

Challenges Faced by Older Workers in Thailand: Age Discrimination and Its Economic Impact

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Abstract

Thailand is facing significant demographic changes, with a growing aging population due to lower fertility rates and longer life expectancy. This paper examines the challenges that older workers in Thailand's labor market encounter, particularly focusing on age discrimination and its economic consequences. Despite existing legal protections against age-based discrimination, many older workers, especially those aged 65 and above, continue to face barriers in securing stable and well-paying jobs. These barriers include age-related biases regarding their adaptability, technological skills, and productivity. As the working-age population shrinks, older workers are often pushed into informal, low-wage sectors that lack adequate social protection, increasing economic inequality. Moreover, limited access to retraining and skills development opportunities, particularly in rural areas, makes it harder for older workers to adapt to the demands of modern industries. The economic impact of this exclusion is severe, as it contributes to reduced labor force participation, social marginalization, and greater financial insecurity. To address these challenges, the paper advocates comprehensive policy reforms that focus on reducing age discrimination, expanding social protection, and investing in skills training and career support for older workers. By creating a more inclusive workforce, Thailand can ensure that older workers remain valuable contributors to the economy, even in the face of demographic and technological shifts.

Keywords: Age Discrimination, Older Workers, Labor Markets, Economic Impacts.

Introduction

Thailand is experiencing a significant demographic shift, with a growing aging population due to a decline in fertility rates and increased life expectancy. As a result, the proportion of older workers in the labor force is rising, which presents both challenges and opportunities for the economy. However, older workers in Thailand face considerable obstacles in the labor market, particularly due to age discrimination. Despite the presence of legal protections, many older individuals struggle to secure stable and well-paying jobs due to biases regarding their adaptability, technological skills, and productivity.

Older workers are often pushed into informal sectors, where job security is low, and wages are minimal, making it difficult for them to achieve financial stability. This exclusion not only increases economic inequality but also isolates many older workers from the benefits of a rapidly evolving labor market. The rise of knowledge-based industries and technological advancements has only further marginalized those who lack digital literacy or access to retraining programs, especially in rural areas.

This paper explores the various challenges faced by older workers in Thailand, focusing on the impact of age discrimination on their economic well-being and their ability to participate meaningfully in the labor market. By examining demographic trends, social attitudes, and labor market dynamics, the paper highlights the need for comprehensive policy reforms to address these issues and ensure that older workers remain active contributors to the economy.

Content

To understand, the demographic and economic context is essential for analyzing the impact of age discrimination on older workers in Thailand's labor market. Thailand is experiencing significant demographic shifts, particularly an aging population due to declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy. According to the World Bank (2025), approximately 13% of the population was aged 65 and older as of 2020, with projections indicating this figure will rise to 31% by 2060. This demographic transition presents both challenges and opportunities for the labor market, particularly in terms of labor force participation among older workers. The decline in fertility rates, from 5.5

children per woman in 1970 to 1.5 in 2020 (Moroz and Naddeo, 2025), has been accompanied by rising life expectancy, leading to an older population that remains economically active for longer. As a result, Thailand faces a shift in its labor force demographics, which directly impacts labor market dynamics, especially for older workers. The economic implications of this aging population are multifaceted. As the working-age population shrinks, Thailand may face a potential labor shortage, which could hinder economic growth. The World Bank (2025) predicts that Thailand's working-age population will decrease by nearly 30% between 2020 and 2060, placing significant pressure on the country's economic growth. Labor force participation rates among older workers, particularly those aged 65 and older, are notably lower than their younger counterparts, especially compared to other East Asia and Pacific countries such as Cambodia and Indonesia (International Labour Organization, 2025). Structural and cultural factors contribute to this, with older workers often excluded from higher-paying and stable jobs due to biases around age and productivity. Many older workers are relegated to informal, lower-wage sectors, where job stability and social protections are minimal. Zaniboni (2015) found that this economic vulnerability, particularly for older workers in rural areas, stems from insufficient social protection, lack of pension schemes, and limited retirement savings. Income inequality among older workers is further exacerbated by both age discrimination and broader economic inequalities. The increasing competitiveness and technological drive of the labor market often leave older workers, especially those aged 60 and above, excluded from higher-paying opportunities. Blau (2025) suggests that older women face a "double disadvantage" due to both age and gender biases, which significantly heightens economic challenges for them. Social protection programs like the Old Age Allowance have been introduced, but they remain insufficient for addressing the financial needs of older workers, particularly those in informal jobs. This lack of adequate support forces many older workers to remain economically dependent, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and economic exclusion. Moroz and Naddeo (2025) also point out that older workers in rural regions face disproportionate economic inequality due to the dual nature of Thailand's labor market, with many unable to keep pace with modern, knowledge-based industries. Social exclusion and marginalization of older workers further compound their economic challenges.

