

# GENERATION EXPENDABLE?

OLDER WOMEN WORKERS IN THE  
PANDECONOMY

FEBRUARY 2022

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**GRASSROOTS RESEARCH STUDIO** – *putting practice into policy*

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## Executive summary

Grassroots Research commenced the *Generation Expendable?* study in mid-2020, when Australia's pandemic fallout was first described as a "shecession."<sup>1</sup> The term recognised the impacts on younger ciswomen and particularly young mothers, often working in more casualised sectors with primary school age children at home.<sup>2</sup> As a cohort, women in their 20s and 30s continue to experience financial, psychological and even physical costs as a result of the enduring pandemic - as do more marginalised groups in the labour market.<sup>3</sup>

But what of *older* women? Already known to face "dual discriminations" at work, how would the economic and health crisis shape their employment experiences?<sup>4</sup> Would age and/or gender render them a 'generation expendable' – expensive, vulnerable to ill-health, their needs largely 'invisible'? Framed in a theoretical lens of 'degrowth' and feminist economics, researchers explored outcomes for older women in the workplace, emphasising wellbeing as a measure.

The findings from the *Generation Expendable?* showed older women went into 2020 with better-than-expected job security. A majority had, and retained, permanent work - but at significant cost: 44 per cent<sup>5</sup> cited financial impacts from the crisis which would affect their retirement.<sup>6,7</sup>

But monetary outcomes weren't the main concern. With many respondents working the pandemic 'frontline': as teachers and health workers, delivering aged and community care, health and safety risks were sharply heightened. Not only was vulnerability to the virus keenly felt, but something of a cultural virus in the workplace, with 52% of women describing *psychological harm* as a result of workplace bullying.<sup>8</sup> The predominance of bullying in the (largely feminised) sectors of health and education, was marked by a commonality of women *bullying other older women*.

From these findings, researchers explore typical workplace structures under growth capitalism in Australia, suggesting the colonial and patriarchal heritage of our systems of economic organisation inherently disadvantage women.<sup>9,10</sup>

To drive wellbeing at work for women, we need to rethink the workplace. Transformational policies such as a basic care income, cooperative ownership of the caring industries – commodified at work yet unvalued in the home – will support the dismantling of consumer capitalism and drive much needed change in the ways Australia works.<sup>11,12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/were-getting-a-bloke-covery-response-to-a-she-cession-how-will-women-respond-at-the-ballot-box/>

<sup>2</sup> Although the survey was actively inclusive of transfeminine women, none identified as such in responses

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.personneltoday.com/hr/harriet-harman-bring-back-dual-discrimination-concept/>

<sup>5</sup> In a previous edition, this figure was incorrectly cited at 73%. The 73% figure in fact relates to changed circumstances and/or conditions of work

<sup>6</sup> Children or others outside the home for more than 20 hours per week

<sup>7</sup> Broadly characterised by 21% living in the private rental sector and only 17.8% being outright homeowners

<sup>8</sup> As defined by the [Fair Work Commission](#) and in a [UK NHS study](#)

<sup>9</sup> <https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/98679/2/02whole.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953620307498>

<sup>11</sup> This study recognises that many women, including older women, are less vulnerable to disadvantage and discrimination than other groups in the labour market such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disability, Trans and Gender Diverse workers, people from a multicultural background, and those with 'intersecting traits' protected under Australian anti-discrimination laws.

<sup>12</sup> Basic care income is a universal payment recognising women's work in the home <https://lpeproject.org/blog/basic-income-care-and-wages-for-housework/>

## Introduction

Prior to COVID, gendered patterns in ageing had long been recognised in Australia. As a cohort, older women often face barriers to the well-paid and flexible work they need to save for retirement. Many are still caring for teens/grandchildren, as well as ageing parents.<sup>13</sup> Having often spent a lifetime in part-time work, older women on average retire with half the superannuation of men. Many lack capital assets such as housing, a pillar of Australia's retirement income system.<sup>14</sup>

Financial and employment insecurity after 40 has long-term implications. Women who experience unemployment in their 50s spend twice as long on JobSeeker as younger men.<sup>15</sup> Their prevalence in the private rental sector (PRS) also marks them the cohort most at risk of homelessness.

Understanding the importance of secure, safe and flexible work as women age, *Generation Expendable?* sought to benchmark work outcomes and conditions under the pandemic and to provide a platform for less heard voices.

## Methodology and scope

*Generation Expendable?* comprised an online survey running between October 2020 and March 2021 on Twitter and through targeted promotion on Facebook. Questions focused on employment outcomes (e.g., loss of jobs), work conditions, and more broadly, around behaviour at work or 'workplace culture'. The study offered a range of open responses and closed questions. Participants were given the option of a paid, follow up interview.

In total, the survey gained 514 views, 329 starts and 152 completed responses. There were ten interviews. All case studies and quotations used below have been deidentified.

## Changed circumstances

Going into 2020, 95 per cent of the women surveyed in *Generation Expendable?* defined themselves as employed. This figure aligns with Australian Bureau of Statistics' data in relation to unemployment for women over 40 during the 2019-2020 financial year.<sup>16</sup> Of those in work, 70 per cent were permanently contracted in full- or part-time jobs.<sup>17</sup> Other respondents identified casual work, short-term contracts and a few, self-employment.<sup>18</sup>

Four-out-of-five women had either retained work or had secured a new job when they undertook the survey. Almost a fifth (19 per cent) lost work as a result of the pandemic.<sup>19</sup>

The most common change in employment circumstances for older women was the swift pivot to working from the home that many other cohorts faced. For some, this brought greater autonomy, convenience and more time with family. For others, it brought isolation and increased vulnerability.

*I was renting with my de-facto husband in NSW. The pandemic made his controlling behaviour much worse and badly impacted my mental health. I tried to commit suicide. After 3 weeks in hospital, I packed everything up and moved to Melbourne where I rent a flat with one of my sons. Relocating was supported by my employer. [But] because I needed time off due to a mental health crisis, I feel I am considered a liability.*

Alisha, 54, single income, renter

Second to changes in place of work, the most commonly cited outcomes at work was a sharp increase in *risk*, defined as 'impact on workplace health and safety'. With many respondents working in the newly 'essential' sectors of healthcare, aged care and education, keeping their jobs came at a cost – and not only in changes to hours and less job security.

