.

Martin (2003) writes that gendering practices in organisations are interrelated with those that occur in everyday, microlevel contexts at work, at home and in leisure time. Accordingly, '[p]racticising is the means by which the gender order is constituted at work' (ibid.: 354).

Existing multiple masculinities and femininities are practiced in the context of other social statuses, such as age, nationality, ethnicity and/or class. The intersectionality of gender and other social divisions also depends on their bodily dimension and expressions.

According to Acker (1991), the gendering of organisations involves five interacting processes: production of gender divisions in jobs, hierarchies, power and subordination; creation of symbols and images; interactions between individuals that enact dominance and subordination; construction of gendered individual identities appropriate to the organisational context; and processes of creating and conceptualising social structures. The idea(l) of the abstract and bodiless worker often excludes women as suitable managers expected to be totally dedicated to the work and no responsibilities for children or family other than bread-winning (Acker, 2006). Women's bodies, sexuality and ability to procreate still meet with suspicion and stigma in recruitment, promotion and career progression, and are used as grounds for control and exclusion. Covert control can be exercised, for example, through arguments about how 'women's emotionality', related to their bodies/sexuality, disables their ability to accomplish demanding tasks in leadership and management. More overt control is actualised through sexual harassment or relegating women of childbearing age to nonmanagerial posts (Acker, 1991). Also lookism can be a part of covert control and aesthetic labour with embedded hopes and wishes for a 'nice', sexualised and 'ageless' physical appearance (see Warhurst et al., 2009).

A major problem for uncovering gendered practices and processes in worklife and management is not necessarily the existence of social divisions and categories *per se*, but the values that are attached to them and how these (re)create social hierarchies, power relations, inequalities and privileges. Dominant values view ageing as a danger, as a process of reducing skills and energy (Taylor and Walker, 1994; Duncan and Loretto, 2004). These values are not, however, applied across all sectors, and in certain high status jobs such as global politicians and senior judges being male and older, age appears to offer security and stability. A career can be understood as a life-long process of work-related activities with a strongly upward, mobile, uninterrupted path (see Hall, 2002). This prototype is based on men managers' life situations and possibilities for permanent employment contracts. Women's careers in management face more hindrances and interruptions, and thus their career paths differ from those of men (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Burke, 2007). Childbearing, care responsibilities (elderly parents, relatives, friends), and the day to day emotional labour of work and home are experienced in gendered ways, such that they impact more on women (McKie et al., 2008).

In building up a career in management many specific educational and personal features are required or sought by employers. There are also many (other) features and social categories, such as age and gender, that impact on recruitment and career development in management. Inclusion or exclusion is often not formally based on 'suitable' or 'unsuitable' age or gender because of antidiscrimination laws in most countries. Nevertheless, discrimination on the basis of age continues and can impact on those at earlier and later stages of their careers (see Moore, 2009). But how do gender and age impact across the career stages of women managers in Finland and Scotland?

The Study

The data here is drawn from semi-structured interviews with eight women in senior management positions in Finland and Scotland. These interviews (2008-9) are part of a larger dataset of 25 interviews and 4 focus groups with women managers, which was gathered, firstly, through approaching two professional women's organisations active in both countries. Potential interviewees were then contacted by these advisees followed by snowballing technique as an additional way to find suitable participants. The selection criteria, applied in both countries, were that participants held a senior managerial positionⁱⁱⁱ in a business or a third sector organisation, and that they were aged 30 or over. We appreciate this is purposive sampling but given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic this was considered a reasonable approach to adopt.

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed^{iv}, yielding over 620 pages of text. A research diary and notes informed analysis through reflection on the context and environment of interviews. Interviews were structured around the topics of career phases; organisational policies and relationships with work colleagues; and mentors and networks^v. These themes in the interview schedule derived from the vast body of research on women in management, while taking into account the relative paucity of attention paid to the impact of gender, age and gendered ageism on women's managerial careers (Itzin and Phillipson, 1995; Calasanti, 2004; Acker, 2006). The schedule was revised following piloting. Most interviewees were in what they identified as mid-career or later phases of their careers, and three women were retired but active in worklife through activities such as work as consultants. Ethical issues have been carefully considered throughout the project (British Sociological Association, 2002; Academy of Finland, 2009). Many interviewees reported that they had never spoken about these topics before and found them sensitive and potentially threatening. In Scotland, language was sometimes a challenge for the Finnish interviewer, who spoke English fluently but as a second language. Thus taping and transcribing was necessary for our team approach to the analysis.