Zaniboni (2015) argues that when older workers cannot adapt to new job requirements, particularly those requiring technological proficiency, they experience social exclusion, leading to isolation and lower mental health outcomes. Many older workers in Thailand lack access to retraining opportunities, placing them at a disadvantage compared to younger workers with better access to education and skills development (World Bank, 2025). This exclusion hinders their ability to transition into new roles or industries, which in turn negatively impacts their quality of life and ability to remain economically active. To address these issues, policymakers in Thailand must take proactive measures to combat age discrimination and support older workers in remaining integrated into the labor market. Blau (2025) emphasizes the importance of policies that extend the working lives of older individuals while combating workplace discrimination. Countries like Japan and Singapore, which have implemented flexible working arrangements and comprehensive retraining programs, serve as effective models for Thailand (Zaniboni, 2015). Moroz & Naddeo (2025) recommend expanding social protection programs to ensure older workers' financial security, thus reducing the pressure to remain in the workforce out of necessity. Additionally, investment in skills training, career counseling, and flexible work arrangements is essential to fostering a more inclusive labor market for older workers.

In conclusion, Thailand's aging population poses significant challenges for older workers in the labor market. As the working-age population declines and older workers face exclusion from higher-paying and stable job opportunities, addressing age discrimination becomes critical. Without comprehensive policies that support older workers, particularly those in rural and informal sectors, Thailand's labor market risks leaving a substantial portion of its population economically vulnerable and socially marginalized. Targeted policy reforms will be crucial to ensuring that older workers can continue to contribute meaningfully to the economy.

1. Prevalence of Age Discrimination in Thailand

Age discrimination, or ageism, is a significant challenge that affects older workers in many labor markets, including Thailand. This issue limits older individuals' access to employment opportunities, career advancement, and economic mobility. Despite legal frameworks such as the Labor Protection Act of 1998, which prohibits age-based discrimination, the effectiveness of these laws remains weak, and older workers

continue to face significant barriers in securing stable, high-quality jobs. Research by the World Bank (2025) reveals that the labor force participation rate for older workers in Thailand, particularly those aged 65 and above, is notably lower compared to other countries in the East Asia and Pacific region. The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2025) identifies that older workers in Thailand face both overt and subtle forms of age discrimination in hiring, retention, and promotions, with employers often perceiving them as less adaptable or technologically proficient than younger workers. Comparing Thailand with its regional neighbors, such as Cambodia and Indonesia, further focuses on the prevalence of age discrimination. These countries have higher labor force participation rates for older workers and have implemented active policies to promote their employment (ILO, 2025). In contrast, Thailand lags behind, with older workers often pushed into informal labor markets where they face lower wages and less job security. Zaniboni (2015) suggests that while older workers possess valuable experience, they are often overlooked in favor of younger workers, especially in the private sector, where productivity and adaptability are prized over experience. Age discrimination in Thailand is not limited to overt forms but also includes subtle and covert practices. Moroz and Naddeo (2025) emphasize that older workers are frequently bypassed during recruitment processes or given fewer opportunities for training and career development. Blau (2025) notes that, while job listings may not explicitly state an age requirement, older applicants are rarely considered for interviews or promotions, a form of discrimination that can be harder to identify but is nonetheless damaging to their employment prospects. This issue is particularly pronounced in industries undergoing rapid technological advancements, where older workers are excluded from digital job markets due to a lack of opportunities to upskill, despite having the requisite experience (Zaniboni, 2015). Cultural and institutional factors in Thailand further contribute to the prevalence of age discrimination. Moroz & Naddeo (2025) argue that there is a strong cultural preference for youth, especially in urban settings, where younger workers are seen as more suitable for high-energy, innovative, and adaptable roles. This cultural bias, combined with institutional factors such as weak enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and inadequate support systems for older workers, perpetuates the exclusion of older workers from the formal labor market. The lack of retraining programs and pension