Other factors such as changes to hours and hourly rate, loss of leave and work benefits, losing work but finding other employment and being on JobKeeper were identified.<sup>18</sup>

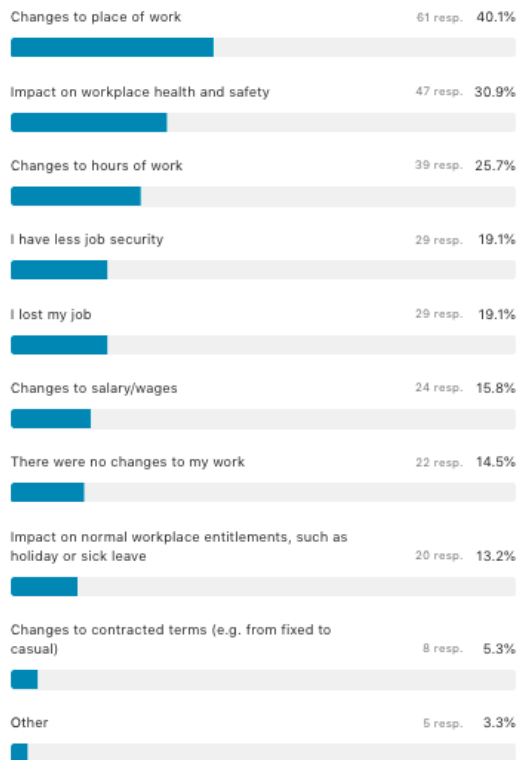
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<sup>13</sup> [20\\_AWCAppendix3.pdf \(awhn.org.au\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/accumulating-poverty-womens-experiences-inequality-over>

✓ 9 Select the changes to work circumstances or conditions that have impacted you in 2020:

152 out of 152 people answered this question (with multiple choice)



Overall, three quarters of women had experienced changes at work as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. But did these changes relate to their age and/or their gender?

## Pandemic ageism?

Researchers had hypothesised that heightened workplace stressors, financial, social and health anxieties arising from the COVID crisis, might play out in line with broader 'structural inequalities' inherent to stratifications of value in the Australian labour market.

Long recognised for our enduring colonial and patriarchal hierarchies in culture, Australia's labour market has been shown to value women's work - and non-white workers - less.<sup>20</sup> With women's worth linked to physical appearance and youthful fecundity in patriarchal discourse, older women become less visible, including in the workplace.<sup>21</sup> Characterisation of (older) women have been shown to align with the 'numerous institutional, normative and cultural factors' influencing social policy and planning in Australia.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.sbs.com.au/topics/voices/health/article/2019/07/31/life-newstart-your-60s-no-one-wants-give-someone-my-age-job>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/gender-indicators-australia/latest-release>

<sup>17</sup> ABS figures rely on (disputed) 'jobseekers' receiving Centrelink payments and therefore may miss the underemployed or 'multiployed' in low-paid jobs.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-12/women-with-degrees-lost-jobs-in-greater-numbers-than-men-covid/13146120>

<sup>19</sup> Respondents were able to select more than one answer, therefore the percentages don't add to 100.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.longdom.org/open-access/the-price-of-prejudice-womens-work-and-labour-force-discrimination-in-australian-history-2332-0915-1000177.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/07/10-tropes-about-women-women-should-stop-laughing-about/325782/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://bmcpublikehealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-018-5273-4>

With differences in life experiences between women in their 40s and in their 70s, researchers disaggregated the survey data into three age cohorts: 40-50 years older; 50-60; and women over 60. We asked each cohort whether they believed their age had influenced outcomes for them at work during the coronavirus crisis. Would the survey expose direct discrimination, such as pressure to take early retirement; or identify unconscious bias, assumptions of older women as secondary earners, or not having childcare commitments?

Age as a factor	Yes	No	Unsure
40-50 (N=69)	17%	77%	6%
51-60 (N=62)	29%	50%	21%
60+ (N=21)	42 %	42%	16%
<b>Total</b>	<b>24.5%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>14.5%</b>

As the summary table shows, fewer than one in five women in their 40s self-reported age as a factor in personal work outcomes.<sup>23</sup> For the cohort in their 50s however, the percentage almost doubled. For women over 60, aligned with retirement age, almost half – 42 per cent – felt age had influenced outcomes of work during the 12-month period. Overall, a third of participants in *Generation Expendable?* cited age as factor shaping pandemic employment outcomes.

For some, age discrimination seemed par for the course:

*A lot of boomer and Gen X women have been in the industry since the 1970s and had gained permanency. However, they are being squeezed out in successive restructures; encouraged to take redundancy; forced to reapply for lesser roles; burnt out by increased reporting.*

Marianne, 50s, mortgagee

*Spill and fill; PDs [position descriptions] changed slightly to allow for disestablishment of [permanent] roles.*

Allie, 48, single homeowner

For others, shock was evident:

*I chose to work from home which I thought was going to be a month or so. Then came suggestions that we needed to employ younger people who were healthy and less likely to need to work from home. I was a female, over 60, with a chronic disease and ostracized for working from home. They said it was my choice. I emphasized that it was a government and CEO directive. I have worked my whole life, with 2 children since I was 15 years and 3 months old. I now feel worthless.*

Saana, 60s, disability, single mortgagee

*Recently made redundant. A younger male has taken my responsibilities. I was the second most senior employee at the company.*

Felice, 59, dual mortgagee

Discrimination is of course devastating for individuals. It also resonates beyond individual harms. The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) 2021 *Global Report on Ageism* states: “Ageism places a heavy economic burden on individuals and society...[it] impacts all aspects of older people’s health, reduces access to employment, education, and health care...”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Notably, an equal number didn’t believe it had played a role.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00524-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00524-9/fulltext)

Age discrimination was frequently cited by survey respondents seeking employment:

*NONE of the jobs I have applied for have resulted in calls from prospective employers nor interviews despite my having experience.*

Nola, single renter, lost job

*When I apply for a job my resume works, I get an interview. However, when my prospective employer sees me, I am automatically dropped off the list. Most times I can see it in the interviewers or receptionist's face. As I need my Centrelink payment, I have to apply for jobs each month with no expectation of getting any of them.*

Marina, 65, seeking work, homeowner, dual income

*The industry seems to be chasing younger workers with less experience. More pliable and able to be trained in the way the company wants without having to unlearn different or bad habits. Still a very male dominated workforce and I believe HR, which is mainly female, preference the guys.*

Ivana, 50s, sole parent, mortgagee

Age discrimination of a more 'systemic' nature was also apparent in policy responses, with the federal government's JobMaker scheme focused on 'new jobs' for younger workers aged 16–29 and 30–35 years and neglected the increasing numbers of Australians who need to work beyond their 50s and 60s.<sup>25,26</sup>

Overall, the data indicated both individual and 'structural' age discrimination at work during the first 12 months of Australia's pandemic crisis.

