



Organizações & Sociedade Journal

2022, 29(100), 151-176

© Authors 2022

DOI 10.1590/1984-92302022v29n0006EN

ISSN 1984-9230

www.revistaoes.ufba.br

NPGA, School of Management

Federal University of Bahia

Associate Editor:

Cintia Rodrigues

Received: 04/15/2021

Accepted: 20/10/2021

Executive Women and their Bodies: Marks of Aging

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Abstract

The present article regards executive women and their aged bodies. The population aging phenomenon and old age feminization are global factors. Based on the literature about the socio-hierarchized body, white, thin, male bodies are privileged in organizations. The aim of the present study is to investigate how executive women experience their aged bodies within the organizational context. The discussion emerges as relevant, since there are few studies related to aging women; studies on body-related factors are even scarcer, a fact that shines light on a theoretical gap. In total, twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with women in the age group 40 years, or older, who act or had acted in several market segments in the country. The research allowed concluding that, in addition to challenges, choices and doubts faced on a daily basis throughout their professional journey, women have to live with a body-under-decay process, a heavy, tired, slow, stiff, limiting and less-attractive-to-the-eye body. The present study has revealed that besides gender, age also matters in organizations, nowadays. The bodies of older women are less valued and seem to have to occupy underprivileged positions in social hierarchy. In order to mitigate losses, women seek aesthetic procedures, change their eating habits and exercise to disguise the aging process.

Keywords: woman; aging; ageism; body; looks.

Introduction

Population aging is a global phenomenon that takes place at quick pace in all countries worldwide (Dardengo & Mafra, 2019); therefore, it must be analyzed by companies and society (Lawrence, 1988; 1996). Data points out that the fraction of the population in the age group close to, or older than, 50 years is the one that will remain growing by 2025 (Wong & Carvalho, 2006).

The population-aging process in Brazil has been accelerated and is closely related to labor force aging (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017). Litvak (2019), by taking into account the Brazilian population, states that its peak will be reached within approximately 25 years. Thus, the age issue gains relevance in the world of corporations, because age is an important factor for executives; when it comes to women, such an importance is outstanding, if one takes into consideration the phenomenon known as aging feminization (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2020; Sakura, 2016). Such a phenomenon is a complex and multi-faceted process that exceeds the quantitative aspects related to a larger number of elderly individuals, since women face greater barriers at the insertion, maintenance and progression of their careers due to gender- and age-related prejudice (Cepellos, 2021). Accordingly, companies need to get prepared to the aging issue, which is becoming a trend, mainly if we keep in mind the aged female labor force.

Despite the importance of the sociodemographic context, there are few studies associated with aging women in organizational research (Ford, Atkinson, Harding, & Collinson, 2021; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012; Still & Timms, 1998); the ones related to the bodies of executive women are yet scarcer, and it highlights a theoretical gap. One of the studies carried out by Carvalho Neto, Tanure and Andrade (2010) concerned the perception by executive women who have accomplished high-level hierarchical positions; 69% of this group comprised younger women, up to their forty's. The aim of the present article is to approach a part of this population that has been poorly assessed, namely: women in the age group forty years, or older, and the body implications experienced by them. Furthermore, the research on executive women is a relevant topic, since women fulfil only 33.1% of all job positions – this rate drops to 13.7% when executive positions come to the scene (Gontijo & Melo, 2017). Reaching executive positions is not the only barriers faced by women. They also face personal and/or professional inquires, dilemmas, insecurity and fear, on a daily basis. Although women have been conquering some ascension in the labor market overtime, they still face obstacles in their daily lives, since a considerable part of organizations rely on masculine values. Thus, when women get to executive positions, besides proving their competence, they must face challenges linked to the masculine corporative environment (Reis et al., 2018).

Despite the shortage of studies on the bodies of aged executive women, the topic emerges as relevant, since older women think more about their shape and body looks than men (Ferraro et al., 2008). When body is taken within the labor context, organizations tend to minimize the effects of it, by ignoring it (Beatty, 2007). While organizations' ideology seeks to neutralize bodies of any kind, or to make them invisible, the unique features of women's bodies make it especially hard to ignore the corporeity factor. This process takes place because women are often valorized by men due to their beauty, which is associated with youth and to reproduction features (Beatty). However, what happens when this body ages? According to Goldenberg (2012), the body can emerge as an essential path to social ascension and to professional growth in the labor market. When it comes to older women, the body reflects the aging process, and it accounts for insecurity

and fear, since women can suffer with prejudice in the work environment, even in a disguised way. Therefore, we can think that older women face several challenges due to their aged bodies.

Given such an understanding, the aim of the present study was to answer the following research question: How do executive women experience their aged bodies within the organizational context? In order to do so, twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with women in the age group forty years, or older, who act or had acted in several market segments in the country. Data were analyzed based on the content analysis by Bardin (2016), through the thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Next, the theoretical reference will be introduced, and it will approach topics such as ageism and body in organizational studies. Subsequently, the methodological procedures will be introduced, as well as the analyses and data discussion; at the end of the article, one will find the study's final considerations.

Ageism and women: the looks and other matters

Prejudice towards older adults is called ageism. This term was mentioned for the first time by Robert Butler – gerontologist and researcher – in the late 1960s. Butler (1989) states that ageism concerns all and any action involving intolerance towards an individual due to its age. The ageism topic is a recent concern of the national academia and it is treated in a multidisciplinary way, mostly by the psychology and demography, geriatrics and communication fields; it is little assessed by the business field, a fact that highlights the need of performing further studies on this subject (Helal & Viana, 2021).