schemes forces many older workers to remain in the workforce well past retirement age, often in low-paying, insecure jobs (Zaniboni, 2015). The economic and social impact of age discrimination is profound. As noted by the World Bank (2025), older workers are often relegated to informal or lower-wage sectors, creating a cycle of economic dependence. This marginalization not only impacts their financial well-being but also their mental and physical health, as exclusion from the workforce can lead to a loss of identity and purpose. Social isolation further exacerbates the challenges faced by older workers, particularly for those without strong social support networks (Blau, 2025).

In conclusion, age discrimination in Thailand's labor market remains a significant barrier to the full participation of older workers. Despite legal protections, both direct and indirect forms of discrimination persist, limiting older workers' access to stable and well-paying employment. Cultural biases, combined with institutional shortcomings, exacerbate the issue, particularly as Thailand faces demographic shifts due to an aging population. With understand the extent and forms of age discrimination is critical for developing effective policies that can mitigate its impact and create a more inclusive labor market for older workers.

2. Barriers Faced by Older Workers

Older workers in Thailand face multiple barriers that hinder their participation in the labor market, which are not limited to economic factors but also extend to social, psychological, and systemic issues. One of the primary barriers is the rapid pace of technological change. Zaniboni (2015) notes that many older workers, particularly those over 50, have limited access to new skill development opportunities, especially in sectors increasingly reliant on digital technologies. The World Bank (2025) highlights the lack of digital literacy among older workers, particularly in rural areas or manual labor sectors, which exacerbates their inability to meet the evolving demands of the labor market. Without access to retraining programs, older workers are often displaced and struggle to find stable, higher-paying jobs in the modern economy (Moroz & Naddeo, 2025). Another significant barrier is employer biases and age-related stereotypes. Blau (2025) argues that older workers are often viewed as less adaptable, less productive, and more expensive than their younger counterparts, which leads to them being overlooked for promotions, training opportunities, and even during the hiring process. The ILO (2025)

reports that despite legal protections against age discrimination in Thailand, these biases persist in the hiring and promotion processes, with older workers often excluded from roles that require creativity or fast-paced problem-solving. This issue is compounded for older women, who experience a "double disadvantage" due to both age and gender biases, limiting their opportunities and contributing to income inequality (Zaniboni, 2015). Health-related issues also pose a significant challenge for older workers. As Blau (2025) explains, older workers are more likely to suffer from chronic conditions such as arthritis or cardiovascular diseases, which can affect their ability to perform physical tasks or work long hours. The World Bank (2025) notes that these health challenges often result in higher absenteeism and lower productivity, reinforcing stereotypes that older workers are less valuable. In some cases, the lack of flexibility in retirement policies and inadequate healthcare systems forces older workers into early retirement, even when they are physically capable of continuing to work (Moroz & Naddeo, 2025). This premature exit from the workforce undermines their economic security and well-being. Social and psychological barriers also significantly impact older workers. Zaniboni (2015) discusses how exclusion from the workforce or relegation to lower-wage jobs can lead to social isolation, loss of self-esteem, and a diminished sense of purpose. The World Bank (2025) highlights that older workers, especially in rural areas, may face additional challenges due to limited access to professional networks, further isolating them from job opportunities. Psychological barriers, such as self-doubt and fear of dismissal due to age, often prevent older workers from seeking new employment, leading them to accept lower-paying, less fulfilling jobs or withdraw from the labor market altogether (ILO, 2025).

