CADERNOS EBAPE.BR FGV EBAPE

DOSSIER: GENERATIONS, AGEISM, AND WORK

Neither young, nor old, nor a man: ageism, gender, and underemployment in the professional trajectory of a Brazilian female engineer

Mayara Rodrigues da Cunha [1]
Ana Carolina Vitor [1] *

* Corresponding Author

[1] Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil

Abstract

This teaching case narrates the real-life story of Marcela, an engineer over 45 years old, highlighting the impacts of ageism and gender in the labor market. The narrative demonstrates how the intersection of age and gender creates specific barriers to job retention and professional reintegration for mature women, even when they possess extensive experience and recognized performance. After being laid off due to a corporate restructuring, Marcela faces a cycle of both explicit and subtle exclusions in recruitment processes, often being overlooked in favor of younger candidates or older male professionals. In response to these challenges, she adopts strategies such as omitting her age from her résumé and accepting a position far below her qualifications. The case also explores forms of resistance, including the pursuit of autonomy through consulting and teaching, albeit constrained by material limitations. Ultimately, this teaching case fosters critical reflection on underemployment as an expression of institutionalized ageism and underscores the importance of organizational practices that value experienced professionals, especially women, in the context of aging.

Keywords: organizational ageism, gender and work, underemployment, teaching case.

Nem jovem, nem velha, nem homem: etarismo, gênero e subemprego na trajetória profissional de uma engenheira brasileira

Resumo

Este caso para ensino conta a história real de Marcela, engenheira com mais de 45 anos, mostrando os impactos do etarismo e gênero no mercado de trabalho. A narrativa evidencia como a combinação entre idade e gênero produz barreiras específicas à permanência e à recolocação profissional de mulheres maduras, mesmo quando possuem ampla experiência e desempenho reconhecido. Ao ser demitida após uma reestruturação, Marcela enfrenta um ciclo de exclusões veladas e explícitas em processos seletivos, sendo frequentemente preterida por profissionais mais jovens ou por homens de faixa etária superior à dela. Diante das dificuldades de reinserção, recorre a estratégias como ocultar a idade no currículo e aceitar um cargo muito aquém de sua qualificação. A narrativa revela também formas de resistência, como a busca por autonomia via consultorias e docência, embora limitadas pelas exigências materiais. Ao final, o caso para ensino propõe uma reflexão crítica sobre o subemprego como expressão do etarismo institucionalizado e ressalta a importância de práticas organizacionais que valorizem profissionais experientes, especialmente mulheres, no contexto do envelhecimento.

Palavras-chave: etarismo organizacional, gênero e trabalho, subemprego, caso para ensino.

Ni joven, ni vieja, ni hombre: Edadismo, género y subempleo en la trayectoria profesional de una ingeniera brasileña

Resumen

Este caso de enseñanza narra la historia real de Marcela, una ingeniera de más de 45 años, destacando los impactos del edadismo y el género en el mercado laboral. La narrativa evidencia cómo la intersección entre edad y género genera barreras específicas para la permanencia y la reinserción profesional de las mujeres maduras, incluso cuando poseen amplia experiencia y un desempeño reconocido. Tras ser despedida debido a una reestructuración corporativa, Marcela enfrenta un ciclo de exclusiones, tanto veladas como explícitas, en los procesos de selección, siendo frecuentemente postergada en favor de profesionales más jóvenes o de hombres de mayor edad. Ante las dificultades de reinserción, adopta estrategias como ocultar su edad en el currículum y aceptar un cargo muy por debajo de su cualificación. La narrativa también revela formas de resistencia, como la búsqueda de autonomía a través de la consultoría y la docencia, aunque limitadas por exigencias materiales. Finalmente, el caso propone una reflexión crítica sobre el subempleo como expresión del edadismo institucionalizado y destaca la importancia de prácticas organizacionales que valoren a las profesionales experimentadas, especialmente a las mujeres, en el contexto del envejecimiento.

Palabras clave: edadismo organizacional, género y trabajo, subempleo, caso de enseñanza.