Ageism is also linked to stereotypes connected to older professionals. Loth and Silveira (2014) have identified three categories of perception about this topic: stereotypical perceptions of oneself, of others and of young individuals. As for the perception of oneself, it was possible observing positive aspects such as greater experience and knowledge, greater expertise, reliability, among others. With regards to the perception of others, it was possible seeing some negative aspects, such as obsolescence and resistance to changes, lack of skills, lower dynamism, among others. The perception by older professionals about the younger ones is more positive due to their technological skills and vital energy, a fact that reinforces the continuity of ageism towards the older ones. This process is perpetuated by older individuals themselves. Scholars have highlighted that the older age must be seen as a moment for continuation, rather than necessarily a time of ending and illness (Silva & Helal, 2019).

Ageism in organizations reflects what society thinks about older individuals (Dennis & Thomas, 2007) and this perception is reinforced by the strong presence of younger individuals in the labor market (Cepellos, 2013), a factor that influences the absorption of older manpower by the market (Goldani, 2010).

Organizations must play the role of fighting ageism by creating opportunities to older workers in the labor Market, since they can help with their knowledge and expertise, as well as teach and guide younger workers (Silva & Helal, 2019). However, it is not what has been happening in Brazilian organizations that have been shortly investing in the fight against prejudice and discrimination towards older individuals. This behavior facilitates the application of ageist

practices (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017). Goldani (2010) states that acknowledging age prejudice as an issue is the first step to rule it out; consequently, it is essential choosing a method to fight it. In order to better understand ageism in organizations, França, Siqueira-Brito, Valentini, Vasques-Menezes, & Torres (2017) elaborated and validated a pioneer instrument in the country, the so-called Ageism Scale at Organizational Context, also known as EACO (Escala de Ageísmo no Contexto Organizacional). This instrument is used to measure ageism in organizational context, since it can help the Human Resources sector to fight this prejudice and to develop policies to prolong the labor life of older professionals.

Ageism makes the orientation of activities among people in different age groups difficult. In order to mitigate the existing barriers, companies must promote projects encompassing intergenerational teams, since, assumingly, organizations benefit from substantiated and consistent works that link collaboration and the expertise of older employees to the technological advancements absorbed by the younger ones (Lawrence, 1988). Fight against ageism and the adoption of strategies to make integration easier by means of intergenerational teams could lead to satisfactory interpersonal experiences and contribute to the meaning given to the work performed by older professionals (Macêdo, Bendassolli, Torres, & França, 2020; Siqueira-Brito, França, & Valentini, 2016). Accordingly, organizations can count on paradigm and prejudice breaking (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017).

Women are the main victims of ageism (Duncan & Loretto, 2004), mainly in the labor context, since men at older ages are more valued than women (Barrett & Naiman-Sessions, 2016). According to Jyrkinen & McKie (2012), executive women feel pressured to be “always young”, they experience sexual harassment or sexual comments at work. Besides, knowledge is oftentimes related to older men, who do not necessarily suffer with the disadvantages of aging and of looking older. Furthermore, women are interpreted as “old” quite earlier in life, sometimes when they are still in their forty’s (Jykinen & McKie); they can face a hard time getting new positions in the labor market, as well as face barriers for their access to career formation and progression when they are over fifty (Moore, 2015). Thus, “age is potentially a double loss [for women]: they often suffer with age prejudice at younger ages than men” (Fineman, 2014, p. 1721).

Some women can suffer with exclusion because they do not present “the ideal professional shape” and it highlights the existing prejudice towards ones’ looks (Moore, 2015). When it comes to sexualization, it is possible observing that many older women can feel “invisible” at formal contexts (Jykinen & McKie, 2012). This statement is in line with the overall perception that women’s physical attractiveness decreases in comparison to men’s (Royal Society for Public Health & The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2018). Cecil, Pendry, Salvatore, Mycroft, & Kurz (2021) identified two main reasons to explain why older women have chosen to leave their hair grey: competence and authenticity. Although aiming at avoiding the perception of an older person, therefore, at avoiding “incompetence”, women feel authentic when they leave their hair grey. However, they have adopted other beauty practices to mitigate the effects of such a hair, and this behavior highlighted the conflict between the authentic look (subjective) and society’s perception about competence (Cecil et al., 2021). This perspective about older women tends to be reinforced by the cultural industry, which ends up limiting the ability to develop a diverse, and not ageist, cultural representation of female aging (Raisborough, Watkins, Connor, & Pitimson, 2021). One of

the points associated with ageism towards women is linked to the body, as shown in details in the next section.

Body in organizational studies: socio-hierarchized body

Flores-Pereira (2010) states that organizational studies have been presenting adaptations to knowledge generated in other research fields, such as Philosophy, by taking the human body as reference to analyze the organizational context. This author discusses the way through which the specific model of body (biological body) has been the main paradigm to build the organizational theory and practice. She also shows how a different concept of human body (social body and personal body) allows rethinking the business theory and practice.

Flores-Pereira (2010) states that it was from the study by Mauss (2003) on that the “body” subject started being built from a new discipline, rather from its simple biological perspective. The body started to be considered an object representing the society it lives in; it is also moored in a specific historical moment. The aforementioned author introduces the four lines of study concerning the body, namely: socio-symbolic body, socio-hierarchized body, socio-political body and personal body (embodiment). The current research was based on the socio-hierarchized body.

According to Flores-Pereira (2010), studies substantiated by the socio-hierarchized body advocate for “the argument that cultural groups attribute a social hierarchical order to bodies; based on this premise, they seek to politicize such a classification process” (p. 420). This study type has been promoting knowledge about social hierarchies, ethnic inequalities and power relationships by opening room to politicize such relationships. Accordingly, these studies problematize the traditional legitimation of the social to the detriment of the biological profile by screening the ways through which bodies have been used to prescribe social roles; therefore, they have been used in asymmetric power relationships. This research line is mainly approached by the symbolic anthropology current and gets some contributions from the post-structuralist perspectives.