## Pandemic sexism?

Survey respondents in their 50s and over 60 cited higher rates of age-discrimination than the younger group. Would researchers see greater commonality in perceptions of gender discrimination shaping women's work outcomes?

Gender as a contributory factor	Yes	No	Unsure
40-50 (N=69)	32%	61%	7%
51-60 (N=62)	23%	59%	18%
60+ (N=21)	37%	53%	10%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>28.5%</b>	<b>58.5%</b>	<b>13%</b>

Combined, one-in-three women identified gender as a factor in decisions made about their employment between March 2020-2021. Again, there was less recognition in the 40–50 age group (although still one-in-three). There was greater identification of sex discrimination from women in their 50s and over 60, perhaps because of greater understanding that discrimination was not always direct:

*Perception that female workers are the second breadwinners.*

Alisha, 50s, single renter

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-10-13/jobmaker-was-meant-to-support-450-000-jobs-the-real-figure-is-ju/100532630>

<sup>26</sup> The scheme covered only young unemployed people on a Centrelink payment. The ABC exposed Treasury papers detailing how employers would profit by replacing a single full-time worker with 2-3 part-time staff, using the \$4 billion two-year Jobmaker scheme. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-22/jobmaker-could-pay-bosses-to-cut-wages-jobs-treasury-foi/13157500>

*More than two dozen men were promoted in my department. Multiple women (at least 5 I know of) in my age bracket had their teams and mandates grow, with no promotion, no salary bump, no recognition...*

Cora, 60s, single mortgagee

Indications of age- and/or gender-discrimination emerging from *Generation Expendable?* are only a snapshot. For definitive evidence, randomised and longitudinal analysis would be required. However, the high rates of self-reported discrimination are significant enough to recommend further investigation.

## The dual discriminations

With 24.3 per cent of participants identifying age as a factor, and 28.3 per cent identifying gender as a factor, researchers were not surprised that replies to the question ‘do you believe the combination of your age and your gender influenced outcomes at work during the pandemic?’ were statistically similar.

Here, 32.2 per cent identified the ‘dual discriminations’ at work, with almost half of women over 60 believing age and gender a factor in work outcomes during the pandemic.<sup>27</sup>

Age and Gender	Yes	No
40-50 (N=69)	23%	77%
51-60 (N=62)	38%	62%
60+ (N=21)	52.5%	47.5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>32.2%</b>	<b>67.8%</b>

With women already financially disadvantaged by ‘normal’ crises such as family breakdown or loss of health, the new precarity in work at a time when many expect to save for retirement was daunting.<sup>28</sup>

*Preferential treatment was given to people who didn't have carer responsibilities as they were able to work longer hours.*

Maxine, 40s, single parent renter

With women’s capacity to accumulate wealth shaped by career breaks and work patterns around care commitments, researchers were keen to capture some of the factors that might support financial resilience to the crisis.

## Gendered ageing

With increasing numbers of Australian women facing poverty in older age, the survey included questions around health, housing, partnership status and other factors which might affect participants’ ability to ‘bounce back’ from the crisis.<sup>29,30</sup>

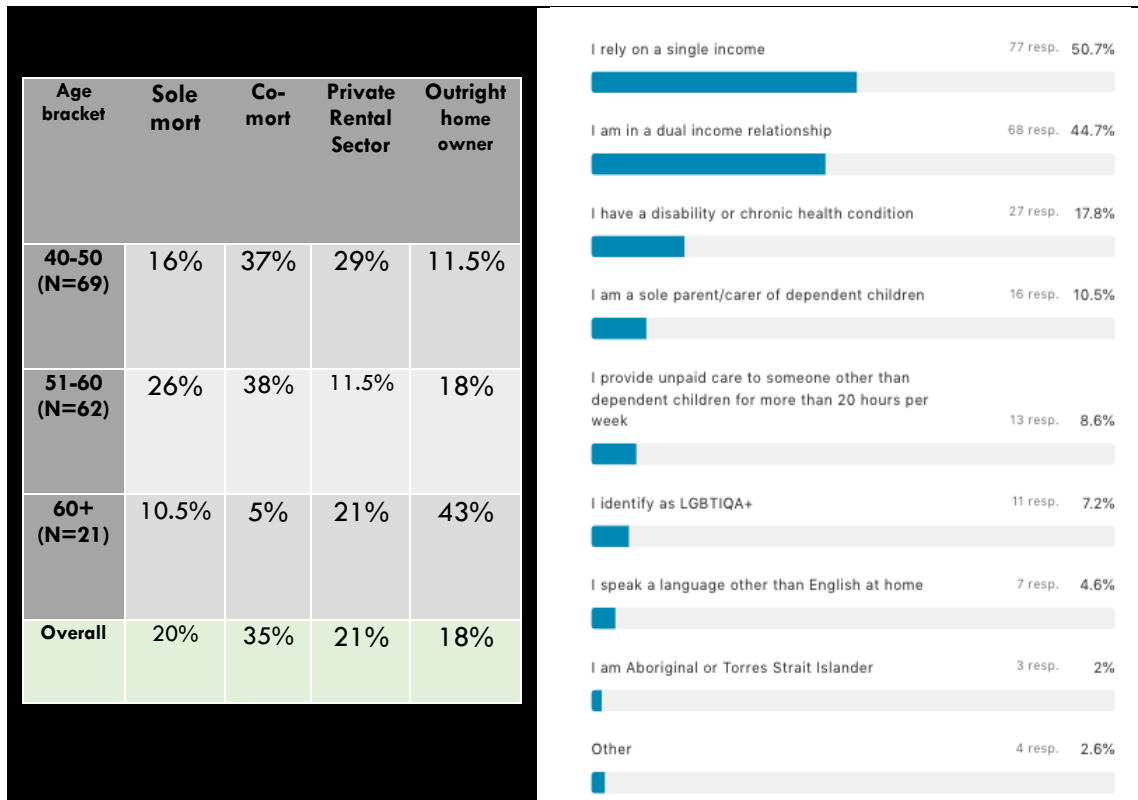
<sup>27</sup> For this question, the ‘not sure’ option wasn’t available

