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The expectations and aspirations of a late-career professional woman

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Abstract

This article presents a powerful account of one late-career woman's lived experiences. Little is known about women who continue professional careers into their 50s and beyond. Here insights are offered into her aspirations and expectations, as she reflects upon a career fragmented by gendered caring responsibilities and the implications of ageism and sexism together with health and body for her late-career phase. The narrative enhances understanding of the intersection of age and gender in a context where masculine career norms dominate. It also offers a reflection upon the implications of these themes for late-career women and their employing organizations more generally.

Keywords

ageism, fragmented careers, health and body, late-career women, sexism

Introduction

What is it like to be a late-career professional woman having experienced the radical workplace change wrought by feminism and employment legislation in recent decades? Growth in female employment in the professional and managerial fields has been substantial (Cabrera, 2007) and women now routinely continue in their careers into their 50s and beyond. Yet little is known about their late-career phase (Armstrong-Stassen and Cameron, 2005; August, 2011). Women's careers research has largely focused upon younger women and their challenges in combining career with childbearing and domestic responsibilities (for example, Crompton et al., 2005). The late-career phase is set to extend, however, as demographic and pension changes increasingly defer retirement (Loretto et al., 2009b). There is an emerging discourse of positive ageing (Simpson et al., 2012) in which older workers are promoted as offering talent and experience (August, 2011). However, as Duberley et al. (2014) powerfully argue, this older worker discourse is de-gendered and adopts a masculine norm. Here, the intersection of gender and age (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012) is explored to generate valuable insight into themes pertinent to older professional women's careers.

The narrative of Flora (a pseudonym) on her career history and aspirations is presented. She is a 51-year-old Human Resources (HR) Director who has a 12-year-old daughter, adult stepchildren, young step-grandchildren and elderly parents. She is divorced, in generally good health and menopausal. She divides her career into three phases. The first phase, mid-1980s to late 1990s, was organizationally based in Company1, a large, national food wholesaler and retailer. Flora joined as a graduate trainee, undertook professional qualifications and moved up through the ranks to Group HR Controller. She moved to Company2, a medium-sized, national food and beverages retailer, in the late 1990s as she believed that board-level opportunities would not be available to her as a woman at Company1. At Company2, she advanced quickly to board level but soon faced pressures in terms of combining domestic commitments, caring for a child and sick partner, with a demanding career. This led to her decision, in the early 2000s, to move into self-employment to balance career with caring responsibilities. She has had a successful period as a freelance and interim HR Director. She is now embarking on a third phase and is ready to 'step back up' to an organizational career. In her narrative, she discusses the path ahead and her experiences of being an 'older' professional woman. The key themes reflected in Flora's account are outlined below.

Career is defined here as 'the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996: 3). This is more flexible than traditional linear (masculine) stage career models with their implicit assumptions of organizational stability and upward mobility (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). It allows for the fragmented nature of women's careers which are often disjointed and interrupted (Cabrera, 2007). Women, for example, are more likely than men to work flexibly and take breaks (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Loretto et al., 2009a), as is evidenced in Flora's account of her career phases.

Contemporary career research presents authenticity, balance and challenge as career drivers for both men and women (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). These concepts have been used in particular to explain women's opting out of organizational careers, as they