Submitted on June 29, 2025 and accepted for publication on May 07, 2026.
[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by the authors.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395120250129x

INTRODUCTION

Based on real events, this story chronicles the professional and personal journey of Marcela Santos between the ages of 45 and 55, a critical period in her professional development. Now 73 years old, Marcela is retired, divorced, and the mother of two children. A native of Belo Horizonte, she earned a degree in Electrical Engineering from the Federal Center for Technological Education of Minas Gerais (Cefet-MG), complementing her education with a graduate degree in the field. Over the course of 35 years of employment under Brazil's CLT labor laws, she worked in major industries, including a nationally prominent company in the electrical sector. Her career reflects challenges common to technical professionals in predominantly male environments, as well as critical financial and family decisions during the phase of preparing for retirement.

Marcela built an exemplary technical career, establishing herself as a leader in her field through her assertive leadership, efficient team management, and resilience in a traditionally male-dominated professional environment. At age 45, already divorced and solely responsible for raising her children, without any financial or emotional support from her ex-husband, she faced a critical moment: she was laid off from the company where she had worked as a senior engineer for two decades, a victim of an abrupt organizational restructuring.

The layoff took place without any measures to ease the transition, such as training or psychological support, and without a professional support network. Left to fend for herself, Marcela had to start over in the job market, facing the challenges of re-entering the workforce on her own, at an advanced age (by market standards) and in the face of gender bias.

The Silent Rejection

Despite her strong résumé and three decades of specialized experience, Marcela faced an 18-month stretch of unemployment. During that time, although she regularly received invitations to interviews and often advanced through the initial stages of the hiring process, she consistently ran into invisible barriers—she was passed over without objective feedback or with vague justifications that never truly explained the real reasons for her rejection.

This professional frustration reached its peak during a hiring process for a well-respected mid-sized engineering firm in Belo Horizonte. On that occasion, in a rare exception to the rule of corporate silence, the recruiter in charge of the process gave him some candid feedback that would remain etched in his memory:

> Marcela, you have excellent experience, but we can't move forward with your application. The position requires candidates between the ages of 23 and 30. It's nothing personal; these are internal company guidelines designed to maintain a "dynamic and energetic" team. I hope you understand.

It was the first time ageism had been directly expressed to Marcela. In other situations, Marcela merely sensed that her age and, possibly, the fact that she was a woman acted as silent barriers to her reentry into the job market. The lack of objective explanations, coupled with recurring exclusion after the initial stages, revealed subtle yet stark forms of age and gender discrimination.

In another instance, Marcela was referred by an acquaintance, through her professional network, for a position at a company in the industry, with the expectation that her connections would smooth the process. However, when she arrived for the interview, she was once again confronted with the issue of her age. The HR manager, though she expressed appreciation for her career history, was blunt: "Even though we recognize your potential and really liked you, unfortunately the company is looking for younger candidates."

Marcela replied without hesitation: "I'm 46, but I have the vitality of a 23-year-old and a wealth of experience that no recent graduate has." Even so, she wasn't selected for the position. Months later, she learned that the job had gone to a friend, a 50-year-old engineer. The choice made it clear that the issue of age, although used as a justification, was selective and intertwined with other factors, such as gender. For Marcela, it became increasingly evident that ageism manifested itself in an intersectional way, particularly penalizing mature women seeking reemployment.

The Bitter Reassignment

Faced with a lack of concrete prospects for re-entering the job market, Marcela began to adopt defensive strategies to circumvent the barriers imposed by structural ageism. She omitted information from her resume that might reveal her age, such as her date of birth and the year she graduated, and even intentionally reduced the length of her work experience, in an attempt to advance through the initial stages of the hiring process. With her savings depleted and as the primary breadwinner for her children, she eventually accepted a position as a junior engineer at a small public works company located more than 100 km from Belo Horizonte.

The entry-level position offered a salary equivalent to what she had earned about 15 years earlier, and required her to work rotating shifts, including night shifts some weeks. Although she recognized the importance of the opportunity given her financial situation, Marcela felt deeply undervalued. She was constantly supervised by recent engineering graduates and subjected to comments that made it clear they found her presence in that role odd: “You should be at a different career level by now, right? Why are you even here?”

Even so, her performance was notably above average. She contributed to process optimization, achieved significant cost reductions, and was praised by numerous clients. However, she remained stagnant in the company hierarchy, without formal recognition or promotions. Internally, she was often referred to, in a pejorative manner, as the “engineering auntie” and “little lady”, expressions that subtly encapsulated the age and gender bias to which she was subjected.