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/mar/19/divorce-women-risk-poverty-children-relationship>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-15/retirement-superannuation-super-money-investment-home-ownership/100208500>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.louisianafcu.org/articles/how-men-and-women-spend-their-money-differently>

The two tables below show some of the factors which impact upon women’s earning capacity and long-term financial security. Note, ‘other’ housing options are not shown.



While detailed analysis of these ‘resilience’ factors in relation to outcomes was outside the scope of the study, the high numbers of women relying on a single income as sole mortgagees, and women living in private rental housing (29 per cent of those in their 40s and one-in-five aged over 60) was particularly concerning. With zero housing costs intrinsic to the adequacy of Australia’s age pension, the implications for the cohort overall, of loss of income and increased precarity, is that COVID will lead to further disadvantage in retirement than expected until normal economic conditions.<sup>31</sup> Overall, 44 per cent reported negative financial outcomes which they expected to impact retirement.

But long-term financial security was only one concern. While a majority of older women had retained employment, it had come at a cost. A cost which could be related to be age and to gender.

## The gendered workplace

High numbers of respondents to *Generation Expendable?* had identified themselves as working in education, healthcare, aged care and community support; all ‘gendered’ or more feminised workplaces at the frontline of the crisis.<sup>32</sup> With 42 per cent of survey respondents having told us that occupational health and safety (OH&S) risk was a key concern in the pandemic workplace, we asked whether this might signal a systemic discrimination for women workers.

<sup>31</sup> [http://web.archive.org/web/20160915013718/http://percapita.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Pension-Adequacy\\_Final.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20160915013718/http://percapita.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Pension-Adequacy_Final.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/closing-the-gender-gap/economic-sectors-with-the-highest-feminisation-rates-are-health-and-community-services-followed-by-education\\_9789264179370-graph49-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/closing-the-gender-gap/economic-sectors-with-the-highest-feminisation-rates-are-health-and-community-services-followed-by-education_9789264179370-graph49-en)



The education sector, where it is common to see a staff more than 70 per cent female, had been the subject of public debate early in the pandemic.<sup>33</sup> The debate had focused however, more on the importance of classroom routine for children than risks for staff.<sup>34,35</sup>

*We were expected to continue attending school with little to no consideration given to our personal circumstances, risks to family members. We were expected to educate the children attending school, ensure they socially distanced (impossible with young children), clean and clean and clean with no training or PPE. Our workload tripled overnight.*

Charli, 50s, co-renter

*I didn't feel safe working in overcrowded schools where students and teachers rush through a small space and students were 'joke-coughing' at teachers.*

Eleanor, 55, homeowner, dual income

*I worked as a casual relief teacher prior to the pandemic, then because of my age, I felt it dangerous to be working as schools were advising teachers over 60 to retire or take leave.*

Phong, 60s, dual mortgagee

*Some schools offered 55+ the option to work from home, my school didn't.*

Andrea, 50s, single mortgagee

While male workers in essential sectors also experienced heightened OH&S risk in the broad scramble to prepare for the virus, researchers wondered, might the predominance of (older) women as educators, aged care workers, social workers and cleaners suggest something of a systemic 'expendability'?<sup>36</sup>

The slow response of governments/employers in protecting women at work raises questions around crisis policymaking. Particularly when 'foundational' workplaces are accountable to government. It also begs the question of the value and 'visibility' of older women dominating frontline jobs, vulnerable both by age and often, as we shall see, gender.

For nurses for example, 90 per cent of whom are female and 48 per cent of those over 45, the apprehension was real.<sup>37,38</sup>

*Our site is female dominated and we have been bullied and manipulated, threatened with financial ramifications. I have spoken out and am being targeted for doing so. Staff are burnt out and in distress. Residents are in distress.*

Nina, 47, co-renter

*Lost confidence in the workplace.*

Penny, 70s, single homeowner

The rollout of personal protective equipment (PPE) was sluggish and unevenly distributed, with reports of it being unfit for women.<sup>39</sup> Added to this were enclosed and poorly ventilated environments; tasks of work which routinely included intimate contact with vulnerable clients.<sup>40</sup>

*I was not considered to be in a high-risk group, so was expected to continue to work face to face in a workplace with around 1000 people. This seemed surreal, but not unfair.*

Caroline, 60s, mortgagee

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.wla.edu.au/yowsil-results.html>

<sup>34</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-04/apo-nid311812.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Although this was later downscaled in some jurisdictions to schooling only the children of 'essential workers', teacher safety seemed largely invisible in decision-making, while parents were given choice, teachers were not  
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-15/coronavirus-changes-to-school-in-term-two-across-australia/12146764>

<sup>36</sup> [Australia's jobs market highly gender-segregated, little change over past 20 years - ABC News](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-15/coronavirus-changes-to-school-in-term-two-across-australia/12146764)

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.acn.edu.au/the-hive-2019/healthy-ageing-nursing-workforce>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/undervalued-and-unseen-australias-covid-19-frontline-workforce/14/4/2020>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.ckn.org.au/content/personal-protective-respirator-masks-ppe-often-do-not-fit-correctly-especially-women-and>

<sup>40</sup> <https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2020-06/RCD.9999.0256.0017.pdf>

*Working in intensive care is not really an appropriate use of my skills as far as the pandemic goes, and it also causes me a lot of physical pain.*

Leanne, 70s, renter with chronic health condition

Under normal labour market conditions, women might have sought new jobs – and indeed, some felt driven to this, not only because of the increased risk to COVID that were experiencing, but from the *cultural virus* infecting the workplace.