privilege balance (of work and other commitments) and authenticity (being true to oneself) over challenging work assignments (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Women may also craft careers aligned to their social and personal values (Duberley et al., 2014) and impose their own glass ceilings to accommodate these (Cabrera, 2007). These themes are powerfully reflected in Flora's narrative in which she 'opts out' of an organizational career and becomes self-employed, allowing her to achieve balance and assuage her feelings of guilt over neglecting her daughter. She is ready to return to the challenge of an organizational career now that her child-care responsibilities are reduced. Interestingly, her opt-out also addresses guilt over not delivering against organizational needs, notwithstanding the offer of a sabbatical while she addressed domestic pressures. As Flora notes, understanding of authenticity, balance, challenge and associated issues, such as guilt, is lacking concerning late-career women.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) propose a typical career pattern for professional women in which challenge dominates in early career, balance in mid-career and authenticity in late career. This may vary by individual (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) and indeed all three remain prominent in Flora's account. Challenge is still important to her (August, 2011) as she grapples with the potential difficulties of 'opting back in' to an organizational career. She notes the lack of female senior role models (Cabrera, 2007; Duberley et al., 2014) and weaves a compelling narrative around the double disadvantage arising from age and gender intersection (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). She presents retirement as a messy phase rather than a neat career ending and reflects the inevitable influence of pension provision, particularly within a fragmented career, upon the retirement decision (Duberley et al., 2014). Flora's concerns in this late-career phase centre on the interwoven themes of caring responsibilities, ageism and sexism and health and body.

Many career models presume caring responsibilities, seen as natural for women, diminish or cease in late career (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). However, women have a disproportionate responsibility for both child *and* elder care (Cabrera, 2007). The trends of having children later and elderly relatives living longer, as Flora demonstrates, mean these caring responsibilities may continue into late career (and beyond) and the blurred work/life boundaries of mid-career (Ford and Collinson, 2011) may also persist. Male and female career paths and family relations thus differ even at this stage (Duberley et al., 2014; Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012) as women experience the ongoing emotional labour of home (McKie et al., 2008). Flora experiences these tensions as she seeks to care for her child, step-grandchildren and elderly parents. As she notes, work structures have not adapted sufficiently to allow professional women in this stage to balance these responsibilities (Cabrera, 2007).

Jyrkinen and McKie (2012) demonstrate the ongoing gendered ageism and sexism that women encounter. Ageism can derive from an 'ideal worker shape', which excludes older professional women on the basis of looks, flexibility and energy (Moore, 2009). Flora worries that employers will perceive her shape as less than ideal and that she will experience lookism, i.e. prejudice or discrimination on the basis of appearance, in this case because she looks too old (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009). She suggests that professional women experience more ageism than men (Duncan and Loretto, 2004) and that this intersects with sexism whereby older women's knowledge is deemed less valuable than men's (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). Consequently, organizations exclude older professional

women and are unwilling to take advantage of their knowledge and expertise. This is illustrated in Flora's account as she fears comparison both with her male peers and more junior females. Little is known about the health and bodies of older women in the workplace (Payne and Doyal, 2010) and, as Flora indicates, these topics are often subjects of stigma or taboo (Ballard et al., 2009). Throughout their careers, women face questions over their ability to undertake professional work given their bodies' reproductive capacities and concerns over emotionality (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). This is coupled in late career with the myths and reality of menopause. Flora reflects upon its associated challenges and suggests that there is little knowledge of how women deal with menopause in the workplace (Loretto et al., 2009b) and that women may lack a way to talk about it as 'a topic silenced by fear, ignorance and revulsion' (Coupland and Williams, 2002: 442).

As an HR Director, Flora offers both personal and professional insights. Her narrative depicts first her personal experiences and ends with professional reflections on what lies ahead for late-career professional women. She provides a powerful account and highlights many poorly understood issues. Implicit within these are the many negative assumptions and stereotypes that are brought to bear on older professional women.

Flora's story

Fragmented careers

I started on a management training scheme [in Company1] and ended up operating as an HR specialist. I was fortunate to be appointed to Group Controller for the retail side. There were a couple of other positions to get to that point, but my final position before I left was as Group HR Controller. I outgrew the company. There was nowhere for me to go other than HR Director on the Main Board and I didn't see those opportunities being made available to me. There were no women on the Board at the time. [Company2] approached me and I was asked to go in as Group HR Manager, but within a year to be appointed onto the Board as HR Director. I went in and that happened but two months after joining, I fell pregnant. I don't think I would have made it work [i.e. combining career and family] if I wasn't working for [Company2]. Because of the position that I held, I was able to influence quite a lot in terms of the business being very focused around family-friendly interventions. It was an organization that really did embrace the value of people and support the needs of their family in terms of their current continued career success. It was also fairly heavily dominated by women and actually on the Board women out-weighed men. But that aside, it was still difficult [to combine career and family]. I spent five years there. I then moved on because my husband became very ill. I decided if I did short, interim or freelance contracts I could completely commit to the business, deliver what they wanted and then know that there was an end date. So that if something happened personally I wasn't going to let the organization down. That has worked very well because it fits around my daughter, who is now 12, and has allowed me to be flexible.

