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FEMINIZATION OF AGING: A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON BEYOND THE NUMBERS

This essay aims to expand the concept of the feminization of aging by addressing the conditions associated with older women's working relationships. The feminization of aging is generally associated with the fact that there are more women than men in the elderly population, especially in Brazil. The theoretical basis of this study can help to expand our understanding of this phenomenon, which has three axes: the nature of the feminization of aging; the characteristics of those who experience it; and, finally, the needs of aging women and transformation strategies in the work context. These elements show that the phenomenon is too complex and multifaceted to be explained by quantitative approaches, which merely consider the predominance of women in the elderly population in Brazil. Due to gender and age discrimination and other professional challenges, women face difficulties associated with building, maintaining, and progressing in their careers. This expansion of the concept reveals the lack of attention and support for this social group in organizations, suggesting that professionals and managers must raise awareness of and confront this issue to effectively transform the world of work for older women.

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide global population aged 65 and over is expected to double, growing from 703 million elderly people in 2019 to 1.5 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2019). In Latin America, the percentage of the population aged 65 and over has almost doubled in recent years, from 5% in 1990 to 9% in 2019 (United Nations, 2019). By 2050, elderly women are expected to make up 54% of the global population (United Nations, 2019).

It is estimated that older people will constitute 25.5% (58.2 million) of the population of Brazil by 2060, compared to 9.2% (19.2 million) in 2018 (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics [Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística—IBGE], 2018). In 2012, older men were 5.7% of the population and women 7.2%; by 2018, these percentages had grown to 6.8% men and 8.6% women (IBGE, 2019). Women also live longer than men in Brazil. Mortality-table data indicate that men have a life expectancy of 72.8 years, while women have a life expectancy of 79.9 years (IBGE, 2018). As there are more elderly women than men, both worldwide and in Brazil, some authors have argued that aging has become feminized in urban areas (Camarano, 2004; Gavrilov & Heuveline, 2003; Lima & Bueno, 2009).

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The feminization of aging is highly relevant in the context of organizations, as many older women enter or remain in the labor market (Nascimento & Rabêlo, 2008). The work conditions that women experience must not be ignored. Data presented by Felix (2016) show that rates of formal employment can begin to decrease when women are just 25 years old. Approximately 28% of women aged 45–49 are formally employed; after the age of 55, only 20% are employed. Of women over 60, less than 10% are employed under the CLT regime (*Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho*—Consolidation of Labor Laws).

The difficulties associated with women’s aging are not well understood, since most studies on aging fail to consider the specific characteristics of men and women, treating them as equivalent (Lima & Bueno, 2009; Mori & Coelho, 2004). Therefore, despite the relevance of this topic, few studies have addressed women’s aging (Lima & Bueno, 2009; Nascimento, 2015) or characteristic features of the feminization of aging, especially when the phenomenon is approached from a work-context perspective.

There is no consensus in the literature on the age at which women begin to experience difficulties in the labor market because they are considered “old.” It may occur when they are 50 years old (Moore, 2009) or even earlier, when they are only 40 (Fineman, 2014). For women, “age is potentially a double damage: they often suffer ageism at younger ages than men” (Fineman, 2014, p. 1721). This paper therefore argues that the feminization of aging is not associated exclusively with women aged 60 or over (Law no. 8.842, 1994); younger women also suffer age-related discrimination.

This study is based on the concept of aging as a socially produced category (Debert, 2007), as well as on the theory of intersectionality (Nash, 2008). The theorization of intersectionality reflects the notion that subjectivity is composed of vectors of race, gender, social class, and sexuality, which reinforce each other (Nash, 2008). It is used to examine the “multidimensionality” of the marginalized experiences of marginalized subjects (Crenshaw, 1989). Although intersectionality research has a long-standing interest in one specific intersection, between race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991), there is limited knowledge of how gender relates to other attributes, such as social class, religion, disability, and age—or how these intersections impact people’s professional lives (Harding, Ford, & Fotaki, 2013). Although the contribution made by the intersectional approach has been widely debated in sociology and gender-specific journals, its use has been limited to studies of labor and employment relationships (McBride, Hebson, & Holgate, 2014). Moreover, despite the

growing interest in age-based perceptions and work practices, few studies have investigated the complexity of aging or the ways in which it intersects with other aspects of identity within organizational settings. (Cleveland, Huebner, & Hanscom, 2017; Riach, Rumens, & Tyler, 2014). Nevertheless, some authors have argued that the relationship between gender and age has the potential to shape identities which, in turn, can influence perceptions and work productivity (Cleveland et al., 2017).

