

I Am (an Older) Woman. Hear Me Roar.

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By Jessica Bennett

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"Age is just a number," said Representative Donna Shalala of Florida, center, who became the oldest freshman in her House class when she took office a little over a month before her 78th birthday. Credit [Erin Schaff for The New York Times](#)

Image



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When Susan Zirinsky takes over CBS News in March, she will be the first woman to hold the job. She will also be the oldest person to assume the role, at 66.

Her appointment was announced just days after Nancy Pelosi, 78, was re-elected Speaker of the House of Representatives — making her the most powerful elected woman in United States history — and Representative Maxine Waters became the first woman and African-American to lead the Financial Services Committee, at age 80.

News of Ms. Zirinsky's ascension broke on the same evening that 71-year-old Glenn Close bested four younger women to win the Golden Globe for best actress.

It seems that older women, long invisible or shunted aside, are experiencing an unfamiliar sensation: power.

There are more women over 50 in this country today than at any other point in history, according to data from the United States Census Bureau. Those women are healthier, are working longer and have more income than previous generations.

That is creating modest but real progress in their visibility and stature.

"Age — don't worry about it. It's a state of mind," Ms. Zirinsky said on Tuesday when asked about the effect of her age on her new job. "I have so much energy that my staff did an intervention when I tried a Red Bull."

Men, of course, have led major organizations well into their seventh and even eighth decades, retaining their power and prominence. But the #MeToo movement has toppled some high-profile males, from 77-year-old Charlie Rose to Les Moonves, 69, who was ousted as head of CBS after multiple allegations of sexual misconduct, creating unexpected openings for the elevation of women.

And Susan Douglas, a professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan who is writing a book on the power of older women, said "a demographic revolution" was occurring — both in the number of women who are working into their 60s and 70s and in the perception, in the wake of #MeToo, of their expertise and value.

"Older women are now saying 'No, I'm still vibrant, I still have a lot to offer, and I'm not going to be consigned to invisibility,' " she said. "These women are reinventing what it means to be an older woman."

In 2016, the average life span of women in the United States was 81.1, compared with men's 76.1. Nearly a third of women aged 65 to 69 are now working, up from 15 percent in the late 1980s, according to recent analyses by the Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz. Some 18 percent of women aged 70 to 74 work, up from 8 percent.

Interestingly, working longer is more common among women with higher education and savings — while those who are not working are more likely to have poor health and low savings and to be dependent on Social Security.

"I can assure you I did not like — in fact I flinched — when The Times wrote about my new company, and there it was in black and white, 'Christiane Amanpour, 60,'" said Ms. Amanpour, who replaced Mr. Rose on PBS last year and turns 61 this week. "But then I thought, no, this is cool! I'm 60 and a whole other chapter of my life is opening."

Despite the excitement, it is still rare to find women in their 60s leading major institutions or taking center stage in other industries.

In cinema, for example, a 2017 study from the University of Southern California found that just 2.6 percent of the speaking roles in 25 films nominated for best picture were women older than 60 — and those women were far less likely to be depicted in powerful jobs.

"I think this notion of who can lead and who can't is being completely upended," said Katie Couric, the longtime news anchor, who celebrated her 62nd birthday this week. "So to see someone like Glenn Close give the most moving speech of the night, and her experience and wisdom respected, or when you see Susan Zirinsky be elevated, I say, 'Bring it on. Let's have more of this.'"

"Z should have gotten this job 10 years ago," Ms. Couric added, using Ms. Zirinsky's nickname.

There is a joke often repeated among women of a certain age: You can walk into a grocery store and shoplift whatever you want, because nobody will notice that you're even there.

Older women have long been expected to "fade into the background," as the scholar Joan C. Williams put it — considered so far past their sexual prime that they were almost invisible. (Lest you think that notion is outdated, look no further than the French author Yann Moix, who told *Marie Claire* magazine last week that he doesn't notice women over 50.)

And while men's value has long been perceived as rising with age, women's has often fallen. In her book, "The Beauty Bias," Deborah Rhode, a Stanford law professor, explained that while silver hair and furrowed brows made aging men look "distinguished," aging women risked marginalization or ridicule for their efforts to pass as young.

It's no surprise, then, that according to one analysis, by *Time*, male actors hit their professional peak at 46, while female actors top out at 30. (As the actor Helen Mirren recently put it, responding to a report that, at 37, Maggie Gyllenhaal had been told she was "too old" for a role opposite a 55-year-old man: "As James Bond got more and more geriatric, his girlfriends got younger and younger. It's so annoying.")

In another survey, compiled a few years ago by Newsweek, 84 percent of corporate hiring managers said they believed a "qualified but visibly older" candidate would make some employers hesitate — particularly if those candidates were women.

And while more people over 65 — almost 20 percent — are still working than at any other point since the 1960s, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, even when America's jobless rate was close to full employment it was women over 50 who were having the hardest time finding work.

"Ageism is one of the last acceptable biases in our culture, but it powerfully intersects with sexism," Professor Douglas said.

But the arc of women's working lives is changing, as is the broader perception of them. Many older women like to work, demographers say, a reality they first experienced decades ago, when opportunities began to open to them in the 1970s and 1980s.

"What the women's movement did was develop generations of strong women," said Representative Donna Shalala, Democrat of Florida, who became the oldest freshman in her House class when she took office a little over a month before her 78th birthday. "We had professional careers, we were achievers in our fields, and you're seeing the result of that now. And we're comfortable in our own skin, and we don't put up with nonsense, and we have a sisterhood."

Zerlina Maxwell, a former media director for Hillary Clinton, echoed that idea.

"I think older women are stepping forward in part because they just don't have any craps to give," Ms. Maxwell said. "Black women of a certain age especially, they have lived through a lot."

Others say that the culture is slowly catching up to the reality of a broader, graying population that is not eager to step back from civic or public life.

"I've embraced every birthday ... what's the alternative, bitch and moan?" Gayle King, 64, a co-anchor of "CBS This Morning," said in an email. "I believe if your body and brain are healthy and you love what you do and the people in your life, what's the downside of THAT?! So I'll say it loud, I'm 64 and (oh so) proud!"

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