



# Women in their Fifties:

## *well-being, ageing and anticipation of ageing*

Concern about ageing western societies has led to an increase in research into later adulthood and old age. In the UK, however, there have been relatively few studies of women's experiences of mid-life. Women at mid-life are affected by a range of issues and are more likely to be in paid work and to be facing separation and divorce than previous generations.

This briefing paper reports on a small qualitative study which explored the everyday experiences of women aged 50-59 – a topic area in which there has been little previous research. The study focused on the opportunities and challenges facing fifty-something women in a range of different social and economic circumstances.

### Key Findings

- Women in this study generally viewed their fifties as a time of personal opportunity, rather than a time of “winding down” into later life
- Opportunities to pursue a satisfying life in their fifties were related to a range of social, economic and family circumstances
- Caring for family members was a central theme in women's discussions of their daily lives, with caring obligations often shifting as children leave home, grandchildren arrive or elderly parents become ill
- Paid work continued to play an important part in women's lives. Their experiences in the labour market were influenced by employers' attitudes to older workers
- Women in a range of social circumstances expressed concern over their future income in later life – particularly their expected pension entitlement
- Women spoke of the importance of looking after their health as they grew older. Whereas bodily changes such as deteriorating eyesight and stiff joints were presented as minor issues, women reported feeling shocked when chronic health problems had started at mid-life
- “Ageing” was described by the women in terms of physical and mental incapacity, and they were reluctant to describe themselves as “ageing”

## Background

### The changing contexts of women's lives

Concern about ageing Western societies has led to an increase in research into later adulthood and old age (Arber & Ginn, 1995; ESRC 2000). In the UK, however, there have been relatively few studies of women's experiences of mid-life. Women at mid-life are affected by a range of demographic and labour market trends, for example, increasing numbers of women of all ages now participate in paid work. According to the labour force survey the employment rate for women aged between 50 and retirement age (i.e. 60 at present) reached 67% in winter 2003/04, up from 59% a decade ago (National Statistics Online). Meanwhile, increasing numbers of fifty-something women are facing separation and divorce – figures from the 2001 census suggest that over 15% of women in their fifties are divorced, which is a three-fold increase compared to 30 years ago (ESRC, 2001; National Statistics Online). These trends highlight the need for research that investigates how women's social and economic circumstances at mid-life influence their day to day lives.

### The study

Nineteen women from a range of different socio-economic and family circumstances took part in the study. They were recruited via flyers advertising the project, which the researchers handed out to passers-by at two sites in central Glasgow: a women's health centre (The Sandyford Initiative) and the St Enoch Shopping Centre. Eleven of the women took part in discussion groups, and eight were interviewed individually. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interview topics included: women's perceptions of changes and continuities in their lives over time; their current experiences of health and illness; their thoughts and plans for the future, and their views about ageing.

### Findings

Generally, women in this sample group were reasonably positive about being in their fifties; many of them viewed this stage in their lives as a time to expand their horizons and "get the most out of life". The interviews indicate that women's opportunities to lead a satisfying life in their fifties were related to various aspects of their life circumstances. Family roles and relationships, employment opportunities, and issues around health and illness emerged as key influences upon the nature and quality of the women's daily lives.

#### Family roles and relationships

Family relationships were central to how most of the women spoke about their daily lives. Much of what women said related to their experiences of care-giving within their families. From the interviews it seems that mid-life is a time when the nature and extent of women's caring obligations may shift in response to changes in family circumstances, such as: children leaving (and possibly returning) home; the arrival of grandchildren; elderly parents or other relatives becoming ill or infirm; and divorce or bereavement.

Sixteen of the nineteen women who participated in the study were mothers. Although none of the women we interviewed were currently involved in looking after their own children full-time, care-giving within the context of mother-child relationships continued to play an important role in these women's lives. This was often expressed through the provision of emotional and financial support to their adult children; "caring about" them even if not physically "caring for" them.

However, alongside an acknowledgement of the continued importance of their caring role as mothers, most of this sample regarded themselves as being at a point in their lives when they should be able to develop and pursue their own goals. Women spoke of their fifties being "time for me" – a stage of life in which they had more control over how they used their time. As one woman explained:

*"I've had my children and I've brought them up. I've done my best for them...and it's my turn now. I'm living life for me. I'm enjoying it...this is my time."*

(Frances, age 56, divorced, youth worker)

For some, "me-time" was expressed through paid work; others spoke of developing hobbies, spending more time with friends, or going travelling. However, the interviews showed that opportunities for women in their fifties to widen their horizons once their children had grown up were dependent on other aspects of their social circumstances – especially their financial situations. Further, for some women, their fifties had seen the onset of new caring demands and obligations within the family. Several spoke of offering support to elderly parents, and/or involvement in looking after grandchildren. There were some interesting contradictions around women's expectations and experiences of being a grandparent. A number of interviewees explicitly stated their intention not to be drawn into a situation of providing care to any grandchildren that they might have in the future. However, all of those women who had grandchildren were in fact involved in looking after them in some form or another. This could sometimes be a strain if women felt that they were pressurised into caring for grandchildren.

So, although women might desire time to themselves in order to pursue their own goals throughout their fifties and beyond, there is some evidence from our study to suggest that it may be more difficult than anticipated for mid-life women to stand back from changing caring demands within the family.