When discussing the feminization of aging, three axes make it easier to understand the phenomenon and how it is reflected in work relationships: the nature of the feminization of aging; the characteristics of those who experience it; and, finally, the needs of aging women and transformation strategies in the workplace.

These elements suggest that the feminization of aging is too complex and multifaceted to be explained by quantitative approaches, which merely consider the predominance of women in the elderly population in Brazil. The feminization of aging also encompasses the inequalities faced by aging women in the workplace. We therefore hold discussions on this topic to ensure that the factors that make aging women vulnerable are mitigated in the Brazilian context through the actions of organizations.

This paper expands the concept of the feminization of aging, promoting debate in the field of Business Administration to mitigate age-related losses.

WHAT IS THE FEMINIZATION OF AGING?

Drawing on the relevant Brazilian and international literature, this study aims to identify the main axes that characterize the feminization of aging and the relationship between this phenomenon and the world of work: the nature of the feminization of aging; the characteristics of those who experience it; and, finally, the needs of aging women and transformation strategies in the work context. These axes of analysis will be addressed in more detail throughout this section.

The nature of the feminization of aging

The feminization of aging is the phenomenon whereby “a greater proportion of women than men” [is found] “among the elderly population, especially at older ages” (Sousa, Lima, Cesar, & Barros, 2018, p. 2). In other words, it is shaped by evidence showing that there are “great differences in the number of elderly

people by gender” (Moreira, 1998, p. 88) and that aging lasts longer for women because they live longer (Moreira, 1998).

As they age, women, despite being in the majority and having a longer life expectancy than men, experience gender and age discrimination, especially in the workplace. This discrimination seems to occur because our society sees age as a marker, which brings together ways of thinking and understanding a given individual, organization, or even society (Fineman, 2014). Although ageism, which is discrimination against older adults (Butler, 1989; Dennis & Thomas, 2007; Palmore, 1999), affects employees in different age groups, it predominates among younger and older age groups, with women, who seem to face even more difficulties, as the main victims (Duncan & Loretto, 2004).

Some authors have argued that this discrimination also occurs outside organizations, being coproduced within everyday political and organizational interactions through work practices and individual actions (Halford, Lotherington, Obstfelder, & Kukarenko, 2015; Krekula, Nikander, & Wilińska, 2018). Researchers have pointed out that aging men and young people are more highly valued than aging women (Barrett & Nauman-Sessions, 2016), especially by organizations (McGann et al., 2016).

In the organizational context, women suffer explicit discrimination from coworkers who say they are too old, as well as experiencing age as a barrier when they search for work, seek access to training, request increased remuneration, or attempt to advance their careers. Such barriers can be veiled, as well as direct (Moore, 2009). When they apply for jobs, older female candidates are often rejected via age-neutral language that describes them as “overqualified” or “too experienced” (McMullin & Berger, 2006). The perception that older women lack technical skills or cannot relate well to younger employees is another factor associated with discrimination (Handy & Davy, 2007).

The discrimination faced by older women relates not just to chronological age, but also to physical appearance in the work context (Jyrkinen, 2014; Krekula et al., 2018). According to a survey conducted in Finland, based on 15 individual interviews and two focus groups involving 12 managers aged 30–60, women felt that their appearance, clothing, and behavior were under constant surveillance both inside and outside the workplace; for this reason, they adopted coping and self-management strategies (McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017). Aging brought additional challenges, with older women feeling that they had to remain energetic and young to enhance the image of the organization. In this environment, women often engage in anti-aging strategies, including physical exercise and dieting (McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017).