Aspirations and expectations of late-career women

I'm now hitting that third phase in my life. I've hit a crossroads, where I'm not challenged as much as I used to be. [Daughter] is much more self-sufficient and doesn't need

me in the same way. I've got to decide what I do next. I worry about this third phase, because I've freelanced for a long time so I don't know how seriously organizations will take me. I don't know whether I've lost ground – I think I have undoubtedly lost ground. The sectors that I enjoy are the sectors that I grew up in and they're still dominated by men. So there are barriers there. I'm conscious that my decision to have a family and my desire to support family life, depending on which organization I go to work for, that's going to be a barrier for me. Had I not had a child – and I don't regret it for a moment because I desperately wanted to have children, I'm so glad I did – but had I not, I don't think I would be in the position that I'm in now. I would have continued developing my career and now be moving into something that would have enabled me to really add value. When you're younger, you're very much moving to the next stage, you're ambitious, you want to move to the next level. You then reach a point where you think, 'Actually, it's not about any of this.' You think, 'I want my career to be very much about adding value', adding value to the organization and to the industry because I've given that industry 30 years of my life. But I worry that I can't fulfil those expectations because I've had that bit in the middle where I stepped back for my child and so I worry about the third phase.

As women we don't understand it. I didn't until I hit my 50s. I then thought, I'm now going to have to face a whole host of problems I hadn't ever appreciated. I wasn't aware of them because my parents didn't have the same set of problems. My mother didn't have a career in the way that I've had a career. I'm the first generation to do that. My mother, my friends' parents, there is no, or very few, people that you can look to to be your example. I haven't got one woman in my entire career that I can look back on that has influenced me or mentored me. They haven't been there in a senior post. So you're learning for yourself; this is a new phenomenon for me. They're going to be difficult years for me and difficult years for women. I stepped back and then I want to step forward again. Not only am I having to step forward with a loss of momentum, in a generation where I'm older. I'm having to manage all of that in my personal life and I'm also trying to convince somebody to take me seriously. Give me a job or give me a contract, or give me a piece of work, when actually I might not be able to deliver against that because of all the issues that are going on in my life.

When I was in my 20s I set my pensions up so that I could retire at 55. No chance now, not in a million years and also I wouldn't want to. I'm not ready. I'm ready to go into that third phase where I really want to get back into it. I feel as if I've been treading water for a while. Then I do see the final phase being, when I retire, being able to do the things – I want to paint, write, but I still want to work. I don't mind if that's working on a voluntary basis. But I've given my life to my career in human resources, so I would like to remain in that. I don't want to reach a point where I say, 'Right, that's it. It was a job.' It wasn't for me. It was a whole career and remains very, very important to me.

Caring responsibilities

[Falling pregnant] was a surprise for me because my husband had children [from a previous marriage] so I hadn't anticipated having my own family. [Daughter] came along, the best thing that ever happened, absolutely without a doubt. But I didn't want to let

[Company2] down, so my husband took a sabbatical and I went back to work after four months. I struggled with the whole issue of the guilt associated with not being there for my child and, in a sense, created my own glass ceiling. I found it difficult to embrace some of the social activities that were required as a member of the Board because I felt that pull in terms of my child. My career was very important, my family was very important and I didn't quite know how to manage both without one suffering. So I placed self-imposed pressure on myself. There is this whole issue of who's the primary child-carer, you or your partner; and myself and my husband both had big jobs so – I suppose I could have quite easily said, 'Let's go and get a nanny', and sort it that way, but I found it too difficult. I'd had a child, I had a responsibility to that child and I also wanted to spend some time with her. I don't want her to grow up and think, 'I didn't ever see – have any time with my Mum.' So it was a really difficult one.

