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June 2003
Abstract

With an increasing proportion of older people in the Australian population and increasing health and longevity, paid work after the age of 65 years may become an option or a necessity in the future. The focus of this paper is on Australian women of the baby boom generation, their working futures, and the work-retirement transition.

This was explored from the viewpoint of women and from a social policy perspective, comprising three studies: focus group research, computer-mediated communication involving an Internet website and four scenarios for the year 2020, and the analysis of quantitative data from a large survey.

The themes of a work – life balance and the availability of choices emerged throughout the research. Women in high-status occupations were found to be more likely to be open to the option of continuing paid work beyond age 65 than women in low-status jobs. However, the women were equally likely to embrace future volunteering.

Policies for an ageing female workforce should be based on the values of inclusiveness, fairness, self-determination, and social justice, and address issues of workplace flexibility, equality in the workplace, recognition for unpaid community and caring work, opportunities for life-long learning, complexity and inequities of the superannuation system, and planning for retirement.
Introduction

Like other industrialised countries, Australia has an ageing population. Longer life expectancy and an increasing proportion of older people in the community are expected to have implications for fiscal, economic, and social policy and put pressure on government income support systems. These pressures will be exacerbated by older workers leaving the workforce.

Population ageing leads to changes in the economy, workforce, family structures, local communities, living arrangements, public expenditure and revenue, labour force participation rates, retirement decisions, and consumption patterns. At the same time, the nature of work is undergoing radical and rapid change, particularly in response to changing technology and globalisation. Concerns about the implications of an ageing population are frequently raised and ageing is often perceived as problematic and as “an issue about which something needs to be done” (Bacon, 1999, p. 77). With an increasing proportion of older people in the Australian population and increasing health and longevity, paid work after the age of 65 years may become an option or a necessity in the future.

What do these changes mean for the people that are now approaching retirement? What are the views of baby boomers? What policies should be developed and implemented to address population ageing? The discourse about our ageing population and its implications for the Australian retirement system has only over the last few years started to attract the attention of the mass media – often portrayed with a negative bias and more distortion than fact. There has also been a growing interest in issues concerning the baby boomers.

The baby boomers are a diverse and large group of people born during the years following the Second World War (1946-1964). The oldest baby boomers are now in their mid-fifties and have started to retire. As a group, they differ from previous generations: they are healthier and have more active lifestyles, are more highly educated, they grew up during times of economic
growth and are accustomed to an economy of personal credit, long-term mortgages, and deficit spending on all levels of government, they had children later, have moved away from traditional family patterns, have experienced rapid social change, and have influenced culture and policies.

There is scant research on issues of future generations’ work-retirement decision and its policy implications, including implications for unpaid work such as volunteering and caring. Further, existing studies of the retirement experience have largely been based on men’s experience of retirement rather than women’s (Onyx & Benton, 1995).

An ageing workforce requires fresh policies. In Australia, there are currently significant disincentives to continued part-time or self-employment for older workers, combined with ageism in the workplace. However, work after the traditional retirement age has the capacity to contribute to financial security in later life and the potential to add purpose and meaning to life.

This paper reports on a research project that was undertaken as part of a PhD thesis at La Trobe University. The focus was on Australian women of the baby boom generation, their working futures, and the work-retirement decision. This was explored both from the viewpoint of women and from a social policy perspective. This paper will present the research methodology, followed by the project's findings and policy recommendations.

**Research methodology**

Three studies were undertaken. Using focus group research, Study 1 explored the views of Australian women of the baby boom generation on working past the age of 65 years. A total of eight focus groups and 49 women were involved in this study.

Study 2 included computer-mediated communication (CMC) involving an Internet website and four future scenarios for the year 2020 describing possible future policy environments in which baby boom women over the age
of 65 engage, or do not engage, in paid work\(^1\). Visitors to the website were asked to comment on the scenarios, in particular to identify probable and preferable elements of the scenarios, policy issues, and possible policy solutions. Fifty individuals provided data for this study. In addition to the website, Study 2 also included a focus group discussion on policy issues with five members of a women’s network.