The theoretical argument introduced by this line of thinking lies on the fact that the body is a symbol to problematize society’s hierarchical relationships. According to Flores-Pereira (2010), the idea lies on problematizing the trend of treating work positions as neutral and meritocratic institutions, as the bureaucratic rationality works hard to make one believe. Acker (1990) states that the organizational structure, for instance, is not neutral when it comes to gender, actually, it assumes a worker who, in fact, is a man. Thus, images of the male body and of masculinity are linked to organizational processes; it marginalizes women and contributes to maintain gender segregation in organizations.

Gatens (1996) agrees with the aforementioned statement and added to it by stating that the body of a neutral and universal “artificial man” is that assumingly calling the interest of organizations, namely: white, thin, disciplined and productive male body. According to Souza (2014), this body would allow a privileged place in “normality” and hegemony. Based on Fernandes and Barbosa (2016), just as there is a social order, there is a corporal order – and deviations in this order. The body order triggers and reveals the social order” (p. 73). According to these authors, body centrality becomes an instance of great power in the social game. This centrality is built from bodies that seek health maintenance (by appealing to its surveillance and self-care, based on healthy life styles, diets, among others), that are appropriate for image (virtual

body forged by image editors) and that are on the podium (athletic bodies inserted in a society that glorifies competition).

Trethewey (1999) analyzes how the organizational and gender discourses are literally written on women's body on such fashions that, most of the time, limit their professional identities. Based on this research, the professional body is a "fit" one; emits signs and messages through body behavior, no-verbal behavior and body performances (such as a text to be read); the body of the professional woman takes the position of an excessively sexual one. These three topics highlight how the bodies of professional women are normalized and made docile within organizational contexts.

When it comes to the ideal executive body, Meriläinen, Tienari, & Valtonen (2015) state that, besides the aesthetic matter ('fit' body), the senses and a sensory way of knowing remain as practice through which executive nominees are assessed by headhunters, who infer their opinions on nominees' agility and mobility skills based on their physical condition. Therefore, "to be fit" is extremely important for executives; the concept of "ideal executive", based on headhunters' work, is that linked to the capacity to reproduce a certain type of masculinity that works to keep power relationships in society regarding gender, age and skin color – a fact that accounts for the losses felt by those who are not in compliance with the "normal" standards. Thus, according to Flores-Pereira (2010), problematizing means the existence of gender/sex, aesthetic, skin color, specific body skills' expectations that, after all, represent the hierarchies of a larger society. Thus, the body is introduced as important fraction of the classification process; therefore, its presence in organizations must be politicized. However, what does really happen when it comes to the body of an older woman?

When the body is associated with aging, it embodies a supporting role, since it becomes the whistleblower of aging. The older age is undesirable to the extent that one may not recognize oneself in an old person; at early juvenile age this process is felt as an announced reality, although not yet in place (Domingues & Freitas, 2019). Moreover, humans are vulnerable to the socio-cultural pressure that reinforces the sense that body beauty is closely related to the looks, health and care, as response to a social standard (Fin, Portella, & Scortegagna, 2017). These authors have stated that leaving the body with its natural look, in Brazil, means carelessness, and such fact gains relevance when the person in question is overweight or old. Besides, the biological clock exerts even stronger pressure over motherhood, since it is likely observing motherhood time overlap due to the professional phase (Tanure, 2007). Similar condition is felt with menopause, which has cultural implications in women and triggers their concern with becoming less sexually desired (Steiner, 1973).

Methodological procedures

Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with women in the age group forty years, or older, who act or had acted in several segments of the labor market in the country. It was done in order to better understand how executive women experience their aging bodies within the organizational context. The age cut was set based on the aforementioned chronological age, because, assumingly, women at the age of forty years are already seen as old for the labor market (Cepellos, 2016). The used script counted on 25 questions; it was divided into two parts: the first one

aimed at collecting interviewees' characteristic data (age, marital status, number of children, formation, profession and work position) and the second part encompassed inquires related to prejudice towards women in the work environment, to aging, menopause, a body that ages, care with the body - which is essential from the time the body starts aging and to ones' looks.

Therefore, the present research is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews aimed at making changes in, or at refining, the main issue, based on the interviewees (Creswell, 2007).

The present researcher's contact network was used for participants' selection. It is important highlighting that the researcher in question is also a white, straight, cisgender executive woman from a privileged social class, and it led to the composition of a sample with women presenting features similar to her own. Women who occupied strategic leadership positions, who were still acting as so, and who were acting in large-sized companies in Brazil, or who were facing a transition process in their careers, in segments such as the pharmaceutical, electro-electronic, food, automotive, marketing, financial and legal sectors, among others, both in the public and private sectors, were considered eligible to the research (managerial positions, or higher ones). Accordingly, the five closest ones to the researcher were invited by her to participate, and the snowball sampling process was applied throughout the process. According to Sanchez and Nappo (2002), the first interviewees recommend others to join the sample, and so on.

The content analysis by Bardin (2016) was used as data analysis technique, based on the thematic analysis technique by Braun & Clarke (2006).

The idea was to perform one-on-one interviews in the best locations for interviewees, mainly in their work place, because, based on Creswell (2007), it would enable observing their behavior in details right where they perform their professional activity. However, due to the time the interviews were conducted at – April and May, 2020; in the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic -, interviews only lasted 33 minutes and were carried out through Zoom or Teams digital tools, depending on the interviewee's preference. These tools allow the researcher to carry out a one-on-one interview with the participants. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The criterion adopted to determine the number of conducted interviews was based on the saturation of topics that have emerged from the collected data. It was possible observing that some data presented higher frequency and greater importance during this process, due to their adherence to the study; later on, it has enabled using the analyses and contributions to the referred study. The thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) was the applied technique. Data analysis followed three different phases: (a) data familiarization - which took place during the interview and at interview's transcription; (b) codes' generation - codes were evidenced based on the frequency they were mentioned, on voice intonation, and on body and facial expressions; (c) definition of topics - by taking into account the adherence factors and complementarity to the present study.