We draw on Crompton's (2001) approach to comparative research with biographical matching. Our aim was to identify linkages between the macro (national) and micro (everyday and personal) levels to explore how gender and age(ism) are (re)constructed in the worklives of women managers. As has been pointed out by many feminist and critical scholars, in spite of the importance of quantitative approaches in social research and comparative analysis, they tend to have limitations with regards the analysis of gendered processes (Williams, 1991). Hence here we use comparative case studies in order to explore the cultural and social differences between the two countries, and to repack these differences and similarities. According to Ragin (1987, ix), the 'case-oriented approach is strong in its access to complexity and historical specificity', which is important for our purposes. Thus we offer a crossnational biographically matched pairs of the data through 4 case studies of 8 women in different career phases. The remainder of the interviews and the focus groups that are part of the data gathering and analysis are reported elsewhere (Jyrkinen, 2011; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2010).

From the rich data we concentrate here on two interlinked topics, namely age as factor in the careers of women managers and the impact of care responsibilities; and the effects of sexualisation of the workplaces (bodies and looks). We analyse these topics through mini-case studies of four biographically matched pairs of women managers in their 30s, 40s, 50s

and 60s in Scotland and Finland. Biographical matching of the eight women managers was done on the basis of age, family situation and position/sector (Table 1). In other words, the sample was selected purposefully, not just to address issues of sensitivity but also to allow for pairing by matching women managers of a similar age and socioeconomic situation (see Crompton, 2001). The crossnational pairs 'illustrate particular examples of comparative reasoning', which are interpreted in the macrolevel contrast of contexts (Crompton 2001: 179, 177).

- Table 1 -

A limitation of this research is, as with any qualitative project, its restricted scope, and therefore it is not possible to make empirical generalisations (Mason, 2002). As researchers we note that the strength of our approach is the depth and complexity of the data, which allows us to explore women's experiences through pairing and in some biographical detail. A key strength of our project is that many interviewees said they talked openly about these issues for the first time. Further, we could analyse patterns related to age, gender and gendered ageism that are both similar and sometimes different in the two countries.

Gender, Age(ism) and Careers

Management, age and care responsibilities

Relatively few women access the upper echelons of management and leadership in Finland and Scotland. Exclusion from career development often takes place through subtle and hidden processes of discrimination (Husu, 2001). More direct gender-based discrimination in recruitment, promotion and remuneration was reported, as was the case with the pair of women in their 40s.

I was replaced by a male who was about the same age (--). [already after his recruitment] he was being paid more than I when I left that job. (Fay, Scotland, 47)

I felt that I did not get the job because I am a woman. (Tina, Finland, 45)

Gender discrimination did not emerge only in actions taken by men. In Tina's case the decision by the employer not to recruit her was, according to her own interpretation, because the women colleague 'did not want a [woman as her] competitor'. The recruitment process was highly interesting, because the eventual decision was made by the male leader, who gave informal notice that the reason for not hiring Tina was actually the other woman; the position was given to a man who rated as the second best candidate. Tina never made an official complaint of gender discrimination. Tina's career has been successful in other companies but some years on she still had strong feelings about this process. In Fay's case, her memories of unfair, discriminatory processes have followed her, but she has turned them into positive energy, and changed her work career.

I had never forgiven him [for replacing her with a man] (--). That upset me, but you move on. (--). You know, anger is such a waste of energy, we have to move on. (Fay, Scotland, 47)

Younger age posed a hurdle for the managerial career of women in both national contexts. Many of the women managers recounted age-based discrimination in earlier stages of their careers. This took subtle forms, such as nonchalance because of young age, as these quotes from the pair of women in their 30s illustrate:

You are not necessarily taken seriously, because you are a young woman. Sometimes it is just because you are young, sometimes it is because you are not a man, and sometimes it is both. (Alice, Scotland, 35)

Afterwards [after the recruitment process] it became clear that I was 'too young'. (--) Maybe this [incident] changed me somehow. (--) But when thinking about recent times, head-hunters seem to be active now and when they contact me it feels that I have done some right things at some phases. And, probably this age seems to be interesting [for employers] (Susan, Finland, 33)

Also women in the other age groups reported having had difficulties when younger than their co-workers and superiors, such as being undermined and colliding with older colleagues. There are, however, clear cultural differences between the two countries, one being the politeness in English-speaking and/or British society in contrast to the 'brutal' way of Finnish culture, also in bringing up the incidences of gendered and ageist behaviours into the fore.