Additionally, inadequate retirement planning and savings present another major barrier for older workers. Zaniboni (2015) points out that while Thailand's social security system provides some support, many older workers still lack sufficient financial resources to retire comfortably, forcing them to remain in the workforce longer, often in insecure and lower-paying jobs. The World Bank (2025) further emphasizes that older workers in informal employment, who lack access to pension schemes, are particularly vulnerable to financial insecurity, perpetuating a cycle of economic inequality. In conclusion, older workers in Thailand face a combination of technological, employer, health, social, psychological, and financial barriers that limit their participation in the

labor market. These barriers prevent them from accessing high-quality, stable employment and contribute to broader economic inequality and social exclusion. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms that focus on training, anti-discrimination laws, healthcare, and social protection to ensure that older workers can remain integrated into the labor market and continue to contribute productively to the economy.

3. Changes in the Labor Market

The labor market in Thailand has undergone significant changes over the past few decades, driven by technological advancements, globalization, demographic shifts, and the transition to knowledge-based industries. These changes have created both opportunities and challenges, particularly for older workers who are often vulnerable to job displacement and exclusion. Technological advancements and the increasing reliance on digital tools and automation have been pivotal in transforming the labor market. Zaniboni (2015) notes that older workers, particularly those in traditional industries such as agriculture and manufacturing, face considerable challenges in adapting to new technologies. As industries evolve toward digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and robotics, older workers without digital skills are increasingly marginalized, with younger, more tech-savvy employees benefiting from job creation in emerging industries (World Bank, 2025). Moroz & Naddeo (2025) emphasize that the growing demand for high-tech skills further pushes older workers out of the labor market, as they struggle to keep pace with the demands of technology-driven sectors.

Globalization has also played a significant role in reshaping Thailand's labor market, increasing trade, foreign investment, and competition, thereby driving the demand for a more flexible and mobile workforce. Zaniboni (2015) explains that older workers, who may have spent decades in stable, traditional jobs, often lack the adaptability required to meet the demands of a globalized labor market. The rise of temporary contracts, gig economy jobs, and freelance work has introduced further job insecurity, with older workers in informal sectors facing lower wages and limited benefits (Moroz & Naddeo, 2025). This shift has exacerbated their vulnerability, especially as they are excluded from social protection systems such as pensions and health insurance, leaving them with limited economic security. The aging population in Thailand presents both opportunities and challenges. As fertility rates decline and life expectancy increases, the

proportion of older workers in the labor force is rising, placing additional pressure on the workforce. According to the World Bank (2025), the number of people aged 65 and older is projected to grow significantly, increasing the demand for services such as healthcare, elder care, and retirement planning. However, Zaniboni (2015) highlights that this demographic shift also contributes to a shrinking labor force, as fewer working-age individuals are available to replace retiring workers. Older workers, while required to stay in the workforce longer, often face difficulties due to age-related health issues, limited skill development opportunities, and the biases associated with age discrimination. This scenario creates an economic dilemma, where older workers are forced to remain employed past traditional retirement age but struggle to find fulfilling and sustainable employment.

The transition from labor-intensive industries to knowledge-based sectors is another key change affecting older workers. Zaniboni (2015) points out that many older workers, particularly those from rural areas with backgrounds in manual labor, are ill-prepared to transition to the service and knowledge industries that require higher education and specialized skills. The World Bank (2025) further emphasizes that older workers lacking educational qualifications or technical expertise are often excluded from emerging job opportunities in sectors such as information technology, finance, and health services. This exclusion limits their income potential and career advancement, contributing to their economic vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated these labor market changes, prompting widespread digitalization and the adoption of remote work practices. Older workers were disproportionately affected by these shifts, as many lacked the technological proficiency or the ability to work from home. Moroz & Naddeo (2025) explain that older workers, particularly in industries forced to shut down or transition to remote work, were often the first to be laid off or pushed out of the workforce. The pandemic also exposed the fragility of social support systems for older workers, with many left without sufficient safety nets or retraining opportunities, exacerbating the barriers they already faced (Blau, 2025). This disruption underscored the urgent need for more robust social protection policies and greater flexibility in the labor market to accommodate older workers, particularly during crises.