Interviewees' profile can be seen in Table 1. Interviewees' names were kept classified in order to ensure their secrecy; therefore, they were replaced by nicknames.

Table 1
Interviewees' profile

Interviewees	Age	City of work	State	Skin color	Formation	Position
Marina	47	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Business	Marketing manager
Eduarda	50	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Law	Arbitrator of law
Virgínia	56	Caxias	Rio Grande do Sul	White	Psychology	HR Director
Valéria	51	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Food Engineering	Marketing Director
Carolina	47	São Paulo	São Paulo	Yellow	Business	Research consultant
Andréa	48	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Engineering	Institute Director
Jussara	50	Joinville	Santa Catarina	White	Social communication	Business woman
Ray	61	Porto Alegre	Rio Grande do Sul	White	Psychology	Career consultant
Stephanie	43	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Law	General Manager
Bárbara	55	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Communication Science	Commercial VP
Antônia	47	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Social communication	Operations Director
Ilma	47	Rio de Janeiro	Rio de Janeiro	White	Business	Marketing manager
Audrey	48	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Business	Career consultant
Raquel	48	São Paulo	São Paulo	Brown	Business	Researcher
Tatiane	48	Santa Catarina	Santa Catarina	White	Business	Director at the public sector
Úrsula	45	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Engineering	Marketing Director
Maria	48	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Psychology	HR Director
Camile	54	Santiago	Chile	Brown	Accounting	Former career transition executive
Elídia	53	São Paulo	São Paulo	White	Business	Marketing executive director
Fany	52	São Paulo	São Paulo	Black	Social communication	Rail Transport business manager

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Initial data familiarization started at the time of interviews, and it was implemented at transcription through notes highlighting narratives, voice intonations, body/facial expressions and insights that have emerged throughout the process. Moreover, the speech was highlighted to enable the gradual constriction of the analysis, in order to make it easier to later form groups based on topics and sub-topics - depending on the approached subject -, as well as to be flexible to the insertion of ideas and findings that have emerged over the interlocutions. The analysis enabled identifying thirty codes, of whom, 23 – which accounted for the largest number of citations and adherence to the research question - were selected and listed. These codes were prejudice, harassment, resignation, regret, culture, value and age. A body that ages, care with the body, plastic and other surgeries, using cosmetics and medication, the looks, youth, experience, old women, aging, knowledge, maturity, balance, biological clock, menopause, felt age, perceived age, future, were also addressed.

In order to define the topics, the following codes were taken into account, as well as the existing complementarity factors among them and the research question. It led to three topics that are closely related to executive women, namely: the experienced context, signs of aging and mitigation strategy. The topics were divided into sub-topics, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Topics and subtopics

Topics	Subtopics
Experienced context	Ageism
	Menopause
Signs of aging	Metabolism
	Illnesses
	Looks
Mitigation strategies	Care with the body

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Data analysis and discussion

Throughout this section, results' analysis and discussion will be addressed based on the topics (experienced context, signs of aging and mitigation strategies) and sub-topics (ageism, menopause, metabolism, illnesses, looks and care with the body) that have emerged from interviews, as shown in the previous section.

Experienced context

The first topic, called experienced context, introduces the ageism perceived by the interviewed executive women, mainly in their work environment.

Ageism

“I feel that, more than ever, age in the corporative world has caught me” (Virgínia, 56 years old). Based on the interviews, it was possible assessing ageism; in other words, prejudice towards age, which is linked to the fact of being a woman – this is part of contexts experienced by women participating in the research. When they were asked about the existence, or not, of prejudice, on a daily basis, they were emphatic in stating its true existence. According to their answers, it was possible observing that, besides feeling insecure because they work in ‘masculine’ environments, they also deal with prejudice due to their age, as it can be seen in their speeches:

I believe so, there is prejudice towards older women, as for the company I work in, age is somehow a barrier, because I see that they long to form new leaders, and after you turn fifty, you will no longer be prepared for a future leadership. You no longer fit the age group they want for new leaders to the future. (Valéria, 51 years old, 2020)

I am leaving the company in the next few months and I believe that one of the main reasons for it is because, according to the company I work in nowadays, I am old! It is so, because the company is new and, currently, I am the oldest executive in the company... I guess that factor age has got heavy lately. I realized, in the most recent years, that I am lesser approached in the market for new positions, I connect it to age. (Virgínia, 56 years old, 2020)

According to the literature, ageism is reinforced by the strong presence of young individuals in the labor market (Cepellos, 2013). Data in this research have shown that, along with the concept of young individuals in the market, companies seem to reinforce ageist practices, more than lacking investments in fighting professional discrimination towards older workers (Cepellos & Tonelli, 2017), since they are active producers of this prejudice. They prioritize the preparation of new young leaders, as observed in the words by Valéria, as well as dismiss older individuals, as observed in Virgínia’s speech.

Professional repositioning for women over fifty can be harder to observe. Oftentimes, when it happens, they step back in their careers, as it can be seen in interviewees’ speeches:

So I felt the hard time repositioning myself and, then, as I repositioned myself in a little lower position, I guess that it is why I got to do so. As I have the feeling that there is prejudice against older women, as much as we can look younger, the better... so, I guess that it somehow influenced the process, so I was accepted in a new position, but with a lower salary, so I could remain working. (Marina, 47 years old, 2020)

Last year, I had an interesting experience with a headhunter who told me: ‘if you want to be repositioned, you must speed up until you turn 49 years, because after 49, you will not be repositioned’. (Audrey, 48 years, 2020)

Therefore, we can observe how the social hierarchical order set for bodies and their classification (Flores-Pereira, 2010) also applies to the case of older women in the organizational context. These are bodies that tend to value less and that end up submitting to lower conditions in order to remain in the labor market. These lower conditions make the reaching of a power position by a woman even farther as they age. It is likely identifying the prescription of social roles (Flores-Pereira) attributed to older women. Organizations seem to have a hard time hiring these women for leadership positions, they make them leave the labor world or accept lower prestige positions. It is possible thinking that organizations more and more seek to “make [these bodies] invisible”, because they are less interesting and attractive to the labor world.