The quote below by Tina gives an example of the 'tyttöily' phenomenon, that of calling and treating adult woman as 'girls' in a derogatory ways. As such, 'tyttö', or 'girl', is used to, for example, when referring to a woman who is interpreted to be without total power of herself; it can sometimes be (even) 'benignly-used' reference made by older men about women, i.e. to infantilise women (in leisure time, such as 'How are you girls doing tonight?'). In work contexts, 'tyttöily' is a gender and age based derogatory wording which also often is attached to discriminatory actions (Martin, 2006: 257).

In the [previous company] there were men in the executive group who were 57 years of age, who were then moved under my supervision, and were left out of the executive group then. And of course, there was some kind of friction there, when there is a so called 'young woman' in her 40s as their boss, such as 'this is not the way it should be'. Well, there then was this kind of undermining because of sex and age [in Finnish, 'tyttöily'] (--). (Tina, Finland, 45)

But there were people who were of the [older] generation that couldn't see what I could see. Interesting. (Fay, Scotland, 47)

There is a paradox of young age: women without children in their 30s may be of interest to employers because of the 'young talent'; at the same time, their age poses a 'threat' – having children is deemed to cause women long periods of absence from work. Care in both countries, having family, or even the possibility making a family can pose obstacles in careers.

If I hadn't had a family [one child] I would have [advanced] to be in a powerful position now. (--) I couldn't even get to the next [stage] in there [the recruitment process] because of my age and the fact that I had been married for, you know, two

years. (--) I was at [totally different work] for about ten years, but I chose to do that because it was important for me to be with my daughter. (Fay, Scotland, 47)

I would probably [in a different life situation and] have gotten myself onto board positions (--) but for purely personal reasons I have not done that, I have thought that these duties are enough for me. (--) But when the children grow older and if I am still in this company, well maybe then I might consider putting my foot in the door (--) Another option that I have thought about is that after these seven years in this company to slowly start looking at other [workplaces] before I turn 50. (--) One of the parents has to be the main person to make a career. To have children, in my opinion, means that the one person has to somewhat give up [her] career. (--) I am the one who runs the everyday life of the family. (Tina, Finland, 45)

The women in their 40s whose spouses travelled a lot were the main caretakers in their families, much like single parents. They were very decisive in, and passionate about, their work, but had decided to 'put the family first' for a while when their child/ren were very young. Their family arrangements and values were relatively traditional thus far, but in the future their work competences could be freed up for more demanding positions. The pool of women managers whose children are older offers a potential for employers: however, gendered ageism is prevalent and 'ageing' impacts women and men's careers differently. The 'optimal' time for women managers seems to be relatively short, somewhere between 40 and 50 years of age, as stated by Cornelia who has long career experience:

And then maybe you [a woman] are ok from about 40 to, I don't know, 45 or maybe 50, but then from 50 on you are seen as, you know, someone in the older category who is approaching retirement. (--) The organisations are structured in a way that many people don't even see that these structures are, you know, sexist and ageist. (Cornelia, Scotland, 67)

[In my earlier job], it was really so that one needed to hide the pregnancy, which is as such really silly. (--) [During earlier phase of current work] when I was looking much younger and was slimmer, often the encounters [with clients] included an attitude of 'why does this young girl come to talk to us as if she knew better?' (--) Well, I am not sure if this is the best age but it is the best phase of life, because one has knowledge and multifaceted experience, and I have also sometimes even said aloud that I wish that I would have had the knowledge and skills twenty years ago! (Phyllis, Finland, 60)

Care in work contexts was highly evident: younger interviewees emphasised that they were keen to learn from more experienced women managers and sought informal discussions and networking. Older women in both countries mentored and supported younger colleagues and subordinates. Thus care has an important meaning within the whole of managerial work which is not necessarily acknowledged.