The most revealing moment of this dynamic occurred on the very day of the interview for the position. The person in charge of the hiring process, noticing that her age was missing from her resume, asked her directly, “Why didn’t you include your age on your resume?” Marcela, with candor and composure, replied: “If I had included my age, would you have called me in for this interview? Well, you needed to get to know me first. If I had included my age, I probably wouldn’t even have made it this far.”

The response, though disconcerting, drew laughter from those present, an ambiguous reaction that wavered between embarrassment and complicity with the discriminatory practice. Marcela was hired, but under the original terms of the position: a salary below her qualifications, an entry-level position, and limited responsibilities given her professional background. The hiring, therefore, did not symbolize recognition, but rather confirmation that, for women like her, re-entering the workforce is often accompanied by devaluation and silencing.

Seeking reemployment in alternative settings

Tired of stagnation and feeling invisible in her underemployed position, Marcela began to look for alternatives to the traditional career path. Conversations with older colleagues and posts in social media groups for experienced female engineers started to make sense in a whole new way. For the first time in years, she allowed herself to ask: “What if I could choose how to work, even with less structure? What if my experience still has value, even outside of large companies?”

One Saturday afternoon, over coffee with Célia, a former college classmate who now teaches at a federal institute, she vented: “Célia, I can’t stand being treated as if I’m taking the place of someone younger. I know what I’m doing; I know a lot. But it seems like that doesn’t matter.” Célia looked at her with empathy and replied firmly: “It does matter. What doesn’t matter is pleasing companies that have already decided your age is a flaw. Have you ever thought about teaching? With your experience, you have a lot to teach.”

The suggestion sparked something in Marcela. The following week, she updated her academic résumé, gathered her certificates, dug out old training materials, and began searching for announcements for technical courses and extension programs. At the same time, she offered her services as a technical consultant to small local governments in rural areas, drawing on her expertise as an electrical engineer.

“It’s a different pace, of course. But the respect I receive, the autonomy… it all makes it worth it,” she said, visibly moved, to a former coworker who asked her how she was adjusting to the new way of working.

Her first consulting gigs didn’t pay much, but Marcela felt she was back in a role that made sense for her career path. In her classes, she found an attentive audience, genuine interest, and, above all, the freedom to share her knowledge without the constant pressure of generational scrutiny. Over time, she came to be recognized as a role model by her students, many of whom saw her as an inspiration.

"I feel useful again. For the first time in a long time, I don't have to prove anything to anyone. I teach, I mentor, and that's enough for me," Marcela confided during a roundtable discussion with other women over 50 who were seeking a career change. This change didn't eliminate all the challenges, but it transformed the way Marcela saw herself in the workplace.

Despite her initial enthusiasm about returning to teaching and technical consulting, financial reality soon set in. The income from these activities was sporadic; although significant from a symbolic and emotional standpoint, it wasn't enough to provide the stability Marcela needed. As a single mother and the sole breadwinner for her household, she found herself forced to reevaluate her choices.

"I wanted to keep going. Being in the classroom gave me back a sense of purpose that I hadn't felt in a long time. But you can't pay the bills with recognition. I needed a steady paycheck; I needed to make sure I had the basics covered," she confided to a friend in the group of mature female engineers.

Balancing her grueling work schedule with the commute to teach classes and provide consulting services in rural areas became increasingly unmanageable. The alternating shifts, physical exhaustion, and lack of time to prepare content properly sapped her energy. Little by little, Marcela began to give up what brought her the most professional satisfaction. First, she gave up consulting. Then, with regret, she left the classroom.

"It felt like a farewell. But it was either that or getting sick for good. I held on as long as I could, as far as I could." Marcela then continued with only her formal job as an engineer at the factory—the same job that, years earlier, had symbolized underemployment and devaluation. She remained there until the day she retired, carrying a mixture of resignation and pride. Resignation for not having been able to remain in the spaces where she was valued as a full-fledged individual. Pride for not having given up on herself, even in the face of a system that persistently tried to erase her.