Study 3 consisted of the analysis of quantitative data from the Healthy Retirement Project (HRP), a longitudinal study of mature-age workers’ expectations as they approach retirement, and their adjustment as they retire. The HRP was undertaken by the Lincoln Gerontology Centre for Education and Research, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University. The focus of Study 3 was on attitudes towards retirement, retirement plans, and the preferred and expected age of retirement. The analysis focused on the responses of 1,359 women born between 1946 and 1964.

Findings

A longer working life

The women who participated in the focus group discussions reported a high level of stress in their lives and did not want to continue working past age 65 at their current pace. However, most of the professionals and managers, as well as some of the women in clerical and administrative positions were open to the possibility of undertaking part-time or project work, or a different type of paid work, past the age of 65. The women in low-skilled occupations agreed unanimously that the option of working beyond the age of 65 years was most unattractive. However, many of these women were looking forward to providing unpaid work in later life for their families and communities.

The preferred retirement age for approximately half of all baby boom women in the HRP was between 55-59 years, although nearly one in ten wanted to

\(^1\) The four future scenarios are available online at http://member.melbpc.org.au/~monika/scenarios.html
work beyond the age of 64. The higher a woman’s education level, the more likely she was to expect a later retirement. Further, the analysis of HRP data by occupational status found the following statistically significant differences: the higher a woman’s occupational status, the more likely she was to work longer hours, have a preference to work less, have not enough spare time, and the less likely she was to regard her income as the primary motivation to work. Both studies (i.e., the focus groups and the HRP) included women who had plans to change the type of their work in the future.

Despite the many negative aspects of contemporary workplaces, most women in the focus group discussions who commented on their paid work stated that they liked at least certain aspects of it. Many of the women who said that they worked mainly for financial reasons also remarked that they enjoyed the social aspects of their work – the social networks, and the companionship with fellow workers.

The greater readiness of the women in the focus groups to consider work beyond the age of 65 years may be explained by the different methodologies. The HRP used a survey questionnaire that provided the women with set categories for their answers. In contrast, the focus group discussions offered the opportunity to further explore issues in a discussion with other women.

Paid work has been considered as a “profoundly important source of social status and self esteem” (Probert, 1998, p. 2). This research found that paid work seemingly provided women in professional, managerial and some women in clerical positions with a sense of fulfilment, control over their creative activity, and contribution to the community. While women in low-skilled occupations were found not to be able to obtain these benefits from their paid work, they considered unpaid work as a meaningful and socially useful activity over which they had control. Consequently, it appears that some non-financial benefits derived from unpaid work by low-skilled women are similar to those gained by women in high-skilled occupations from paid work.
The nature of current workplaces was found to be of great concern to women. Participants in the focus group discussions and the CMC research commented on women’s disadvantage in the workplace. In particular, they pointed to women’s lower wages and reduced labour force participation and the implications for career options and retirement savings. Workplace changes over the last decade have reinforced this disadvantage. The casualisation of the workforce has affected women more than men, the experience of corporate downsizing has led to less job security, and workplaces were perceived as lacking flexibility to suit women’s needs while at the same time employers increasingly expected flexibility from their employees. While some women reported that they had to work long hours, others were unable to find work, in particular those who tried to join the workforce after having taken time out to raise children or care for a partner. As a consequence, women felt time-deprived, rushed, pressured, and stressed.

In all three studies, the participants reported that they had experienced or observed ageism in the workplace. Further, it was noted that older workers were less likely to have training opportunities than younger workers. Thus, older women are affected by multiple inequalities in the workplace: as women, and as older workers (Wilson, 2001). Being a member of a culturally and linguistically diverse community adds another disadvantage (Warburton, Winocur, & Rosenman, 1995).

The research conducted for the three studies found that closely connected to women’s views and planning regarding work in later life were other life considerations, in particular women’s caring and volunteer work, their financial situation, and a balance in their personal lives and in the environment.

**Women’s unpaid work**

Many women reported that they looked forward to volunteering in retirement. One in three women in the HRP voiced this intention, many focus group
participants noted their plans for volunteering in later life, and participants in the CMC research anticipated an increased level of volunteering in the future. Women’s motivation for providing unpaid work for their communities varied, including a concern for others, giving something back to the community, keeping busy, and increasing social contact. The women perceived volunteer work as providing mental stimulation, purposeful activity, social contact, and – unlike paid work – as having sufficient flexibility when combined with family responsibilities and other pursuits.