We say that we value these skills of care that women have who have brought up a family, but then we don't do anything to care for them as individuals, to help them flourish in the work place. (Fay, Scotland, 47)

One [foreign] women student contacted us, and she was working for this company a couple of summers ago, and did her thesis in our company. Then she was working here and I was mentoring her, helping her [at that time]. Now I have a feeling that she will apply for a [permanent] job in our company. (Tina, Finland, 45)

Women of the younger generations can be in better positions than those in older ones because of changes taken place in organisations and societies, however slow they have been. More experienced women managers were concerned about younger women's possibilities to advance in their careers, and brought the issue of glass ceiling to the fore.

I am a feminist, but a lot of younger won't say that because they don't identify with it, people think that it's a, you know, something from the past because they don't face exactly the same discrimination. If they are not careful, you know, they will, of course, there is a lot of hidden discrimination that sort of goes by other names. You just have to look at the structure of organisations and there are very few women at the top, I mean, the whole thing about the glass ceiling is there. (Cornelia, Scotland, 67)

But in younger generations of women I think that they dare better to bring [their competence] to the fore. I think that a bit older generations [of women] uphold more the misunderstood proverb 'modesty graces'. That should not mean self-deprecation. (--) For instance, in the training of managers these issues [gender and age] come up, and many trainees ponder about these because it often feels that one bumps one's head on the glass ceiling. (Phyllis, Finland, 60)

To summarise, the women managers in Scotland and Finland had experienced hidden and sometimes rather overt discrimination on the basis of their gender and age. This often linked with real or hypothetical care responsibilities, which employers almost automatically interpreted as gender coded.

Sexualised workplaces: Bodies and looks

The physical aspects of health and age(ing) in worklife have been widely researched in social gerontology and other related disciplines. Less focus has been given to corporeality as embodiment(s), gender and age in organisations and managerial careers, although many late modern cultures strongly value 'beauty' as part of one's personal and social capital. Age and power imbalance play an important role in gender discrimination and sexual harassment: the perpetrator is often of a more senior age and position than the victim, which easily discourages the victim from making official complaints because of fears of negative consequences. The youngest women managers had encountered sexually explicit language which they interpreted as improper but not 'serious enough' for a formal complaint.

I have come [into] two occasions where I have had, I think, sexually explicit language and which was hugely inappropriate. (Alice, Scotland, 35)

I have gotten comments that relate to my sex. But maybe this person wanted to say this with a positive meaning, and then he had been drinking, well, he was affected by alcohol. But let's put it this way that those comments were such that they cannot stand daylight. But, I did not, however, find them [too] oppressive. But he would not had told these kinds of things to any man, so in this sense, this was related to gender. (Susan, Finland, 33)

In Susan's case, the situation took place at a get together after an executive group meeting, and she explained it has being due to alcohol use. This is a traditional 'explanation' for other forms of gender-based violence/violences in Finland, yet criticized by many feminist and pro-feminist scholars (e.g. Ronkainen, 2001). There are differences between Scotland and Finland in how sexual harassment is tackled: in Finland, actual support and help is often 'non-gendered'; by contrast, in Scotland services are often provided for women by women, so talking about and managing harassment, ironically, becomes a female activity. In Alice's case, she had taken the issue up with her superior, but they had 'agreed that we won't take it further'. She felt the incidences were related to age and gender, and were much rooted in generational issues.

Yeah, that behaviour is to be called as older man's [behaviour], such as [of] the fifties' generations. (--) I think they did realise, they knew what they were saying, they knew that it was inappropriate, but they just thought they could say anything. (Alice, Scotland, 35)

In both countries, experiences of sexualised comments and/or harassment were not limited only to the younger women but experienced by women in all age groups. Sexualised beauty standards seem to be very present in worklife. Lookism reconstructs current and future forms of aesthetic labour and gendered ageism in organisation (see Warhurst et al., 2009). Woman managers felt pressures to stay 'always young' or 'ageless'. They often had to tolerate implicit and explicit sexism from their male colleagues in order to maintain work relations and membership in the work community.