Briefly, prejudice towards older women is a factor that must be added to obstacles faced by women - who age on a daily basis. It is understood that, based on the labor market, women close to the age of fifty years can be considered old. Therefore, based on the interviews, not looking old is the way to minimize professional prejudice resulting from age. The next section will bring up reflections related to aging signs highlighted by the body that bring along challenges to women’s daily lives as executives.

Aging signs

The second topic, called aging signs, introduces the main body marks that report the aging process experienced by executive women, namely: menopause, metabolism, illnesses and looks. The sub-topics will be approached deeply, later on.

Menopause

“It has some impact on our energy. So, there are days when I am more tired, mainly, because I had a bad night of sleep... Your energy changes, you know? (Bárbara, 55 years old, 2020). Menopause is an important element related to the body of executive women. And it is linked to their aging process.

Besides facing daily challenges in companies, women often live with prejudice, with uncertainties about the feared menopause and the challenges it brings to the lives of most of them, as it can be seen in the speech by interviewees:

Getting to menopause made a huge difference in me, I changed from water to wine, even because it was so fast, to me. It was one day in, one day out, and never more, you know? That is how I picture that, tiredness, pain in the body, different hair, different nails, different skin and things will never get back. These are like marks. You wake up one day, look at yourself in the mirror and: man, it is marked, got it? It really marks this thing of the curve heading downwards. You do not sleep well, wake up in pain, tired, I feel the difference a lot. (Valéria, 51 years old, 2020)

Because of menopause, the skin gets extremely dry, you feel like you are all cracked up, then, I put lots of moisturizer and body oil on, and anti-aging face creams. Hair dying, you know, no grey hair, the hair needs hydration, I always took good care of my hair, my

body, my face, always. Oh, I also feel the hot flashes, these horrible flashes, it is permanent heat, I gets you from the neck and your face starts to burn. (Fany, 52 years old, 2020)

I feel a little of these changes like, in the hair, skin, but as soon as I got to menopause, I started to take hormone replacement... at the day I realized, in the following week, I started with the replacement, so I think I do not feel it: that unbearable heat, I got weight... then, I do not know the association between menopause and age but the hair changes, the skin changes, I guess that everything changes a little, you know? (Elídia, 53 years old, 2020)

Based on the speeches by Valéria, Fany and Elídia, it is possible noticing how menopause is an event capable of highlighting the aging process. Such a perception restates the concept that the body reports the age, as pointed out by Domingues and Freitas (2019). It makes the body different, drier, and more tired. Menopause seems to have its relevance in reporting the aging process based on the negative aspect of physical decay, as likely seen in the speech by Valéria, when she states that *“It really marks this thing of the curve heading downwards”*. As an attempt to stop the aging process, women use anti-aging products and seek to replace hormones in order to give back what is missing, it is possible arguing:

What would be wrong with the natural process of the body? What is the problem of a more tired body? According to Steiner (1973), menopause has cultural implications and the psychological change can be sudden and, sometimes, traumatic, because it is still associated with loss of the femininity symbol and women feel like they become less sexually desirable. Mori and Coelho (2004) also approach the vulnerability brought by menopause, since it influences the activities, emotions and experiences of different roles such as that as mother, wife, woman and worker. Although data reflect a personal implication of menopause, it is possible to problematize it based on the social perspective. Changes caused by the menopause seem to influence performance (bad sleep and tiredness) and image (dry skin and different nails), it makes the body less active and, consequently, less productive. Furthermore, the body can become less desirable; therefore, as pointed out by Jyrkinen and McKie (2012), *“invisible”*, in formal work contexts, because it gets less sexualized. Yet, it regards cultural implications and psychological changes that associate menopause with the loss of the femininity symbol and with women’s concern with becoming less sexually desirable (Steiner, 1973).

Briefly, no positive report was mentioned about menopause. Women headed their speeches to menopause’s impacts when they reported their experiences with it, such as fear, insomnia, dry skin and hair, lack of energy and sleep.

Metabolism

“Loosing weight is easier, getting a good night of sleep is harder, everything is harder, you know?” (Andrea, 48 years old, 2020). Metabolism change is one of the main complaints of women facing the aging process. Reports have pointed out that such a phase is not easily assimilated by

women. Besides tiredness, wrinkles, flaccidity and grey hair, these changes can also lead to lower performance and lower results, as shown in the speech below:

This is an interesting topic, right, we kind of realize about the changes, like the grey hair, you get more tired, you get aware that your body has changed, that menopause is on its way. Wrinkles and flaccidity, I used to exercise a little and I could observe the difference... now, I can exercise for three hours, but the muscles will never pump out, we get much slower. (Audrey, 48 years old, 2020)

Limits set by aging are faced with sadness: “Your memory is no longer the same, you cannot think as fast as you did before” (Ray, 61 years old, 2020):

It means total sadness. It really means a questioning. It is losing elasticity, it is wrinkles coming up: my God, everything is falling down, how is my hair now? It is hard. It is very hard when it comes to hormones, you know, is too much effort for small results, we exercise a lot, but nothing happens, you drink a little more, and the belly grows. I see there are more issues, more tiredness, more demands. (Tatiane, 48 years old, 2020)

When women talk about metabolism, they complain that it looks slower, that it is necessary making a lot of effort for small results, that everything gets harder and, finally, that they can have their memory compromised and that their reasoning gets slower. But, why is it so difficult to deal with an aged body? It is possible thinking that it is complex, because the decayed body seems not to perform in an efficient way. According to Meriläinen et al. (2015), based on the professional’s physical conditions, one can infer the skills and capacity to be fast and mobile. Thus, the body of older women seems to be far from the “ideal executive body” often desired by organizations. Based on this author, the “ideal executive” reproduces a masculinity type that works to keep power relationships in society in terms of gender, age and skin color. Therefore, notably, this concept takes older women farther from power within organizations.