## Workplace relationships

Having anticipated changed circumstances and conditions of work for women, researchers wanted to understand how relationships at work functioned in the first 12 months of COVID. Expecting a sharp increase in workplace stressors, it was pleasing to see some women reporting great collegiality.

### Ellie, 41, renter, living with chronic illness

Ellie had just passed her probationary period at the university library when COVID hit. Unlike some, she found her team of ten women supportive, even when the pandemic triggered Ellie's pre-existing PTSD and major depressive disorder. Early on, team members, of which she was both the youngest and most recently employed, had been offered voluntary redundancy or early retirement. Although this was later taken off the table, it left her anxious about her job security. After seeking advice from her supportive team leader, Ellie chose a reduction in hours and some purchased leave. As of February 2021, she remained content to work from home. Describing herself as an "introvert" she has found it easy to focus with fewer interruptions and appreciated being able to complete household tasks while still doing her paid role. Ellie described "feeling privileged" in comparison to many other workers, even though the precarity of the sector is still causing her anxiety.

Positive change in workplace relationships was rare, however. More commonly, participants described poor behaviour at work. Occasionally this was well managed:

*Management were supportive and assisted me to deal with an aggressive co-worker. I believe that the aggressive behaviour was directly linked to the co-worker struggling to cope with increased workload and stress related.*

Lesley, 43, retail worker, co-mortgagee

Overall, more than one-in-two women (58.6 per cent), 'didn't feel supported by management', and either disagreed or weren't sure that 'established policies and procedures were adhered to' during the period.

Many described 'toxic' workplace cultures linked to pandemic pressures.

*I changed jobs due to a toxic and bullying work environment. I had been forced to take a 20 per cent pay cut with no reduction in hours.*

Jenni, 55, co-mortgagee

*Young man been in industry given information and power. I was not given the same information. Information is power... Was a very humiliating time, [it] broke me. Counsellor; 6 weeks off work. When I returned, removed from my role and changed workplace. Some workers refused any engagement with me. Still too emotionally affected to talk about my experience.*

Madeline, 50s, co-mortgagee

### Brenda, 66, co-mortgagee

Being on leave when COVID lockdown hit meant Brenda was working from home immediately, following government and medical advice as a vulnerable worker. Her usual work activities were reshaped by the change, as she couldn't perform in-person duties. She continued to attend weekly staff meetings virtually however, listening to the needs of the team she supervised as well as the priorities of colleagues in lateral positions. When clerical staff were under particular pressure, she stepped into a telephone triage role, in addition to her usual management tasks. In August, much to Brenda's disbelief, a group of senior clinicians lodged a grievance of 'poor leadership' against her. No examples were given, so it was impossible for Brenda to make an evidenced rebuttal. The situation was problematised by her continued working from home, but as a recent cancer patient, return to work wasn't an option. While Brenda received private support from some, the hierarchies in healthcare bureaucracy meant the grievance process was largely conducted 'in camera', with details not shared and therefore unanswerable. A formal capability process followed, citing an 'OH&S risk analysis process' of an incident in a work area where Brenda had jurisdiction, despite her being able to provide on-site supervision. Eventually, the claim was resolved in her favour, but the usual procedure of identifying where responsibility lay never took place.

## The toxic workplace

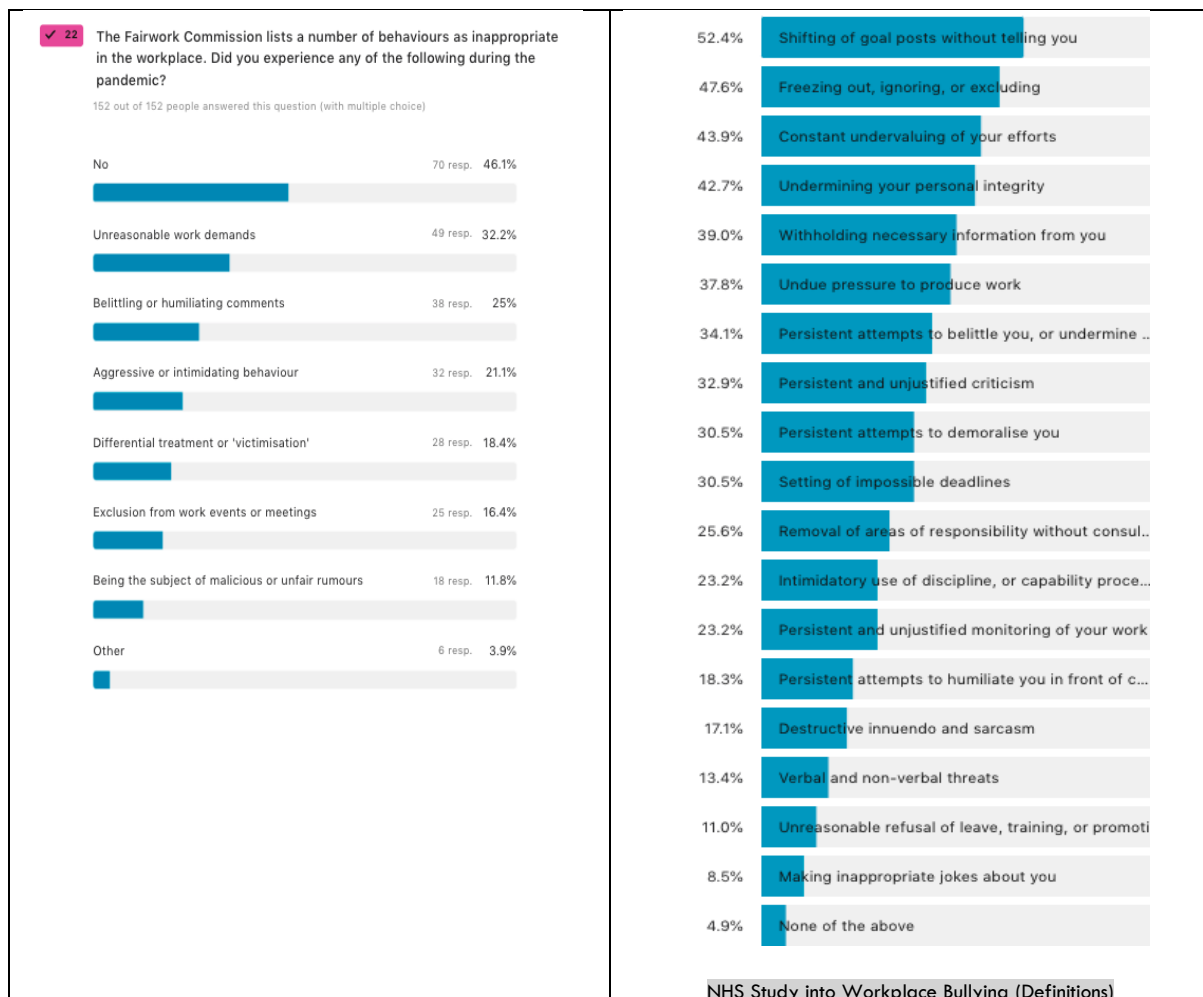
To understand pandemic workplace culture, researchers had introduced two datasets into the survey. The first used Fair Work Commission definitions of workplace bullying. The second, more nuanced descriptors from UK's study of bullying in the National Health Service (NHS).<sup>41</sup>