Unlike plans for paid work, the enthusiasm for future volunteering went across occupational backgrounds. An analysis of HRP data showed that the women were more likely to look forward to volunteering in retirement if they were already volunteers, were in excellent health, and felt frequently happy. Financial security and occupational status had little impact on anticipations of volunteering in retirement, nor did birthplace, language spoken at home, marital status, or whether the women had dependent children.

Volunteer work fosters personal well-being (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Further, it has been noted that people with higher education levels and higher incomes have greater and more diverse social networks (Keupp, Kraus, & Straus, 2000, p. 232). Therefore, volunteer work has potential benefits, in particular for women in low-skilled positions, as it may maintain and increase their well-being and social networks, and counter isolation in later life.

In the context of volunteer work, the research participants raised two issues of concern. They were unsure whether in the future older people would be able to volunteer in areas of skill, and they requested some form of recognition for unpaid community and caring work. The latter concern has also been raised by Hugman, who observed that in unpaid work for the benefit of family and community the actual tasks performed often resemble those for which other people are paid a wage, and therefore should be recognised (1999).
Caring is a type of unpaid work which is predominantly provided by women (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000), is usually associated with financial disadvantage for the carer (Gee et al., 2002; Mitchell & Thompson, 2001), and may have repercussions for the carer’s health and well-being (Status of Women Canada, 1998). Not surprisingly, the women who participated in this research expressed concerns for the care of their ageing parents and other relatives. They found the required support services in short supply, and commented that governments had reduced entitlements and cut services such as nursing home care and carer support. Many of the women in the focus group discussions reported that they juggled paid work and caring responsibilities, which often left them exhausted and with insufficient free time. They anticipated that in the future the expectations on women’s time from partners, children, and older relatives would increase.

**Retirement income**

Few women were confident that they had or would accumulate sufficient savings for their retirement. The topic of superannuation came up in all eight focus groups, was discussed at length, and was also raised by participants in the CMC research. The issues that were raised in regard to the superannuation system were numerous and included the following main concerns:

- the superannuation system is too complex and too difficult to understand;
- the media and governments provide conflicting messages about the required savings for older age;
- the system is modelled on the male work experience and disadvantages women;
- some funds charge excessive fees;
- taxes on superannuation savings are too high; and
- financial advisers and fund managers are frequently perceived as biased and dishonest.

Of particular concern were the current policy shift in favour of savings in private superannuation schemes by neo-liberal governments and inadequate government regulation of the superannuation system. In this regard, the focus
group participants expressed very clearly and unanimously that they wanted the government age pension to be maintained.

**Work – life balance**

Achieving a balance between work and other areas of life was found to be vital. The vast majority of participants in the focus group discussions stressed the importance of achieving a balance in life, and asserted that they were only prepared to continue working at an older age if a balance could be achieved between work and other areas of their lives, such as family, friends, study, volunteer work, and time for themselves. The participants of the CMC research also regarded a work – life balance as essential, and some women visualised a post-materialist future and a more ethical society, suggesting spirituality and environmental sustainability as additional elements of a balanced life.

Many women commented on their plans to study, learn new skills, or change career in future years. They emphasised the need for lifelong learning and free education and training if people were expected to prolong their working lives.

Will the women’s voices be heard? Will women achieve greater equality and fairness in later life? Will we as a society overcome inequalities of gender and power? The participants in the CMC research did not consider the probable future desirable, and the women in the focus groups were rather pessimistic about the future.

**Planning for the future**

Most women who participated in the research had thought little about retirement, yet they reported that they worried about their financial situation in retirement. For example, nine in ten women in the HRP were not confident about their financial future, in particular women who were divorced or separated. Only one in four women expected to be in a comfortable financial situation if she retired in ten years time.
Some women in the focus group discussions also pointed out that planning for later life was difficult because of a rapidly changing society, lack of understanding of financial and investment matters, or a changing family situation where adult children moved back home or needed financial support. This changing family situation has been described as “the boomers and their boomerang children” (Horin, 2002). In particular, women in low-skilled occupations said that they found it difficult to plan ahead.

**Recommendations for policy change**

Policies for an ageing female workforce should be based on the values of inclusiveness, fairness, self-determination, and social justice. Choice is important to baby boomers, and social policy of the future will need to consider a wide range of options across all spheres of life. Further, social policy will have to take account of women’s multiple roles – for example, as workers, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, partners in a couple relationship, friends, carers, citizens, and as individuals who want to achieve a balance in their lives and align their work with their values. Inclusive processes of consultation and citizen participation in the policy development processes are crucial.