The body can be taken as object to represent the society it lives in; simultaneously, it can be moored in a specific historical moment (Flores-Pereira, 2010), because most negative qualities are attributed to older individuals within a capitalist society such as that we live in (Nelson, 2005), since the body, at this time of life, no longer shows itself as that productive and fast – important values in the current context. Furthermore, interviews have confirmed that the aged body is flaccid, has a big belly and has a hard time getting muscles. Therefore, this body seems not to reach the expectations of a body that is interesting for organizations, namely: a thin (Gatens, 1996) and athletic body (Fernandes & Barbosa, 2016). Therefore, women at this time of life are quite far from the ideal body model expected to fill outstanding positions in organizations.

Briefly, metabolism is an aspect linked to the body of executive women, since it often seems slow, a fact that hinders weight maintenance and good-quality sleep. This process, though, oftentimes has strong impact on work performance.

Illnesses

“So, there are limitations, aging takes me away from opportunities” (Raquel, 48 years old, 2020). Besides the difficulties associated with slower metabolism, hormone changes and self-esteem issues, some interviewees also deal with stronger risk of living with diseases directly related to aging, such as worsened hearing, sight, sleep and memory. It regards a body vulnerable to illnesses, to unpleasant changes and to threats to its functionality, as one can see in the following speech: *“your body no longer responds the same way. We cannot work without glasses, the grey hair, so, you know, it gets hard”* (Marina, 47 years old, 2020).

By aging, some people feel a kind of disobedience of body control (Bullington, 2006), as one can observe in the speech by Marina, 47 years old (2020), when she says: *“your body does not respond the same way I did before”; or, yet: “For example, I do not have, today, the necessary concentration to learn about a tool of something, as I had before, I am not able to”* (Valéria, 51 years old, 2020).

You have a share there, and it will be a little square of the illness itself, which is age, you will have it, maybe, little moves, you can have a memory disorder. So, what you have left is very little, then you feel the pressure, like, you have to decide what you will do. (Tatiane, 48 years old, 2020)

According to Heikkinen (2000), variability is the main body feature; in other words, the propensity to change and aging is a variability experience, because individuals start to feel that their relationship with the world is no longer natural and harmonious. What used to be a natural part of “self” seems to be a new experience, which can lead to anxiety, fear and insecurity (Nilsson, Aarvimäki, & Ekman, 2000). One can observe, in Valéria’s speech, how aging “is a punch”, and it shows how it can be experienced as a shock for individuals. Aging, for some women, is a burden that comes along with prejudice, physical limitations and look-related issues:

In my opinion, aging means body, sight and hearing decay. If I want to get the most information possible, I have to be close to certain right locations. See, it is not my cognition, it is my physical shape. (Raquel, 48 years old, 2020)

But, why does aging show up so negative for the interviewees? Women talk about the likelihood of having memory, mobility, concentration, information gathering issues during the aging process, and it can account for losses in their lives. Such a process can be linked to the fact that human beings can be put at service of economy and production by generating a producer body that, therefore, needs to be healthy in order to achieve higher yield (Fernandes & Barbosa, 2016). Accordingly, a body more vulnerable to illnesses, and lesser under control by itself, seems to be a lesser valuable body in our society.

Therefore, based on interviewees’ speeches, it was possible observing the experience of women presenting aging-related illnesses, such as hearing, sight and concentration issues. Aging

seems to be exclusively associated with body decay, with physical limitations that highlight the restriction to possibilities observed by women.

The looks

“I do not want people to look at me and say: ‘This cougar lady’, and then label me, got it? (Valéria, 51 years old, 2020). The looks play relevant role in women’s lives; according to them, they are the reflex of what they are, if they are not well-resolved with themselves, if they are secure, they are their image, as one can picture in some speeches shown throughout this section: “I think it is kind of a cliché, but I think it really has some influence. I do not even like to think about it, but we get caught by it... For example, my husband is very annoyed with my grey hair” (Virgínia, 56 years old, 2020).

Notably, the looks – reflected on the fact of having grey hair -, based on Virgínia’s speech, is something that can influence the aging experience of executive women. This same excerpt shows that grey hair has implications in personal life, since it does not match social expectations (Fin, Portella, Scortegagna, & Frighetto, 2015) and forces the interviewee, herself, to present her hard time dealing with this factor when she states that she does not like “to think about it”. Other speeches point out that the pressure because of the looks is not just felt at personal scope, but also in the corporative universe. Whenever women do not fit the social expectations, they can suffer with ‘lookism’, which is a kind of prejudice linked to the looks (Kramkowska, 2019), mainly at work environment scope:

It is terrible to say so, but I think, yes, I guess the look makes the difference, yes. Because, still, this corporative world has pre-established concepts, people pay attention to it, so, the way you are dressed, the way you behave. (Elídia, 53 years old, 2020)

When we are at an older age, like, I think the look shows off that sense of well-resolved person, you know? That the person is in its age, but that it is well, it is, I don’t know, dressing fashion clothes or well-treated: I am still here, yet, got it? (Tatiane, 48 years old, 2020)

Based on some interviewees, the organizational context has “pre-established concepts”, i.e., expected concepts regarding the looks, as one sees in the speech by Elídia; accordingly, the looks seem to validate professionals’ existence, mainly of the older ones, in organizations. The speech by Tatiane expresses such a sense, when she says that the looks are important, because they show off that “you are at your age, but you look good”; in other worlds, the looks end up compensating the older age.