[Husband] became seriously ill and I had to become his carer. He had a heart attack and had to have a triple heart bypass operation. He was relatively young so it was very unexpected. It took a year for him to recover to a point where he was capable of caring for himself. So I took a year off work. Initially [Company2] was more than happy for me to work part-time and I did for a short period, but I felt that I was holding the business back. I was a member of the Board, I wasn't really fulfilling the role that I should have been fulfilling so an element of guilt came into play and I decided to leave the organization. They asked me to take a sabbatical but I felt that it was the wrong thing to do because I didn't know how I'd feel at the end of the period. So I left and took a year off to care for [Husband]. We spent a period of time abroad, we came back to the UK, settled in [Town] and I took on interim work. My husband was going back into work and I wanted to support that. I didn't know how that was going to work out with his health, [Daughter] was starting school, so it was a period where I thought, 'If I commit to a business and something goes wrong, I don't want to let that business down.'

I had [Daughter] late. I didn't have her till I was 39 and also have older stepchildren and young step-grandchildren. Even though my husband and I are separated, I have a very good relationship with him and my stepchildren, so I'm still seen as a grandparent. So there's still a pull because I have a younger child. I have ageing parents whose needs are greater now than they were. So it's a difficult one. Undoubtedly, it's going to be a real challenge. I don't think that there's a great deal of understanding about the pressures on this particular generation of women and men. Men [have pressures] to a lesser extent because when parents become elderly, like childbearing, it falls to the woman. Because we're carers; we're perceived as carers, so it's not just about children. I have a brother, but I'm the one that gets the call if there's an issue with my parents and I'm the one that will go – without even thinking – and deal with it. You're battling, not only with the system, but your inner DNA. There's still a social culture that insists within this country that women are carers. So undoubtedly, I will have that battle till the day I die [laughs]. Really, because I'm in the elder care stage, there'll still be things that are going on further down the chain.

I do not believe that organizations have tuned into that [*ongoing caring* responsibilities]. There's a lack of awareness of the primary barriers to access in work for women in their 50s and 60s. What are the interventions that can be put into place within an organization to either eliminate or reduce the barriers? There's not enough information

available for organizations. More work is required around the area of elder care, so that there's an understanding that elder care has an impact on, generally, the next generation, my generation and the generation after. Organizations need to tune into this group, this wealth of expertise that exists among women in their 50s and 60s who could contribute, but need to contribute in a different way. So they need some flexibility in the way that they work. The problem is that a number of companies believe that women need flexibility only in their childbearing years, but actually, they don't.

Ageism and sexism in the workplace

I'm conscious that I'm in my 50s, I do believe that's a barrier with some organizations. I attend lots of events and find that I'm surrounded by younger people who are perhaps perceived to have more energy than I have in terms of moving their career in a direction that suits the organization. They may be more available than I am. I don't particularly want to travel around the world so that my child doesn't see me. I don't even want to travel around the UK so that my child doesn't see me [laughter], but I'm happy to travel. I just don't want to do it too much.

Men don't take the breaks, although I was married to a man who did. He took a first sabbatical when our daughter was born and then subsequently, when he was poorly, he took another two years sabbatical. But then he went back to work and he was able to pick the reins up far more quickly than I was. The organizations that he went to work in, they used to take him more seriously. It didn't matter that he had a younger child because he was a man, so he was more available. Whereas I was a woman and I had a younger child. I do think it's changing and I have seen that change, which is very positive. But in many organizations there are less obvious barriers, they have become buried. So, an example in senior management, a woman is required to be available, not just within working hours. So let's go on a business dinner or are you available to take a call at nine o'clock at night when you're putting your child to bed. The requirement is still there.