Going away [for a] three week course (--) there were 21 men and me. (--) It was absolutely incredible the behaviour of some of these guys who were away from home from their wives [saying that] 'do me a [sexual] favour, because you are alone' (--). There was a lot of innuendo; in fact one of the mornings there was a pair of ladies' knickers hanging outside on the handle of a door. (Megan, Scotland, 58)

Now they have hired young pretty women there as secretaries and in other positions. (--) It is also a question of age, because a woman is good [as a colleague] only when she is young and pretty and is capable of doing [only] what they [men] demand. (--) The outside world poses expectations [for women] to be slim and well groomed and all those kinds of issues in order to succeed [in worklife]. (Sara, Finland, 56)

A common feature was also that even obvious sexual harassment experienced by women managers was left formally unreported because of the fear of reprisal and getting a 'bad name'. Non-reporting is understandable in the context of individual women, but it has the quite serious consequence of giving a signal that sexism and sexual harassment of workers is tolerated. If women managers do not dare to pursue sexual harassment cases, how can workers in lower hierarchical level positions do so?

Paradoxically, sexualisation in workplaces may be a process by which some senior women managers may avoid being sexually objectified, but at the same time become 'invisible' in formal contexts, as was related by Cornelia. In contrast, Phyllis reported that age has not discouraged sexualised comments directed at her on work contexts.

It came to me as a bit of a shock when I got older, because I noticed that people paid less attention to me and I thought (--) this is different sexist [behaviour] (Cornelia, Scotland, 67)

In feedback from the first session [concerning development of skills], a man wrote that ‘Could you put seam stockings on for the next meeting?’ Seam stocking can obviously be very beautiful, but it really crossed my mind that next time I will on purpose put on thick woollen socks! But I have to admit that it demanded quite a lot of self-discipline and guts to meet this person like nothing had happened. (Phyllis, Finland, 60)

As the narratives illustrate, the intersections of gender and age discrimination take many forms, not the least of which is sexual harassment. In both national contexts women were reluctant to report sexualised forms of improper behaviour. This relates to the continued ‘hidden’ nature and covert practices of gendering and sexualisation of bodies in workplaces, and the underdeveloped organisational policies and practices in both countries.

Concluding Comments

Postindustrial societies are encountering challenges that result from the demographic changes and the successes they have had in increasing participation in the workforce, not least among women. While women’s participation in management is increasing, there is only a slow rise in the numbers of women in top positions, which reinforces gendering processes in organisations. In work organisations women’s self-presentations and bodies are subject to gendered ageism even at early stages of their careers, and the amount increases while the character of the gendered ageism changes.

In this article we have used biographically matched pairs of interviewees in a crossnational exploration of Scotland and Finland. We have addressed some of the similarities and differences between these two EU countries, and reflected these through the micro-level experiences and perceptions of women managers – the problems were not that different. In other words, even though Finland and Scotland/UK represent countries with differences in welfare regime, culture and legislation, our data demonstrate a similarity of experience among women managers in relation to their careers. These include overt and covert gender discrimination and gendered ageism which build up career obstacles for women in management.

Care responsibilities continue to be undertaken largely by women in both countries, which participants felt to impact strongly on potential career advancement. A major contrast is that women in Scotland/UK work part-time more often than in Finland. Patterns of work relate to childcare provisions which affect the careers of women managers especially in their early and mid career phases. Despite government, trade union and business initiatives to the contrary, the dominant business culture in the UK/Scotland can be described as ‘globalised forms of work’ with long working hours and relatively inflexible work patterns. The trend and culture of long-hourism and ‘presentism’ discourages some women (and men) who want to both work and raise a family (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2008). In Finland a wider range of flexible work arrangements in contractual arrangements other than part-time are more evident and accepted, for example, compressed hours, telecommuting and seasonal changes to working patterns. In Scotland these sorts of policies and arrangements remain relatively new. One major issue that needs more research is the possibility to re-organise

managerial work in more flexible ways: part-time work does not necessarily mean less commitment to the company/organisation, but currently is interpreted as such.

