



A gendered approach to workforce participation patterns over the life course for an Australian baby boom cohort



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ABSTRACT

Population ageing and its future implications for governments and individuals have been central to much policy debate and research targeted to retain older people in the workforce. This study identified workforce participation patterns across the adult life course for women and men entering later life, and explored the influences of various early and adult life socio-demographic circumstances. Data were collected from 1261 men and women aged 60 to 64 years in the *Life History and Health (LHH) Survey* (a sub-study of the *Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study*, Australia) in 2010–11. LHH provides detailed information on personal histories of paid work, socio-economic resources from childhood (number of books and father's occupation) and adult life factors such as educational attainment, marital histories, childcare and informal caring. Latent class analysis (LCA) was undertaken to identify patterns of workforce participation for participants across their adult life. Significant gender differences were confirmed. Further analysis (LCA with covariates) showed that women who reported having books during childhood, and those who had post-school qualification, were more likely to have mostly been in paid work and less likely to have not been in paid work; while ever partnered women had significantly higher odds of increasing part time work over time. Men who had reported ever having had informal caring activities were likely to have had decreasing participation in paid work over time, and were highly likely to be not in paid work after 55 years. Ever partnered status was protective for being in paid work for men. These findings indicate the need for gender-specific policies and strategies to enable continued workforce participation throughout adult life and into later working years, particularly for people who had fewer social or economic opportunities earlier in life.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Mature age workforce and its challenges

'Population ageing' is a global phenomenon indicating rapid growth in the proportion of people aged 60 years and older. In the next few decades, younger people (aged 0–15 years) will be outnumbered by people aged 60 years and above (World Health Organization, 2014) and there will be declining numbers of younger adults in the workforce. This demographic and social change presents a number of challenges, with long term productivity and activity of mature age workers becoming increasingly important (Christensen, Doblhammer, Rau, & Vaupel, 2009; European Commission, 2000; Loh & Kendig, 2013). Mature age workers are a critical

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part of the workforce, and contribute years of knowledge and skill (Fasbender, Deller, Wang, & Wiernik, 2014). The exit of these workers from the paid workforce, combined with fewer younger workers to replace them, will have considerable impacts on the productivity and sustainability of industry, and on national economies (Loretto & White, 2006). Moreover, as populations age, successive generations are likely to be required to remain longer in paid work in order to maintain the tax base, to support their own ageing, and to minimise demands on public pensions and welfare.

Among the many challenges of population ageing, workforce participation of mature age workers and its associated economic and financial implications are of major concern to governments and have been widely discussed (Australian Treasury, 2010; European Commission, 2000; Li, Duncan, & Miranti, 2013). To alleviate these potential burdens, governments and institutions around the globe are proclaiming the necessity of retaining mature age workers (Australian Treasury, 2010; Loretto & White, 2006; Phillipson, 2013). Policies have been initiated to promote increased workforce participation and remove barriers to longer work life, and financial incentives have been introduced for people to remain in work (Spoehr, Barnett, & Parnis, 2009; Temple, Adair, & Hosseini-Chavishi, 2011; World Health Organization, 2002). In some countries like Australia and other OECD² countries, age-based anti-discrimination reforms have been implemented (Chomik & Piggott, 2012; Loretto & White, 2006; OECD, 2013). Many governments such as the United Kingdom, France, Netherlands and Australia are seeking to raise retirement ages and pension eligibility age to retain mature age workers for longer into the future (Chomik & Piggott, 2012; ILC, 2011; OECD, 2013). However, despite raising pension eligibility ages, installing financial incentives, and increasing flexibility of working hours, many people do not remain in the workforce in their older ages (Abhayaratna & Lattimore, 2006; Spoehr et al., 2009). Among those who do continue to work, many people aged 60 years and above will work part time work, with different trends for men and women (Spoehr et al., 2009).

To date, most research interest in older workers has focussed on retirement with many studies investigating factors associated with early exit from the workforce (Alavinia & Burdorf, 2008; Dahl, Nilsen, & Vaage, 2003; Rice, Lang, Henley, & Melzer, 2011), or on the effects of retirement on health (Coe & Zamarró, 2011; van der Heide, van Rijn, Robroek, Burdorf, & Proper, 2013), or financial implications (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2007; Van Rooij, Lusardi, & Alessie, 2012). For many people, retirement comes as a consequence of their own life decisions, 'at the right time', and is associated with a positive change in their lives and wellbeing (Byles, et al., 2013; Hardy, 2002; Kim & Moen, 2001). For other people, retirement arises from external pressures including redundancy, the onset of ill health, or needing to care for a sick or disabled family member (Alavinia & Burdorf, 2008).

It has also been hypothesized that older age workforce participation is likely to depend on patterns of employment at earlier life stages, and the social and economic circumstances that prevail across the life course (Case, Fertig, & Paxson, 2005; Flores & Kalwij, 2014; Mazzonna & Havari, 2011). With greater focus on the heterogeneity in life course trajectories, the traditional expectation that people will exhibit a "normal work biography" whereby they commence work as young adults, continue to work until a normative retirement age, and then cease work and retire to a life of leisure is increasingly being brought into question. Two major criticisms of this traditional life course model are a) that it is highly gendered pertaining mostly to a male breadwinner role (Everingham, Warner-Smith, & Byles, 2007), and b) that it has been changed in the current economic and social order (Kendig, Wells, O'Loughlin, & Heese, 2013; Kohli, 2007).

Many older people report having left work at a relatively early age due to health problems, redundancy, to care for family, for lifestyle choices or due to other circumstances (Abhayaratna & Lattimore, 2006; Brooke & Taylor, 2005; Larsen & Pedersen, 2013; Radl, 2013; Shultz, Morton, & Weckerle, 1998); and they may or may not return to work on a full or part-time basis when their circumstances change. Compared to men, women's working lives are likely to be more fragmented, combining family and caring roles with full or part time work at different life stages.

The purpose of this study is to ascertain different patterns of workforce participation among men and women over their working lives and to explore various factors associated with different workforce participation patterns. We also aim to investigate the relationship between early and adult life factors and patterns of workforce participation, and to examine differences by gender.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

There is substantial literature on gender differences in workforce participation at various points over the life course. However, here has been little work conceptualizing how the differences in employment probabilities of mature age men and women reflect the continuation of their earlier life employment patterns, and other earlier life circumstances (Ruhm, 1996). Social factors in later life, such as needing to care for a disabled parent or spouse, will be overlaid on these established patterns, potentially creating a disruption or interruption to work. In this paper, we hypothesize on how employment patterns and their predictors over the life course are different for men and women, as a result of gender related roles, expectations, opportunities and constraints since this baby boom cohort reached adulthood in 1960's.

2.1. Workforce participation by gender

Women have complex workforce participation patterns because of their varying family and work roles (Gerber, Wittekind, Grote, & Staffelbach, 2009; Huang, El-Khoury, Johansson, Lindroth, & Sverke, 2007). They exhibit different workforce participation trajectories over the life course depending on their age, social and economic situations and family life (Gerber et al., 2009). Many women choose to remain out of work or to work part time during child bearing ages, and in their middle ages while they still have

² The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) is an organisation dedicated to global development and is made up of 34 member countries (see <http://www.oecd.org/about/membersandpartners/> for a full list of these countries).

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