Older women also suffer from a tendency to be overlooked. There is still this view that, 'What has she got to contribute? She's had x number of years off for raising children. There'll be issues going on in her life.' There is still a view, not in all organizations obviously, that the value that you can provide may not equal the value that a male can provide because you haven't been there for the same length of time; haven't experienced the same events that have occurred because you've had absences. Even once those times are gone, even if you haven't had children, there is still an element of males looking at females and thinking, 'Well, should she not be home looking after the grandchildren, or tending the garden', or, 'Hasn't she done her bit?' There's still a view that men go on for ever, whereas women have an end shelf life. Now that may be because men have children into their 60s and 70s; women don't. Within senior management there is a belief that men can easily work beyond their retirement years but women have more health problems and issues to deal with and also some family stuff. Also they've had gaps, so they haven't contributed in the same way so they don't have the same wealth of experience to add into the pot because they're distracted.

An added disadvantage for me in my 50s is I'm now not only going to have to compete against all of my opposite gender, I'm now competing against a younger generation.

It's different altogether because you have that whole issue around ageism in the workplace and that is another barrier. I do believe that there still exists a barrier around ageism. So, for example, I'd say, if you've moved through your career and you've stayed in senior management, then you may well still be in senior management. If you stepped out of your career and you tried to get back in to senior management when you were in your 50s and 60s, you're more likely not to, in preference for a younger person.

Health and body

I'm in my 50s. I'm very much aware that I'm tireder, I'm less bothered about the way I look. I always want to look relatively smart. I'm conscious that, because I'm in the middle of menopause, I'm not always on form. I'm also aware that I don't have the energy level, because of my health, to compete with a male who has probably reached a point whereby their children are older. They may or may not be in a relationship socially because the divorce rates are so high. Here is a point where you have a male in their 50s, very focused again on their career. I think, pitch me against that and I haven't really got a hope in hell.

I find the menopause a real distraction on my health. Women and health is something that businesses do not want to talk about publicly. It's not something that's out there. There are taboos associated with menopause. Men see it as a woman's problem and definitely don't want to talk about it. There's a lack of understanding about the associated health problems with menopause, sweating, feeling faint. I can remember sitting in a meeting pitching for some business recently and feeling absolutely dreadful and having to leave the meeting. I didn't get that work. I just don't have the energy level that I had in my 20s and I sometimes worry whether employers will see that as a negative. I think there is little understanding, in fact there's probably less understanding in those areas [health and menopause] than there is in areas of childcare because that's been an issue we've been managing for many years. Less so in the arena of age and that worries me because we're dealing now with an older generation. We have more men and women in their 50s, who want to work longer, who are being encouraged by the government to work longer because of changes to the pension rights and retirement dates and so they're looking to do something. And they're looking to add value. It is a frustration because once you're in your 50s, in your 60s, the added value that you can give the organization in terms of experience and knowledge is phenomenal. I do think that these are going to be difficult years.

Professional reflections

I don't think we know what we're facing and I find that in some ways slightly unnerving, but in other ways so interesting because we've never been there and we've never done it. In some ways it's quite exciting because you think, 'Well actually this is new – this is quite ground-breaking.' I don't think we know all the barriers yet [to older professional women's careers]. And once we know the barriers, how will we overcome them and will we learn from our experiences of childbearing barriers, because there's already some learning there that perhaps we could use to our advantage. But we don't because we don't

know what's coming. There's a real lack of understanding, among women and undoubtedly in HRM. I don't think as HR professionals we fully understand what's going to hit us. In some ways I think it will hit some people like a tsunami. I really do genuinely believe that some companies have no idea about this coming because this is so new. This generation coming through, we are women who have worked in careers all our lives. Some have had children, some have not. Some have had partners, some have not. We're at a point now, regardless of what our background is, where we want to continue our careers.

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