In conclusion, the labor market in Thailand is undergoing significant transformations driven by technological advancements, globalization, demographic shifts, and the rise of knowledge-based industries. While these changes have created new opportunities, they have also presented substantial challenges for older workers, who face barriers such as limited access to retraining, employer biases, and a lack of job security. To ensure that older workers remain engaged in the labor market and continue contributing to the economy, it is crucial to invest in lifelong learning, workplace accommodations, and social protection systems. Addressing these specific barriers through targeted policy interventions is essential for creating a more inclusive labor market for older workers.

4. Challenges and Future Outlook

Thailand's aging population presents significant challenges to its labor market, particularly for older workers who face a multitude of barriers to remaining active and engaged in the workforce. One of the primary challenges is the rapid pace of technological change. Many older workers, especially those in rural areas or manual labor sectors, struggle to keep up with advancements in digital tools and automation, often leaving them marginalized in industries that require digital literacy. This technological divide, combined with age discrimination, further limits their access to stable, high-paying jobs. Despite legal frameworks like the Labor Protection Act of 1998, older workers continue to face biases in hiring and promotions, with employers perceiving them as less adaptable and technologically proficient. Additionally, health-related challenges, such as chronic conditions that affect productivity, and the lack of comprehensive social protection, such as pension schemes and retirement savings, exacerbate the financial insecurity of older workers. Many are forced into informal, low-wage jobs where job stability is minimal, creating a cycle of economic dependence. Moreover, the exclusion of older workers from retraining and career support programs leaves them ill-prepared to transition into knowledge-based industries that are rapidly growing in Thailand. Looking ahead, the future of older workers in Thailand hinges on the implementation of comprehensive policy reforms. These reforms must address age discrimination, expand social protection systems, and invest in lifelong learning and retraining opportunities. Countries like Japan and Singapore have successfully integrated older workers into the

labor market by offering flexible work arrangements and retraining programs, and Thailand could benefit from similar policies. By ensuring that older workers have access to the resources they need to adapt to technological changes, Thailand can create an inclusive labor market where older workers continue to contribute meaningfully to the economy. Ultimately, the challenge lies in balancing the demands of an aging population with the need to maintain a dynamic and productive workforce, and this can be achieved through targeted policies that support the inclusion of older workers in modern industries.

Conclusion

Thailand is facing a pressing challenge as its population ages, which is having a significant impact on the labor market. Older workers are dealing with a range of difficulties, from age discrimination and technological barriers to health issues and limited access to retraining opportunities. As a result, many older workers find themselves pushed into informal, low-paying jobs, which increases economic inequality and marginalizes them from the benefits of a rapidly evolving economy. Even though there are laws meant to protect against age discrimination, these often fall short in practice, leaving older workers vulnerable to bias and exclusion. To address these issues, Thailand needs to adopt a set of policies that support older workers and ensure they can continue to contribute to the economy. First, strengthening the enforcement of anti-age discrimination laws is crucial, alongside providing incentives for employers to hire and retain older workers. Expanding social protection programs, including better pensions and healthcare, will also help ensure financial security for older workers, reducing the need for them to remain in low-wage jobs. Investing in digital skills training and retraining opportunities is another key step, especially for older workers who may not have access to these resources, particularly in rural areas.

Additionally, making the labor market more inclusive for older workers means offering flexible working arrangements, such as job-sharing or remote work, which can help them stay in the workforce longer without compromising their health or well-being. Thailand can look to countries like Japan and Singapore, which have successfully integrated older workers into their labor markets by offering retraining programs and flexible work policies. If Thailand follows suit, it can create an environment where older

workers are valued for their experience and can continue to thrive in the modern economy.

Eventually, the future of Thailand’s labor market depends on its ability to embrace an aging population. By implementing thoughtful, inclusive policies, the country can ensure that older workers remain active contributors to the economy, helping to build a sustainable and resilient workforce for the future.

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