#### Mid-life experiences in the labour market

Two thirds of those who participated in the study were in paid employment. These women all talked about their jobs in positive terms. Aside from the financial independence paid work brought, women also commented on how being in work enhanced their self-esteem. Several women indicated that their fifties had been a time for developing their careers, either through returning to work full-time once their children had reached adulthood, or after embarking upon higher or

further education in their thirties or forties. For example, one woman explained:

*“I worked part time in my forties because the children were still at school so I’m now full time. I’ve been given opportunities I didn’t have in my forties. Opportunities to train, totally different job, um, which I love, and it’s bringing out things I didn’t know I had. Um, I can’t complain about work at all, it’s been great. My employer, there’s no ageism. Yes I have found a lot of changes but all for the better.”*

(Jenny, age 54, married, civil servant)

By contrast, two of the women in the sample group had experienced ageism from potential employers. As Maggie commented:

*“The difference for me, ye know, being in my fifties is that, eh, it’s a lot more difficult to get employment.”*

(Maggie, age 55, divorced, unemployed)

Overall, the interviewees’ accounts of their employment situations suggest that employers’ attitudes towards older workers may be an important factor shaping the labour market experiences of women at mid-life.

Anticipation of retirement was a central theme when women talked about their employment situations. Whilst some saw themselves as “winding down” towards retirement, others explained that they would need to work beyond sixty in order to maintain a reasonable level of income. A substantial minority of women expressed concern over their pension entitlements. Most reported gaps in pension contributions, often related to child-rearing breaks in employment, but also to spells of illness-related unemployment, or a return to education/training mid-career. The following quotation is typical of the comments made regarding pensions:

*“I think it’s a very worrisome future...when you get to the end of your working life, as we are in our fifties, you know...you can’t magic it out of nowhere...”*

(Elaine, age 59, married, secondary school teacher)

Women’s views about their pension situation seemed to be linked not only to their current levels of income, but also to their work histories and their wider household circumstances. Women with relatively high household incomes, along with occupational or private pensions, were most likely to voice worries about maintaining their standard of living in retirement. The five women who were in receipt of state benefits were least likely to have any form of additional pension provision aside from their state entitlement, but they were also less likely to express concern about their future financial circumstances than more affluent women in the study. Marital status was also relevant here. Single (never married) and divorced women all expressed awareness that they would not be “cushioned” in retirement by access to a partner’s financial resources.

## Health, illness & ageing

In general, much of the existing literature on women’s health at mid-life has been dominated by a biomedically -orientated focus on the menopause. In our study, discussion of the menopause was minimal compared to accounts of other aspects of everyday life, even though women were specifically asked about this during the course of the interviews. Even in the context of discussions about health and illness, women had other health concerns and issues which were discussed more than the menopause.

Many women discussed a growing awareness of bodily changes (other than those associated with the menopause) at mid-life. They commented on specific physical and mental changes they had noticed: greying hair, deteriorating eyesight, difficulties in remembering words, stiff or creaky joints, sagging stomachs and wrinkled skin. Although these changes were frequently noted by the interviewees, they were very rarely presented as being problematic. Rather, women made efforts in the interviews to downplay these changes – by laughing them off, by pointing out that these things happen to everybody, and by emphasising that these changes did not interfere with everyday life. One woman illustrated this well when she said:

*“Yes, that’s a thing, trying to remember words. You know it’s in there, and it does come out eventually, or someone’s name, and it’s at the end of the day....but who cares? It’s not a big issue though is it? It’s not. It could be so much worse [...] and you don’t feel so bothered because you know everyone is going through the same thing.”*

(Jenny, age 54, married, civil servant)

In addition to expressing an awareness that their minds and bodies were now displaying signs of ageing, women were also aware of the need to look after their health now that they were in their fifties. Good health was seen by many as a resource that was necessary for them to make best use of the rest of their lives. As one woman remarked:

*“I want to have...whatever much life I’ve got left, I want to have an active life and I want to have a healthy life.”*

(Suzy, age 52, single, community worker)

Despite a general acknowledgement of the need to care for their health as they grew older, the data suggest that the women in the sample group were ambivalent about acknowledging any links between ageing and health problems. The likelihood that individuals will experience the onset of chronic health problems increases throughout the fifties. However, several women reported feeling quite shocked when health problems such as high blood pressure, gall bladder problems and diabetes, had started at mid-life. Indeed, one or two women went so far as to say that they did not think that their health problems were related to their age. This is illustrated by the following quotation, by a

woman who had experienced multiple health problems in her fifties:

*“I’ve had these problems in my fifties and up until then, I really hadn’t had anything. So I suppose it’s all happened in my fifties. I don’t suppose it’s really to do with age. I suppose it’s just happened.”*

(Grace, age 56, married, receptionist)

The apparent reluctance of the women in this study to make connections between the onset of health problems and their own ageing may be related to the fact that “ageing” was viewed very negatively by almost all of the women. They defined ageing in terms of physical and mental incapacity, and expressed the opinion that “ageing” was not a label that currently applied to them personally. So, it seems that whilst the women in this study considered it acceptable to joke about failing eyesight or greying hair at mid-life, they were reluctant to acknowledge that increasing age may herald the onset of more serious health problems.

## Implications for research and policy

The findings from this study suggest that women’s experiences of mid-life may reflect increasingly complex and diverse experiences of social and economic structures. This means that:

- In order to understand how structural, cultural and personal opportunities and barriers interact, and are experienced, by women in their fifties, a research approach is needed which illuminates both commonalities and diversity in experience
- Policy makers need to consider the circumstances in which women experience their own ageing, so as to formulate policies that are sensitive to the needs of women at mid-life – for example, policies concerning work-life balance or pension entitlements
- Health care services for women at mid-life need to be responsive to women’s own health priorities, which may not be focused upon issues associated with the menopause

## References

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## The Study

The study was funded by Glasgow Caledonian University. The research team comprised Linda McKie, Laura Airey and Kathryn Backett-Milburn.

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This briefing was written by Laura Airey and edited by Sarah Morton and the research team.

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