When asked, 'did you experience any of the inappropriate behaviours listed below?', researchers were shocked to see 53 per cent of participants - *more than half* of those surveyed, had experienced one or more conducts which, if ongoing, constitute workplace bullying under Australian law.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/3/6/e002628>

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2021C00421/Html/Volume\\_2#\\_Toc84592712](https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2021C00421/Html/Volume_2#_Toc84592712)



Although one small study of a specific worker cohort under extraordinary circumstances, the implications for Australian workplace culture more broadly stood out to researchers. If the patterns identified were representative, there was a crisis in OH&S risk for older women – and no doubt other groups – at work.

## Pandemic or endemic?

Work Safe recognises that occupational health includes psychological health.<sup>43</sup> It stresses employers and workers should 'never be silent witness to workplace bullying, harassment or other poor behaviours'.<sup>44</sup>

*Generation Expendable?* found many workplaces not only lacked safeguards to protect workers from psychological harm, but also that *structures inherent* to the organisation of work seemed to actively drive bullying. While it's not possible to separate out 'external' anxieties from relationships at work during a global pandemic, the consistency of incidents and their nature suggested to researchers that there were factors pre-existing the crisis:<sup>45</sup>

*No changes in my workplace can be attributed to the pandemic. [They] can only be attributed to perceptions that my age and gender make me less capable at work.*

Felice, 59, dual mortgagee

*My 2020 workplace has an absolutely toxic culture. This is long term and completely unrelated to Covid.*

Marnie, 40s, single renter

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/media-centre/psychological-health-and-safety-workplace-national-guide>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/bullying-workplace>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/reports-publications/quarterly-reports>

*The pandemic is irrelevant. Australian work culture is so screwed up...Bitching behind people's backs, bullying and intimidation. That is nothing to do with the pandemic. Because I am female and older, they literally act like a teenager who wants to go to a party and have a tantrum.*

Marisa, 50s dual-mortgagee

While the pandemic almost certainly heightened poor conditions at work, including 'toxic' work cultures, for many it was already the norm. To date, data from the Fair Work Commission shows no increase in reported bullying during the pandemic. This may, however, only reflect a reluctance of workers to bring claims in a precarious labour market.

International studies have rated Australia sixth highest in the world for workplace bullying, an estimate that aligns with figures from mental health organisations. Beyond Blue suggests that 'during their working lives, almost 50% of all Australians will experience bullying in some form'.<sup>46</sup>

*Generation Expendable?* participants often linked treatment to their age and/or gender:

*I felt that due to my age and gender, I was made to feel more at risk. More of a nuisance. More trouble.*

Ann, 60s, single renter

*I worked until my contract expired and that was that. I was not contacted personally by anyone at that university until someone rang to suggest that I might like to complete the project upon which I had been working - unpaid of course.*

Beth, 60s, renter and carer

That the survey exposes high rates of bullying in sectors where women dominate the staff aligns with Fair Work's statistics. Here, education and healthcare routinely top the list of sectors reporting bullying.<sup>47</sup> It is noted by the sector itself that 'one of the undesirable features of the health care sector in Australia is a culture of bullying and harassment'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly in education, where a reported 99.6% of educators experience bullying across their career. Researchers explored this further in targeted interviews with participants, to explore commonalities in majority-female sectors.<sup>49</sup>

Without having directly asked about perpetrators in the survey, researchers had to look at supporting data for greater understanding of the nature of workplace bullying of older women. Understanding that bullying behaviours are most commonly directed by managers at subordinates, we looked at the demographics women gave for 'decision-makers at work', during the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, most cited men over the age of 40, as typical of the feminised and other sectors.<sup>50</sup> Close on this figure however, came 40 per cent older female managers cited and indeed, the survey identified case upon case of older women bullying other older women.

*It speaks volumes about a world in which women turn on other women; no better than the men we try and escape. Fickle woman leading in her man's world. Why we feel we need to become one in order to live amongst them. I will never understand.*

Katie, 50s, single mother in public housing

*My boss picked on me prior to COVID – even putting me in Coventry for six months but that's another story. I always felt disliked and resented. I had disclosed being neurodiverse and she certainly targeted my communication style – or what she saw as a lack thereof. She shared false (and confidential) information about me with colleagues too. The behaviour ramped up under COVID. I was already routinely excluded, and my input ignored or mocked, but one final email attack – I walked the streets for two hours so my kids couldn't witness me crying. With advice from my union, I lodged a staff grievance. I considered it an internal matter so was pretty shocked when she involved the Board and threatened legal action. I'd kept records though. The*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/position-statement-bullying-in-the-workplace.pdf> Reviewed 2021

<sup>49</sup> [http://www.aphref.aph.gov.au\\_house\\_committee\\_ee\\_bullying\\_subs\\_sub77.pdf](http://www.aphref.aph.gov.au_house_committee_ee_bullying_subs_sub77.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.universalclass.com/articles/business/characteristics-of-workplace-harassment/perpetrators.htm>

*Board agreed a substantial payout - but I had to sign an NDA<sup>51</sup>. As an organisation advocating for workers' rights – including for older women – it was terrible. I'm still on medication for both my physical and mental health. In my new job they celebrate difference.*

Brynne, 53, disability, co-mortgagee

The NHS study had identified 'perceived inequities in workload distribution...made staff more likely to bully' and with workload pressures identified by 38 per cent of women in the survey, it suggests work burden was a significant issue in the feminised sectors prior to the pandemic, an issue heightened by the crisis.

