



Women and Age

“Old age is not a disease – it is strength and survivorship, triumph over all kinds of [unpleasant change] and disappointment, trials and illnesses”.

Maggie Kuhn (American Activist)

When we discuss age discrimination against women, we often think of young or old women, rarely both. The lifecycle experience of discrimination is rarely discussed.

For young women, there is often a desire to protect them from their own actions, such as self harm, drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, whereas for older women we seek to support from the perceived negative impacts of growing older. Somewhere in between is a group of women, generally 30 – 60 years old, who are seen as valuable, contributors to society, including in relationships.

This division fails to recognise the strengths shown by women across age ranges and reduces opportunities to learn from and support one another.

Age discrimination does, however, have age specific impacts depending on age. The Young Women’s Trust Annual Survey UK found evidence of financial difficulty and mental health challenges were particularly significant for young women 25 – 30, with 58% unable to make money last to the end of the month and 1 in 5 citing mental health as affecting their ability to stay in work.

For young women under 21 years, life can be particularly difficult. The Living Wage in Scotland is not enforced for those under 21 years, and is reduced for the 21 – 25 year bracket. Additionally the removal of welfare benefits in 1988 for young people 16 and 17 years old, except in exceptional circumstances, reduces the ability to escape violent and abusive family households.

Violence and abuse is a common theme across women’s lives, regardless of age. Their experience of protection and safety however is related to their age. Westmarland et al recognised that, “The emerging real rape of older women myth is more akin to the child sexual abuse model, which focuses upon the inability of the victim to protect themselves and pathologizes the offender as sick and corrupt.” (Westmarland, N. et al (2017)) This approach reduces the opportunity to provide safety and security for women across generations, which is significant in a society where, as Westmarland points out, “ ... the ageing society is a primarily female society, and sexual violence is an overwhelmingly female experience.”

Add to this the fact that “women are more exposed to poverty in old age. They make up more than two thirds (65%) of pensioners living at risk of poverty” (Business in the community), women’s ability to escape violence and abuse is further compromised.

The experience of inequality is magnified for women, regardless of age, from particular communities, such as disabled, BME and LGBT+. It is essential that we continue to explore opportunities to increase women’s collective understanding of their experiences discrimination, encouraging intergenerational approaches to addressing oppression against women across the lifecycle.

EVENT RESULTS

THEME: What do women of different ages have to offer? What can we learn from each other? What issues are we dealing with? How can we work together to make positive changes?

PARTICIPANTS: Total of 40 women from local communities, representing a wide range of backgrounds, convened 8 break-out groups on issues with 52 proposed actions. **(Aug 2011)**

TOP FOUR PRIORITIES VOTED BY PARTICIPANTS (NUMBER OF VOTES)

Keep talking to increase awareness, reduce stigma. **27 votes**

Women's group support Don't suffer in silence. **18 votes**

Mental health awareness/discussion in schools. **16 votes**

Get health professionals to change their attitudes (All ages). **15 votes**

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Individual action/mind-set change. **89 votes**

Education/Training/Awareness raising. **83 votes**

Government/legislative/structural change. **65 votes**

Organised action. **61 votes**

DETAILED RESULTS FROM THE WORKING GROUPS

- Keep talking to increase awareness, reduce stigma. **27 votes**
- Women's group support. Don't suffer in silence. **18 votes**
- Mental health awareness/discussion in schools. **16 votes**
- Get health professionals to change their attitudes (All ages). **15 votes**
- Do not judge a book by its cover. Look through pages. Challenge why you are not suitable. **14 votes**
- How do we know that the 'named person' for our children is safe? Would the government tell us or will it be a cover up for a dodgy scheme? The government need to rethink this scheme. **13 votes**
- Overcome fears and believe in yourself. Have more networks of women's space events – sharing stories. **12 votes**
- Wise Women valuable service. **12 votes**
- Awareness raising for women (what to expect) Male partners (create understanding), families (for support); employers (adjust and adapt health policies) Women need to know what's happening. Information is power. **11 votes**
- Create network of women supporting women – supporting women for support, interaction, sharing passions, interests, listening, feminist-oriented discussion and possible action, for single women. Mental and intellectual stimulation. **10 votes**
- Give a trial regardless of age or qualifications, to prove themselves. **10 votes**