The policy recommendations resulting from this study are concerned with change in three areas: prolonging working lives, improving income systems, and achieving a balanced life.

**Prolonging working lives**

Prolonged working lives should be a choice. Equality in the workplace and favourable working and tax conditions might influence the work and retirement decisions of those who consider staying in paid employment past the age of 65 years. Tax incentives should also be used to persuade employers to recruit and maintain an age-balanced workforce.

More flexible workplaces to achieve a better work-life balance are important for the whole workforce, not just for women. However, flexibility at work is
essential if mature female workers are to be encouraged to prolong their working lives.

Increased opportunities for skills development are required if older employees are expected to stay in the workforce for longer. Further, the topic of prolonging working lives needs to be brought into mainstream social and economic debate, with people from a diverse range of backgrounds given opportunities to contribute to such a discourse.

Government regulation should seek to achieve protection for particularly disadvantaged groups of older women, such as those in ill health, with few financial resources, and/or no significant social networks.

Those women who do not wish or are not able to be in paid employment beyond the age of 65 years often provide unpaid work for the benefit of their families and communities. Such unpaid work needs to be encouraged and supported to a much greater extent than at present. Additional opportunities for involvement in community work that take women’s interests, skills, and experience into account are required, together with a culture of recognition. A culture of recognition should encompass the provision of training and material, human, and financial resources, and should make civil activities more visible. However, the provision of community work should not be a requirement for access to government income support.

Government-funded superannuation contributions should be provided to people who provide unpaid personal care work. Further, better supports, for example, increased availability of respite care, should be available for people with caring responsibilities.

**Improving income systems**

At present, Australia operates a highly targeted and punitive social security system. More than one in five Australians of working-age rely on this system for income support, most of these for the majority of their income (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2002). It is
likely that this proportion will increase in the future. Therefore, it is proposed that a system be explored that would provide a guaranteed minimum income for all Australians. A basic income would be above the poverty line, without means test or work requirement, and available to all Australians. A range of different models exists already (e.g., Beck, 2000; Tomlinson, 2001; Van Parijs, 2000), and an exploration should focus on a suitable model for Australian circumstances. Coinciding with such an exploration should be a gradual simplification of Centrelink benefits and a public discourse about all aspects of a future minimum income system.

Community education about financial planning and investment products should be increased. Governments should fund not-for-profit organisations for the provision of financial advice that is independent, honest, and easy to understand. Further, the Australian superannuation system should be improved to eradicate inequities. In particular, this should include recognition of time out of the workforce for family reasons or study, increased transparency of financial transactions, removal of the $450 earnings threshold and front-end taxes, extension of the government co-contribution concept to people who provide unpaid caring work, legislation for full compensation in the event of theft or fraud, taxation concessions for people who postpone withdrawing superannuation savings, equal treatment of same-sex partners and heterosexual couples in all Australian States and Territories – this could be achieved by passing the Superannuation (Entitlements of same sex couples) Bill 2000, and broader representation of women in decision-making positions across all sectors of superannuation

Achieving a balanced life
Achieving a balanced life requires attention to ecological, social, and spiritual sustainability. Ecological and spiritual issues were mentioned by a small number of research participants, but not explored in this study. However, elements of social sustainability were examined. These include health, lifelong learning, and the development of social capital.
Australia’s universal public health system (Medicare) should be maintained and strengthened, healthy ageing should be promoted, and access to private health care for older people should be made more affordable.

Opportunities for lifelong learning should be increased and diversified, and free training and education should be available to people of all ages. The development of social capital should be encouraged and supported by strategies such as the provision of mentoring programs, opportunities and technologies for communication within the community, and increased availability of communal spaces and systems that support community relationships.

**Conclusion**

This paper reported on a project exploring the working futures and potential future work-retirement decisions of Australian women of the baby boom generation. The research participants identified as the pertinent areas associated with this decision the nature of future workplaces, support for unpaid caring and community work, the retirement income system, and a work-life balance. Recommendations for policy change were presented that are concerned with prolonging working lives, improving income systems, and achieving a balanced life.
References


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