*Generation Expendable?* uncovered much evidence of what the World Health Organisation has recently recognised as the work-related condition of 'burnout'. The WHO describes burnout as 'chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed;' including feelings of exhaustion, 'reduced efficacy in work' and 'negativism or cynicism related to one's job'.

When we consider burnout for female workers, it additionally needs to be seen in the context of many women commencing *unpaid work* almost as soon as *paid work* finishes for the day. This 'reproductive' work typically involves caring for children, cooking, cleaning, household administration as well as bearing the emotion load – all tasks which have significantly grown as Australia 'moved home' during the pandemic.<sup>52</sup> The emotional load women already often shoulder, will only have gone into overdrive under poor conditions at work, reduced safety and stressed colleagues and families to support. This is borne out by mental health statistics across the first 12 months of the pandemic, where women report much higher levels of 'psychological distress' than men.<sup>53,54</sup>

Researchers propose that burnout is likely to be a key factor in workplace bullying from and of women. A driver with a structural element. As many older women work part-time to meet family commitments or in line with health considerations, the burden of work may not diminish according. Part-time work has grown from 10 per cent of total employment in 1966 to 29 per cent in 2007.<sup>55</sup> Yet there is very little research as to whether or how employers reduce workload for part-time staff. What research there is shows that part-time workers, usually women, are expected to deliver '100% of the outputs in 60 or 80% of the hours – and for 60 or 80% of the salary'.<sup>56</sup>

A more structural explanation might be seen in Australia's model of 'market competition', where meritocracy is valued over collaborative leadership. We can see in this, arguably, linear hierarchies of Australia's colonial heritage and its enduring natures in the structural foundations of our government institutions. Perhaps also we can see evidence of patriarchal stereotypes shaping relationships at work for women. Under patriarchal cultures, women are encouraged to compete (for the attention of men).

While not all schools, hospitals and community care settings are hubs of inappropriate behaviour, the extreme commonality of experiences in this study signals a significant problem; one heightened under crisis conditions perhaps, but arguably *endemic* to Australian working culture. Further research into the bullying work environments of the feminised sectors is clearly needed.

## The toxic workplace

With more than half of participants experiencing psychological risk at work as a result of conditions at work in the pandemic, researchers recorded the impacts on their health and wellbeing.

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<sup>51</sup> Non-disclosure agreement

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/health/2017-09-14/the-mental-load-and-what-to-do-about-it/8942032>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/methodologies/household-impacts-covid-19-survey-methodology/feb-2021>

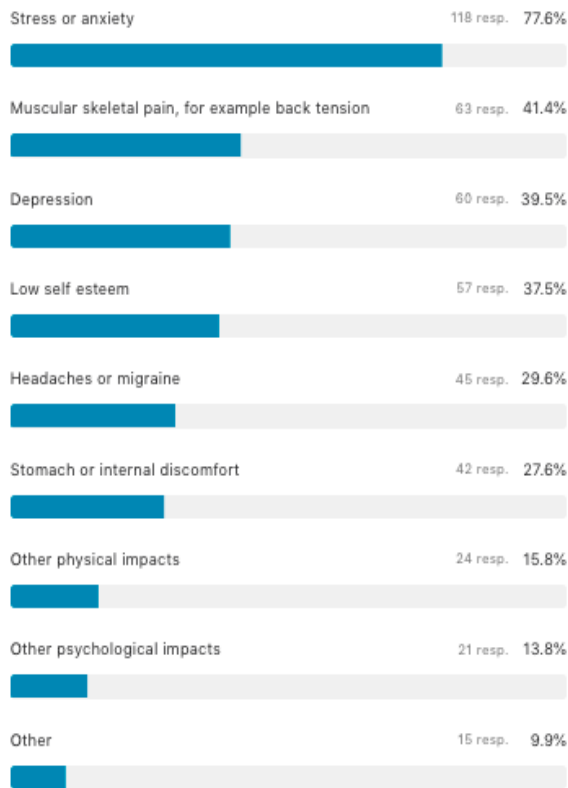
<sup>54</sup> <https://www.anu.edu.au/news/all-news/worry-increases-distancing-decreases-with-covid-second-wave>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/part-time-employment/part-time-employment.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0018726717722394>

✓ 31 Have your experiences at work this year affected your health or wellbeing in any of the following ways?

152 out of 152 people answered this question (with multiple choice)



It was evident from the responses that the health and wellbeing of women at work during March 2020-2021 had been heavily impacted. For some, this was related to their treatment by ‘leaders’, for others, the stress of employment precarity – with its age and gender connotations – was also key.

*I got let go; as I was with the company for less than a year; four hours later I was offered two weeks’ work. After two weeks sacked again. Next day offered an 8 hr a fortnight contract. Worked 29hrs a week for four weeks. Offered a 45hr fortnight contract-worked 45hrs a week. After three months the contract was meant to be permanent, results back to casual contract.*

Nandita, 40s, co-mortgagee

*Their unwillingness to make my position permanent prior [to COVID], meant that as soon as I needed to work from home, they could fire me with no notice and no recourse. Was fired literally an hour after I requested to work from home.*

Anya, 40s, dual income, living with disability

*The pressure on us to perform fulltime plus evenings... the screaming and shouting and BLAMING was too stressful, and I resigned. My nerves are shot. I was on job seeker and took a 20 per cent pay cut in an already underpaid industry. I believe that Australia is fundamentally ageist and sexist. Women over 45 are treated like dirt, not only by men but women under 30. I have experienced unbelievable ageism from this group.<sup>[57]</sup> I am 52 and a mother of teenagers. I have openly been told that men only want to work with young, pretty things as it ‘keeps them performing well’.*