They understand that they, as individuals, must take control of their own aging and find ways to age successfully and avoid decline, mainly by consuming skin products, cosmetic surgeries, and aesthetic procedures (Trethewey, 2001).

Women fight invisibility and seek to improve their physical appearance by focusing on beauty, both to attract or keep romantic partners and to meet workplace demands (Clarke & Griffin, 2008). In the services sector, for example, appearance and youth are valued and some women are excluded for not corresponding to “the ideal form of professional” (Moore, 2009). Women assume that appearance is a relevant issue, as it is linked to sexual attractiveness. For men, on the other hand, “looking young” is only important in situations that require physical work, such as manual labor. (McGann et al., 2016).

Researchers have found evidence of age- and gender-based discrimination, not just in the actions of men, but also in the actions of other women, particularly younger women who use their appearance to compete in their organizations (McMullin & Berger, 2006). Negative experiences related to ageism, such as the depreciation of skills, may help to explain why women who interrupt their careers and later decide to return to work often choose to redirect their energies, avoiding their former employers (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012).

It is also important to note that aging women are not the only women to suffer discrimination. Studies have shown that women of all ages are more likely than men to suffer discrimination related to appearance or sexuality, especially if they are under 25 or over 45 years old (Duncan & Loretto, 2004). For this reason, the literature referenced in this study includes women of various ages, not just older women.

The characteristics of women who experience the feminization of aging

The feminization of aging changes the age patterns of women in the workforce (Giatti & Barreto, 2003) and puts pressure the labor market in various ways (Institute of Applied Economic Research [IPEA], 2010). This is shown in data provided by the United Nations (2012), which indicates that, in 2012, 26% of older men and 15% of older women in more developed countries were in the labor market. In Brazil in the same year, 44% of men and 21% of older women were in the workforce (Gomes & Pamplona, 2015). Given the scale of aging in the global workforce, understanding this phase of life is critical to the future capacity of organizations (Gordon & Whelan, 1998).

Certain factors prompt older women to enter or remain in the labor market. Divorce and widowhood can force women into new roles, where they may have to learn new jobs, find ways to support themselves, or seek greater sociability and new partners (Nascimento & Rabêlo, 2008). In this scenario, many women must secure a livelihood for themselves and their families. Given the difficulties they face (Nascimento & Rabêlo, 2008) and their relatively low levels of education, they must often accept precarious jobs with poor wages that allow them to reconcile their work routine, since they are not qualified for more secure or better paid positions (Gomes & Pamplona, 2015; Nascimento & Souza, 2006). Aging women who have dedicated their lives to raising children may have few job prospects and struggle to find jobs (Lima & Bueno, 2009). Other women may choose not to look for work because their children are employed; such women may end up taking care of their grandchildren (Soares, 2012).

So who are the women who face difficulties in the job market? The literature shows that various types of women face difficulties linked to ageism in the workplace. Businesswomen appear to experience challenges (Gordon & Whelan, 1998), given that women are less likely to occupy managerial positions as they age. The data show that 43.4% of managerial positions are held by women between 16 and 29 years old; 39.5% are held by women between 30 and 49 years old; 31.6% are held by women between 50 and 59 years old, and only 31.3% are held by women aged 60 or over (IBGE, 2018). Women who have chosen flexible jobs also fall victim to gender inequality; many work informally, facing lower levels of choice, autonomy, and control than older men with flexible jobs (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015). This lack of recognition of their “work” makes older women less visible in debates about the balance between professional and personal life (Loretto & Vickerstaff, 2015). Women scholars also face age- and gender-based discrimination, as they are frequently pressured to assume gender-appropriate roles—generally related to student welfare—that are less highly valued than the research careers pursued by younger male colleagues (Broadbridge, Granleese, & Sayer, 2006). Aging immigrant and indigenous women are also vulnerable when they decide to return to the workforce; they frequently end up accepting lower wages and carrying out lower-status tasks than in previous or part-time jobs (Encel & Studencki, 1997). Likewise, women entrepreneurs face discrimination because they experience the disadvantages of being autonomous older women. However, they use their experience to take action against discrimination in their businesses (Meliou, Mallett, & Rosenberg, 2019).