Questions of gender, age and ageing in worklife reflect and highlight contradictions in management and leadership. Managers are expected to have experience and knowledge, supposed to come with age. Knowledge is, however, often naturally associated with older men, who do not necessarily suffer drawbacks from getting older and being older looking, but rather the opposite. On the other hand, women are interpreted to be 'old' already rather early, sometimes when they are just over 40 years of age. Older women's knowledge is not necessarily valued in the same way as that of their male counterparts – a patriarchal value system tends to exclude 'old people' when they are women. Looks/ism and embodiment are increasingly important factors and particular concerns for women. These trends are part of gendered processes but very seldom talked about in recruitment or promotion processes. Gendered ageism seems to be a phenomenon that tackles women in management in both countries. Women managers in different ages had encountered sexualised and aesthetic demands that affect their worklife. At the same time, one of our main findings and results is that women managers at more senior age, often 40 plus or in their 50s could offer potential intellectual capital for business and other organisations. Yet women felt many organisations were not aware of this nor ready to take advantage of this pool of expertise.

Indirect and direct discrimination was strongly apparent in the interview narratives – most of the women fought hard to get their opinions taken into account, especially when they were young. There is a paradox about young age and management: women without children in their 30s may be of interest to employers because of the 'young talent' which is appreciated in many sectors of worklife. Yet young age poses a 'threat', because having children is deemed to cause women long periods of absence from work. Care is gender coded in both countries, and having family or even the possibility of making a family can pose obstacles in careers. The careers of very young women seem to suffer from the 'threat' of getting pregnant, whereas once women reach their 40s, they risk being 'too old', unattractive, emotional and menopausal. When ageing, a woman can be in triple jeopardy because of her gender, age and looks (Granleese and Sayer 2005), whereas men's social positions have the potential to improve when they become older.

Through the biographical pairing we have illustrated that women managers' careers are often kaleidoscopic (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Women actively and continuously educate themselves and search for new challenges. In spite of serious problems caused by gendered ageism in women managers' lives, age and ageing can also be positive aspects: care responsibilities often lessen when children grow older, and therefore women in their mid-careers offer a huge reserve of knowledge and are a work resource for organisations. Advancing age often means gaining more experience and self-confidence and thus more freedom and space. Gendered ageism is a problem which organisations and political decision-makers need to recognise and address. In addition, researchers and policy-makers need to consider how women's intergenerational knowledge could be better used in organisations. There is a need for a recognition in companies and society of gendered ageism and a willingness to tackle the potential loss of talent and expertise. The investments already made by societies in the education of women must be fully incorporated into the building of international compatibility in the EU. Likewise the potential for women to achieve financial independence and secure a future in retirement cannot continue to be undermined by the intersectionalities of age, gender and 'lookism'.

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Table 1. Biographically matching pairs

Age	Scotland	Finland
30s	Alice, 35, married, no children, senior manager in business, university degree, no current care responsibilities.	Susan, 33, co-habiting, no children (son of spouse visiting every second weekend), HR manager in business, BAA degree and ongoing training, in the near future care responsibility for father.
40s	Fay, 47, married, one child, manager of own business, university degree, many care responsibilities because husband travels a lot.	Tina, 45, married, 2 children, senior manager in business, university degree, many care responsibilities because husband travels a lot.
50s	Megan, 58, divorced, no children, senior manager in NGO, university degree, major part of career in male dominated areas, first woman top manager in earlier work in large company and CEO of current organisation.	Sara, 56, divorced, one child, manager of own business, ex-leader of a company, active in NGOs, college degree and professional training, major part of career in male dominated areas.
60s	Cornelia, 67, married, 4 children, manager and expert position in education sector, university degree, active in NGOS.	Phyllis, 60, (re)married, 3 children, manager of own business and expert position in education sector, university degree, active in NGOs.

ⁱ In Scotland, social security including maternity rights is a UK responsibility, although other welfare services are the responsibility of the Scottish Government.

ⁱⁱ The comparison of the Scottish figures on gender pay gap with those of the European Commission is not totally unambiguous as there are differences in data analysis and reporting.

ⁱⁱⁱ In writing up, we have deliberately chosen to use the term ‘manager’ when referring to the interviewees’ positions, instead of specifying their position such as ‘leader’ or ‘top manager’ in order to avoid recognisability.

^{iv} The interview recordings were anonymised before the transcribing. An agreement of confidentiality was made with the transcriber.

^v In this paper we have limited our focus on general themes related to age, gender and gendered ageism, and will report e.g. possibilities of and challenges for organisational policies and practices in other articles.