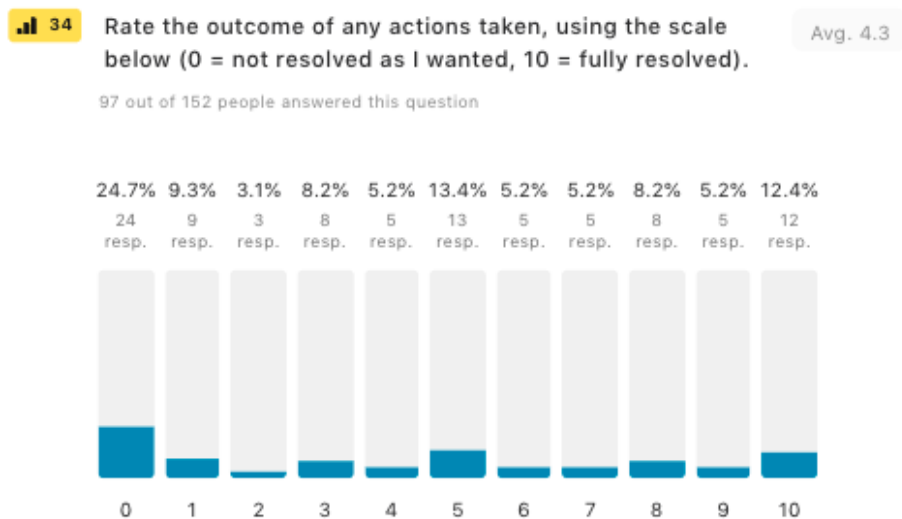
Ododa, 52, single mortgagee

*Lost my job at the beginning of the pandemic so my boss could recoup money he lost on a cancelled trip to Bali.*

Deanna, 50s, renter

<sup>57</sup> There is [evidence](#) supporting this claim.

Despite challenging circumstances, almost two-in-three women 'took action of some sort' to challenge conditions at work. 33.6 per cent 'took up issues with the person/people involved directly'; others sought 'help from a manager' (23 per cent) or 'from co-workers' (27 per cent). Overall, issues were less often resolved than fully resolved.



With the pandemic still prevalent, conditions for Australian workers and jobseekers will likely remain stressed for some time. For women over 40 as we have seen, labour market mobility is problematic. An 'internal colonisation' has been noted in Australia culture. This refers to our being 'a state with equal citizenship but which is structured socially and economically in such a way that certain areas and populations are at a disadvantage.' The findings of *Generation Expendable?* suggest older women are one of these disadvantaged populations.<sup>58</sup>

So how do we improve workplace culture?

## Rethinking the workplace

Academics have noted that '...in Australia of course, colonial expansion was aided by narratives of racial and patriarchal organisation that many see enduring in 21st century capitalism.'<sup>59</sup> If we are to improve outcomes for older women – and other marginalised groups - at work therefore, we will need transformational change; disruption of 'the 'natural' hierarchy of white men organising society', which reproduces deeply embedded inequities.<sup>60</sup>

In the short-term we might:

- Monitor and report bullying data in relation to traits protected under law, such as age and gender;
- Implement harsher consequences for perpetrators; mandatory retraining and removal from the workplace;
- Introduce mandatory reporting of psychological injury with improved recompense for victims.

<sup>58</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/776653/Heritage\\_colonialism\\_and\\_postcolonialism](https://www.academia.edu/776653/Heritage_colonialism_and_postcolonialism)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01400/full>



To generate real change however, we need to dismantle the complex factors which reproduce risk by *design*. We live in a country marked by 'the perpetuation of colonial and patriarchal structures across every part of society, including our economic relationships'.<sup>61</sup>

For 'decolonial feminists' nothing less than 'the transformation of hetero-patriarchal, colonial, and racist structures of organisation and power' will achieve this. This means fundamentally rethinking our linear systems of work and replacing neo-liberal individualism with more feminine and collective models of economic and social wellbeing.

The coronavirus pandemic has been devastating for national economies and workers the world over. But it has also provided a platform for 'new economy' voices advocating for a 'post-growth' future. For some, this will see the 'revival of Indigenous knowledges-practices' as a way to mitigate climate crisis and work in harmony with the environment. For feminist economists, a future where care work is recognised both culturally and financially, through a universal care income for example, is a first step if we are to support women in work.<sup>62</sup>

Cooperative and more 'circular' ways of working will be key to disrupting the inequalities inherent in labour market capitalism. Unlike capitalist systems of productions, these *structure in equality*: in ownership, decision-making and in (collective) outcomes.<sup>63,64</sup>

With institutions of work 'heavily implicated in the rising levels of global inequality' this study provides evidence of what the 'mutually constitutive relationship between organizations and institutions in the reproduction of inequality' means for older women.<sup>65</sup>

While it may seem that transformative change is out of reach, there are signs it's already emerging. Virtual online networks have mushroomed 'under COVID' - an almost *subversive localism* of place-based reciprocity, and 'good karma' economics, dominated largely by older women.<sup>66</sup> Outside of the strictures of the paid economy it seems, older women remain integral to our social organisation and wellbeing.

## Conclusion

For the lucky few, the pandeconomy has provided new opportunities. For others, the rise of a mass exodus from the workplace, a 'great resignation' shows that workplaces the world over are no longer delivering for workers. For older women, already vulnerable to gendered ageing, the coronavirus crisis has amplified existing inequalities, including age- and gender-discrimination. Only by challenging entrenched hierarchies at work and in the home, will we be able to pivot to ways of working that support the wellbeing of all the community.

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<sup>61</sup> <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/05/patriarchy-and-how-it-shows-up-for-everyone/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://webmagazine.unitn.it/evento/drss/87665/who-cares-the-impact-of-universal-care-income-and-working-time-reduction-on>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.epi.org/publication/what-labor-market-changes-have-generated-inequality-and-wage-suppression-employer-power-is-significant-but-largely-constant-whereas-workers-power-has-been-eroded-by-policy-actions/>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.africaacademyofmanagement.org/organisation-special-issue-call-papers-2019>

<sup>65</sup> <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0170840618792596>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.goodkarmaeffect.com/stories>

35

Looking to the future, how do you rate your employment prospects? (0 = very poor, 10 = excellent)

Avg. 5.5

149 out of 152 people answered this question