DILEMMAS

Many women aged 45 and older have faced unemployment without being given plausible reasons. Despite their solid professional experience and consistent track record of performance, they are often the first to be let go during organizational restructuring processes. Meanwhile, men in the same age group, and in many cases, even older, remain in their positions or are even promoted. Faced with this scenario of silent and unequal exclusion, several recurring dilemmas arise:

- Was underemployment a choice or something imposed on you?
- Should you accept a career setback as a strategy to secure a new position in the job market?
- Is there room for women to age within organizations?
- What would you, as a manager, do differently when dealing with a professional like Marcela?
- Is the company's practice of limiting the age of candidates legal? Is it ethical?

TEACHING NOTES

Access to the teaching notes for this case is restricted and is available only to faculty and instructors affiliated with the academic institution upon request at https://periodicos.fgv.br/cadernosebape/article/view/98367

TEACHING NOTES REFERENCES

Amorim, W., Fischer, A., & Fevorini, F. B. (2019). Workers age 50 and over in the Brazilian labor market: is there ageism? *Revista de Gestão*, *26*(2), 161-179. https://doi.org/10.1108/REGE-09-2018-0092

Burn, I., Firoozi, D., Ladd, D., & Neumark, D. (2023). Stereotypes of older workers and perceived ageism in job ads: evidence from an experiment. *Journal of Pension Economics & Finance*, *22*(4), 463-489. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474747222000270

Butler, R. N. (1969). Age-ism: another form of bigotry. *The Gerontologist*, *9*(4 Part 1), 243-246. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/9.4_Part_1.243

Carvalho, S. T. N. (2021). Diagnóstico do ageism no serviço público brasileiro: a necessidade de combater o preconceito projetado para o futuro do servidor. *Revista da CGU, 13*(23), 106-120. https://revista.cgu.gov.br/Revista_da_CGU/article/view/399/258

Cepellos, V. M. (2018). Envelhecimento nas organizações: os grandes debates sobre o tema nos estudos de Administração de Empresas. *Teoria e Prática em Administração*, *8*(1), 138-159. https://periodicos.ufpb.br/index.php/tpa/article/view/37614

Cepellos, V. M., & Tonelli, M. J. (2017). Envelhecimento profissional: percepções e práticas de gestão da idade. *Revista Alcance*, *24*(1), 4-21. https://periodicos.univali.br/index.php/ra/article/view/9929

Cepellos, V. M., Silva, G. T., & Tonelli, M. J. (2019). Envelhecimento: múltiplas idades na construção da idade profissional. *Organizações & Sociedade*, *26*(89), 269-290. https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-9260894

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Interseccionalidade*. Boitempo.

Copola, A. L. B. (2025). *Etarismo feminino no mercado de trabalho: impactos emocionais no âmbito profissional e pessoal* [Dissertação de mestrado, Fundação Getulio Vargas). FGV Sistema de Bibliotecas. https://hdl.handle.net/10438/36840

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 8*(1), 139-167. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf

França, L. H. P. F., & Garcia, T. M. (2022). *O ageísmo nas organizações: a representação negativa do trabalhador mais velho*. Atena.

Hanashiro, D. M. M., & Pereira, M. F. M. W. M. (2020). O etarismo no local de trabalho: evidências práticas de "saneamento" de trabalhadores mais velhos. *Revista Gestão Organizacional*, *13*(2), 188-206. https://doi.org/10.22277/rgo.v13i2.5032

Helal, D. H., Oltramari, A. P., Moscon, D. C. B., & Paiva, K. C. M. (2023). *Dicionário de gestão de pessoas e relações de trabalho no Brasil*. Gradus. https://doi.org/10.46848/9786581033323

Helal, D. H., & Viana, L. O. (2021). Ageísmo: uma revisão integrativa da literatura em língua portuguesa. *Conhecimento & Diversidade*, *13*(29), 171-191. https://doi.org/10.18316/rcd.v13i29.8115

Helal, D. H., Nobrega, C. V., & Lima, T. A. P. (2021). Retirement and organizations: perspectives and challenges for both workers and human resource management. *Working with Older People*, *25*(2), 141-152. https://doi.org/10.1108/WWOP-04-2020-0014

Keskinen, K., Lumme-Sandt, K., & Nikander, P. (2023). Turning age into agency: a qualitative longitudinal investigation into older jobseekers' agentic responses to ageism. *Journal of Aging Studies*, *65*, 101136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2023.101136

Kleissner, V., & Jahn, G. (2020). Dimensions of work-related age stereotypes and in-group favoritism. *Research on Aging, 42*(3/4), 126-136. https://doi.org/10.1177/0164027519896189

Mattos, R. L. (2021). *Mudanças nas organizações: etarismo e contratação de profissionais 50+* [Dissertação de mestrado, Fundação Getúlio Vargas]. FGV Sistema de Bibliotecas. https://hdl.handle.net/10438/30750

North, M. S. (2019). The global economy, aging, and the rise of ageism. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives on ageism* (pp. 25-40). Springer.