Women have to always be well-dressed, their hair must be well-brushed, they must look good, because, if someday... we are not willing to dry our hair everyday, to put make up on, do whatever... but if we do not do it, we end up hearing comments, it has happned to

me, I heard: 'Gee, how long since you last cleaned your nails?' (Marina, 47 years old, 2020)

Pressure for good looks seems to reach women strongly. According to Mariana's speech, whenever it does not happen, women take the risk of hearing unpleasant comments. Based on Kramkowska (2019), the body is ruled by the sense of being a window that, when comes to the female gender, makes physical attractiveness essential. It is even more worrisome when women report to feel constantly surveilled by their looks, be it through the way they are dressed, behave or through their grey hair. Such an experience reflects how the body of older women is normalized and made docile within the organizational context, a fact that limits their professional identity (Trethewey, 1999).

Data have pointed out that the looks are a set of features that show whether women are still active, even when they are undergoing the aging process. Based on some scholars, women's body beauty is associated with what is judged as pleasant to see and feel (Fin et al., 2017). Notably, executive women at the aging process tend to seek "visibility" within the organization environment from having a jovial look, which is expected and desired by members in the organization. This is the only way for women to show that they are still "alive" - as the word used by one of the interviewees - and to remain acknowledged as professionals. Thus, the looks are beyond that aesthetic issue, since they reflect vivacity, presence, willingness, availability to go on working.

Briefly, according to women under the aging process, the looks are extremely important, since they exceed the aesthetics and are related to women's psyche. It is possible observing a social pressure related to these women's looks and they feel the need of avoiding grey hair, of not having their nails cleaned, of wearing inappropriate clothes. The control over their image is clear, both at personal and professional scope.

Mitigation strategy

The third topic, called mitigation strategy, introduces the main care with the body interviewed women adopt in order to deal with the aging process.

Body care

You just go adding one more role to life, you know? But, yet, you still only have the 24 hours that everybody else has. So, along the very physiological challenge you face to keep the balance of things, everything is harder, you know? (Andrea, 48 years old, 2020)

In order to deal with the undesired effects of aging, as shown throughout this section, the interviewed women seek mitigation strategies, as one can observe in the presented speeches:

You have to sleep better to have a better look, so you will not have the face of a tired person, we have to take much care of ourselves, we have to go to the beauty saloon more often, we have to get better dressed. We can feel that the market has demands, like, that person quited itself, you know? (Tatiane, 48 years old, 2020)

The speech by Tatiane expresses the need of taking care of one's own image, since the market demands a person to do not "look tired"; therefore, women are more pressured to go to the beauty saloon and to get better dressed, for instance. On the other hand, women can pass the image of someone who has "quited herself", i.e., who has given up, mainly, who is no longer in the labor market. Findings have confirmed the sense that, in Brazil, the fact of leaving one's body on its natural shape means sloppiness and lack of care, mainly when it comes to overweight and aged people (Tanure, 2007).

Women have adapted their routines and some cares by realizing how hard it would be to loose weight, to sleep and move, despite the dry skin, nails and hair, among other novelties coming along with aging, as one can see in the speeches below:

You have to constantly change your eating habits, and to exercise in order to try to keep fit, to again get a healthy body that will not put you at trouble or set future limitations (Stephanie, 43 years old, 2020)

I have a good dermatologist, I have a good haird stylist, so, I have kept myself in shape, but, of course, there are limits. There comes the time when you realize that things are not working as they did before. But I am a carefull person. My hair is always dyed, so, like, I think that it is about it. (Bárbara, 55 years old, 2020)

You travel abroad and buy medicines, vitamins, facial moisturizer, hair products, you know? I go to the dermatologist quite often, I put skin moisturizer on every day, in the morning and at night, and I did not use to do it before. I think that for certain, there is a behavioral change in it. (Elídia, 53 years old, 2020)

It is worth highlighting that the aging experience for women can be even more complex and filled with prejudice when it is crossed by skin color and social class matters. Although interviewees in the current research had so negatively experienced their aging bodies, they were mostly white and came from privileged social classes, a fact that helps them dealing with their bodies in a very particular way, as it could have been seen in the analysis applied to the interviews. These women have access to special products and new technologies, different from less privileged women. Accordingly, minimizing the effects of aging is also a strategy to be used only for few women in our society, since it is mainly achieved through consumption.

Final considerations

The present study focused on executive women undergoing the aging process; it sought to answer the following research question: how do executive women experience their aged bodies within the organizational context? It was possible observing that gender and age inequality remains in place, as well as the practice, although disguised, of ageism in companies. Few women in high executive positions, besides confirming the aging process, can feel like intruders in their own environment, which is seen as mostly masculine. These factors contribute to their insecurity which, sometimes, boosts the constant self-imposition of pressure.

The first theoretical contribution of this article is related to body influence over executive women. Data have shown that the body is a core element in executive women's experience with aging, because of challenges such as living with menopause effects and with metabolic changes (weight gain, slowness, tiredness, among others), illnesses and look-related issues. All these factors are associated with an experience that is mostly unpleasant, since interviewees understand that the body is living a decay process due to aging. Notably, there is the effort to manage a body that needs constant care in order to remain as society expects, mainly when one takes into account the organizational environment, which mostly values younger bodies. Therefore, women often show discomfort with their own bodies. It is possible thinking that such an experience is linked to how these bodies are welcomed, or not, by the organizational context. But, it is clear that the aged body tends to do not fit the "ideal executive body" standards expected by organizations (Meriläinen et al., 2015). This process takes older women far from the possibility of keeping themselves at, or of reaching, power positions. Thus, it is undeniable that one feels the gender/sex, aesthetic, skin color, specific body skills expectations, as recalled by Flores-Pereira (2010), as well as age-related expectations. This finding got clearer when some participants have stated that, from a certain point in life, onwards, chronological age could hinder their access to the labor market, mainly when it comes to some hierarchical positions. Then, professional repositioning becomes unfeasible, and, most of the time, it demands women to submit to lower positions or to seek ways to mitigate aging by remaining in compliance with social demands. Besides the body function issues, women are too concerned with their looks, and this is the second contribution of the present study.