The needs of aging women and transformation strategies in the work context

As this article explains, women face a range of difficulties linked to gender and age as they get older. The literature shows that it is important to recognize the needs of these women, enabling organizations to take responsibility for creating programs, policies, and practices to support them. Such steps will have positive consequences, both for the women and also for their organizations (Gordon & Whelan, 1998). It is therefore necessary to understand the conditions and demands that aging women face in different work contexts.

Women in traditionally female sectors often receive lower wages and are less recognized for their achievements than men. They are also more exposed to traumatic events and physical injuries; for example, such women often work in the health services as janitors, nurses, and auxiliary professionals (Payne & Doyal, 2010). Women who dedicate themselves to domestic activities or care for their grandchildren or other dependents may have compromised mental health, due to stress, social isolation, and a lack of recognition for their work (Payne & Doyal, 2010). Research has shown that aging women who occupy higher-level positions in organizations often feel the need to restore their work-family balance, have more personal time, achieve both personal fulfillment and perceived value for the organization and, finally, to prepare for the next decade (Gordon & Whelan, 1998).

Various strategies for providing a better quality of life for aging women in the workplace have been proposed. These have included fostering a culture in which employees feel comfortable talking about health problems and reducing sources of stress. Employers should also consider the effects of menopause and consider temperature and ventilation in the workplace (Griffiths et al., 2016). Other variables that influence the permanence of aging women in the labor market include interpersonal relationships, autonomy, flexibility, and interests outside of work (Shacklock, Brunetto, & Nelson, 2009).

Despite the clear feminization of aging, initiatives designed to minimize the effects of gender and age discrimination are rarely discussed in Brazil. There is an urgent need to focus on this issue and to direct more actions toward aging women, who are increasingly becoming a significant part of the workforce, despite the discrimination they face. The main questions raised by this essay are as follows: What are organizations doing for aging women in the workplace? Are the needs of these women understood? What strategies have been implemented? Organization directors must be encouraged to recognize the needs of aging women and to promote transformations designed

to enhance their inclusion and sense of being valued in the organizational space (Cepellos, 2016).

FINAL COMMENTS

This paper has adopted a multidisciplinary perspective to explore the literature on the feminization of aging. We argue that the concept of feminization goes far beyond the numbers; the phenomenon is more than just the fact that older women outnumber and live longer than men in Brazilian society. Rather, this study argues that the feminization of aging is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Especially in Brazil, losses seem to result from situations and historical and cultural contexts (Goldani, 2010) that make older Brazilian women more vulnerable than older men.

This paper argues that three axes shape this phenomenon: the nature of the feminization of aging; the characteristics of those who experience it; and, finally, the needs of aging women and transformation strategies in the work context. Any discussion about the feminization of aging must acknowledge that aging women face many challenges, including how to deal with their appearance, negative perceptions of their technical and behavioral skills, and the need to respond effectively when their knowledge and experience are questioned. Both men and younger women discriminate against older women, demonstrating the complexity of the phenomenon. Furthermore, although there is a growing contingent of older women in the workforce, few actions have been implemented to mitigate the problems they face.

This paper thus expands the concept of the feminization of aging, enriching the debate about gender- and age-based inequalities in organizations to help mitigate age-related losses.

The paper does have some limitations, as it addresses the feminization of aging in a generalized and exclusively theoretical way. Future studies should explore this topic in more detail, using empirical data and considering both the nature of particular organizational contexts and needs of women working in those environments. In addition, research should compare the experiences of aging women and men, identifying key elements that differentiate the experience of aging in these two groups.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The author declare that they participated in all stages of development of the manuscript. From the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, the theoretical review (literature survey), data collection, as well as data analysis, and finally, writing and final review the article.