Oliveira, L. B., & Silva, E. C. M. (2024). Demissão e transição de carreira de trabalhadores na maturidade. *Revista Eletrônica de Ciência Administrativa*, *23*(3), 410-433. https://doi.org/10.21529/RECADM.2024016

Organização Internacional do Trabalho. (2023). *Relatório global sobre envelhecimento e trabalho*.

Palmore, E. B. (1999). *Ageism: negative and positive*. Springer.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.

Santos, P. C., & Hanashiro, D. M. M. (2024). Programas para contratação de trabalhadores mais velhos: a visão dos gestores de RH. *Revista Organizações Em Contexto*, *20*(39), 267-297. https://revistas.metodista.br/index.php/organizacoesemcontexto/article/view/14

Silva, M., & Helal, D. (2024). Envelhecimento e gestão da idade nas organizações: um estudo de múltiplos casos no Poder Executivo do estado de Pernambuco. *Revista de Administração Pública*, *75*(1), 181-121. https://doi.org/10.21874/rsp.v75i1.10188

Silva, M. A. P., & Helal, D. H. (2022). Age management in the brazilian context: a theoretical discussion. *Organizations and Markets in Emerging Economies*, *13*(1), 6-25. https://doi.org/10.15388/omee.2022.13.68

Silva, R. A., & Helal, D. H. (2019). Ageismo nas organizações: questões para debate. *Revista de Administração IMED*, *9*(1), 187-197. https://seer.atitus.edu.br/index.php/raimed/article/view/3167

World Economic Forum. (2023, June 20). *Global Gender Gap Report 2023*. https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023/

Mayara Rodrigues da Cunha
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3694-425X
Ph.D. in Business Administration from the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC-Minas); Assistant Professor I in the Business Administration Program at the University of Itaúna (UIT). E-mail: adm.mayara.cunha@gmail.com

Ana Carolina Vitor
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3782-5818
Ph.D. candidate in Business Administration in the Graduate Program at the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais (PUC-Minas).
E-mail: carolinavitor.marketing@gmail.com

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Mayara Rodrigues da Cunha: Conceptualization (Equal); Data curation (Leadership); Formal analysis (Equal); Research (Leadership); Project management (Equal); Resources (Equal); Validation (Equal); Visualization (Equal); Writing – original draft (Equal); Writing – revision and editing (Equal).

Ana Carolina Vitor: Conceptualization (Equal); Data curation (Support); Formal analysis (Equal); Investigation (Support); Project management (Equal); Resources (Equal); Validation (Equal); Visualization (Equal); Writing – original draft (Equal); Writing – revision and editing (Equal).

RESEARCH DATA AVAILABILITY

The dataset supporting the results of this study is not publicly available.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USAGE

No artificial intelligence tools were used.

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Hélio Arthur Reis Irigaray, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9580-7859

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Fabricio Stocker, Fundação Getulio Vargas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6340-9127

GUEST EDITORS

Diego Costa Mendes, Universidade Federal de Viçosa, Viçosa, MG, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3193-7034

Kely Cesar Martins de Paiva, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, MG, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5185-9072

Darcy Mitiko Mori Hanashiro, Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, São Paulo, SP, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2305-4186

Sónia P. Gonçalves, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3704-2995

REVIEWERS

Bruno Pereira de Andrade Rebelo, Instituto Universitario de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1702-0396

Márcia Maria de Oliveira, Universidade Federal de Roraima, Boa Vista, RR, Brazil. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5511-0942

One of the reviewers did not authorize the disclosure of his or her identity.

PEER REVIEW REPORT

The peer review report is available at this link https://periodicos.fgv.br/cadernosebape/article/view/97420

CC BY