The second theoretical contribution is related to the importance of the body's looks for these women. There are only few national and international studies about the aging and looks topic (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008; Yokomizo & Lopes, 2019). The looks are associated with aesthetics, mainly when it comes to the female body (Cardoso, 2019). This finding has confirmed that such a feeling is not just an imaginary factor, but an experienced reality, since, according to the interviewees, the looks are the message they send out. These outcomes have confirmed that the professional body expected by organizations is a "fit" one, and that women's body must be excessively sexual (Trethewey, 1999). Therefore, a body that does not match the rule and that does not fit the standards is, oftentimes, a less acknowledged body.

The aging body of executive women, in the current research, is experienced from social pressure, from the control of its shape, size and look. It is a body to please others and to be in compliance with organizations' expectations: jovial and, preferably, thin. Modernity, according to Fernandes-Eloi Dantas, Sousa, Cerqueira-Santos and Maia (2017), worships the looks, health and care, as response to social standards. Executive women undergoing the aging process seem to feel

such a pressure close to them. It is then easy to observe the negative reinforcement of old women's image. Besides the aesthetic issues, interviewees have shown that the looks also seem to reflect values, such as vivacity, presence and availability to work.

The third theoretical contribution is related to the fact that, overall, studies regard gender issues when they focus on the body expected by organizations, which, by the way, is a masculine (Acker, 1990), mainly white, thin, disciplined and productive body (Gatens, 1996). Accordingly, it was possible identifying that not just gender, but age, matters. The body of a woman at older age seems not to be valuable for organizations, since it is categorized as less relevant, obsolete and prone to submit to lower positions in order to remain in the organization. Based on such a socio-hierarchical perspective of the body, one can observe that the body of older women is often placed in socially underprivileged position, a fact that reinforces asymmetric power relationships. As recalls Flores-Pereira (2010), despite the trend of dealing with job positions as neutral and meritocratic institutions, it was possible observing that organizations assume a professional model that does not encompass the body of an aged woman. This finding corroborates Acker, who points out that the organizational structure is not neutral when it comes to gender. The body of older women seems to be a little deviant (Souza, 2014); therefore, it is necessary and urgent to rethink the organizational logic that, rather than welcoming these bodies and giving them more possibilities, imposes limiting ways of being - sometimes, it even expels these women from the organizational environment. Thus, it is essential taking into consideration the human body concept based on the socio-hierarchical viewpoint in order to rethink both the managerial theories and practices, as suggested by Flores-Pereira (2010). It is necessary reasoning on how to break the hierarchized body concept and on the likelihood of having different bodies circulating in the organizational context.

The other point that deserves a discussion lies on the negative perspective of aging, which has prevailed in the data analysis, although some positive aspects of this phenomenon had already been approached in the literature, based on the perspective that aging can provide individuals with freedom (Sakura, 2016). During the conducted interviews, women also talked about the positive aspects of aging, but they were not used during the formal analysis carried out in the current study, since they were not related to the articles' main topic. The interviewed women pointed out that the positive aspects of aging are often linked to certain behaviors and feelings such as more security and serenity to choose which fights to take in the corporative world. They also highlighted that experience combined to wisdom helps decision-making – as the case of focusing on what really adds value to the business. Nevertheless, although not deeply addressed, the present study has shown that aging also has its positive side. However, from the body viewpoint, the negative aspects of it seem to prevail in the aging experience of executive women; therefore, they were mostly explored throughout the article.

In conclusion, it was possible observing that, just as stated by Mavin and Grandy (2016), leader women from a privileged social class hold power through their formal positions, but they remain marginalized in social relationships because their female bodies do not comply with organizations' expectations. Data in the current study allowed going beyond, and it was possible adding that factor "age" also influences how women experience such marginalization process. However, although chronological age emerges as a professional-usefulness indicator when it comes to productivity (Sennett, 2007), it was possible noticing that, in the case of women, the

aged body, and its particular features (grey hair, slowness, overweight, wrinkles, among others), can make their devaluing even clearer in a society that acknowledges productivity. It seems that women face a tough fight to win. More than ever, it is necessary enjoying the acquired years, rather than hiding and neglecting them, as women age (IBGE, 2019), mainly in the organizational context.

This research contributed to the organizational studies' field by revealing how the body of executive women is subjected to social rules and how it is, sometimes, underprivileged in the social hierarchy. Society must rethink the prejudice towards age and reconsider the position given to aged bodies, mainly of women, within the organizational context.

Limitations and suggestions to future research

Despite the article's contributions, it also presents some limitations. The current research did not take into account women outside executive positions, and it may have limited the analysis, in the sense of not counting on viewpoint differences, since it may have made the work more robust. Another limitation of it lies on the fact that the positive aspects of aging were not addressed based on the collected data, and it could have brought another perspective on the assessed phenomenon. Because the aim of the current study was to better understand executives' viewpoint and the challenges faced by them throughout their professional trajectory, the will to understand these same factors from leaders' perspective emerged, mainly when such leadership is exerted by a woman; this became a suggestion for further studies. Another recommendation lies on understanding the influence of, and perception by, headhunters about the aging process for people considered for professional repositioning. Such a study becomes relevant if one takes into account that headhunters can be the first barrier to be faced by older women seeking a new opportunity in the labor market.

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Financing

The authors did not get any financial support for the research, authorship or publication of the current article.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful for the valuable recommendations from the appraisers, since they help improving the article.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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First author: conception (leader), formal analysis (leader), investigation (leader), methodology (leader), project management (equal), resources (support), inspection (support), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing – original draft – (leader), writing - review and edition - (equal).

Second author: conception (support), formal analysis (support), investigation (support), methodology (support), project management (equal), resources (leader), inspection (leader), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing – original draft – (support), writing – review and edition (equal).

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