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The Sexageism Project

End of Project Summary Report

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May 2022

Introduction

Ageing and ageing inequalities are shaped by ageism, sexism, and their intersection: sexageism (Calasanti and Slevin 2013; Krekula, Nikander and Wilińska 2018; WHO 2021). Yet mainstream accounts of ageing remain frustratingly gender neutral (Rochon, Kalia and Higgs 2021). Many recent publications in leading ageing journals have explored ageism without taking gender into account (e.g., Berridge and Hooyman 2020; Vervaecke and Meisner 2021; Amundsen 2022; Hopf, Walsh and Georgantzi 2022; Reul *et al.* 2022). The “Everyday Ageism” scale (Allen *et al.* 2021) is silent on gender. The absence of gender is deeply troubling, not least because this excludes the experiences of over half of the ageing population and the majority of the very old (who are primarily women), for whom ageing is experienced as gendered. A key aspect of sexageism is invisibilisation (Ward and Holland 2011; Pilcher and Martin 2020) and this would appear to be paralleled by the under-attention to gender in mainstream gerontological literature.

This report summarises the findings from a 2022 survey conducted online survey conducted with 158 older women in the United Kingdom (UK), which aimed to explore their understandings of ‘sexageism’: “a deeply entrenched and shaming ideology that devalues the bodies and identities of older women in our youth-loving and age-phobic culture” (Bouson 2016: 1). The findings highlight the ways in which older women experience ‘surround sound’ sexageism through everyday linguistic, discursive and interpersonal microaggressions (Sue 2010; Gendron *et al.* 2016) which coalesce to reflect and reinforce their cultural devaluation. Central to the respondents’ perceptions of sexageism were the experiences of being patronised and invisibilised, which they understood to be profoundly gendered occurrences, compounded by intersections with other key social locations (class, disability, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation) and reinforced by the media (advertising, press, TV, radio, social media). These mis-recognitions and non-recognitions (Fraser 2003; Westwood 2018) are profound sources of social injustice. This report highlights the importance of, and major challenges associated with, tackling sexageism and its impact on the lives of older women. It argues for gender to be central to all future analyses of ageing and ageism.

Background

There is a growing appreciation of the significance of ageism (prejudice and discrimination towards older people: Nelson 2004; Bytheway 2005) for older people in their everyday lives (Gendron *et al.* 2016; Older People’s Commissioner for Wales 2021), and ‘everyday sexism’ in women’s lives (Brandt 2011; Bates 2016). However, the voices of older women remain obscured by both sets of discourse. Yet the “embodied and emplaced” (Finlay 2021: 80) nature of sexageism has been observed by feminist writers for decades (de Beauvoir 1991; Greer 1991; Frieden 1994; Steinem 1995; Woodward 2006). In her article ‘The Double Standard of Ageing’, Susan Sontag (1972) argued that ageing women are stigmatised and marginalised both for being older and for being women. Merryn Gott (2005: 33) wrote, 30 years later, that:

Susan Sontag’s ‘double standard’ of ageing is alive and well in the 21st century in that physical ageing continues to disenfranchise and desexualize women in a way that it does not men.

Over a decade after Gott's observation, little had changed:

Women are continuously bombarded with images of idealized feminine beauty that privilege young, slim, toned and healthy bodies... While youth is equated with sexual desirability, health and femininity, oldness is associated with asexuality, poor health, social invisibility and a loss of physical attractiveness and social currency. (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2012: 103)

Feminist gerontologists have long emphasised the significance of gender for ageing and age-related inequalities. Older women's experiences of the intersection of ageing and ageism – sexageism – inform their comparatively greater cultural devaluation and socioeconomic disadvantage in later life (Arber, Davidson and Ginn 2003; Ray 2004; Krekula 2007; Freixas, Luque and Rein 2012; Calasanti and Slevin 2013; Twigg 2012; Carney 2018; Vlachantoni 2018; Rochon, Kalia and Higgs 2021). This is nuanced at sexageism's intersections with other social locations: notably class, disability, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation (Traies 2016; Westwood 2016; Krekula, Nikander and Wilińska 2018; Hendrix 2021; Putnam and Bigby 2021; Reygan, Henderson and Khan 2022).

Rather than being two distinct forces, ageism and sexism spring from the same well. Both valorise “beauty, vitality, and strength” associated with youthfulness and disdain “decline, disease, and weakness” associated with older age (Krekula, Nikander and Wilińska 2018: 38). This is also gendered. Arber and Ginn (1991: 42) wrote this thirty years ago, and it remains true in the present day:

Because women's value is sexualized, positively in the first half of life, negatively in the second, it depends on a youthful appearance ... Whereas attractiveness in men depends on many factors which can increase with age, including their achievements, experience in the public world, money and power, these do not generally enhance a woman's sexual eligibility.

Everyday ageism and sexism are conveyed in microaggressions (Sue 2010) i.e., jokes, comments, casual remarks, negative stereotypes and general discursive assumptions. Sexist microaggressions reinforce gender norms and stereotypes and the sexualisation of young women (Bradley-Geist, Rivera and Geringer 2015). Ageist microaggressions reinforce stereotypical, homogenising assumptions about older people and the perception of “old as negative, young as positive” (Gendron *et al.* 2016: 1001). Sexageist microaggressions are less well-understood but are known to have a detrimental effect on older women's physical and mental health (Chrisler, Barney and Palatino 2016).

The media (advertising, press, TV, radio) and social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp) plays an increasingly significant role in the perpetuation of misogyny, ageism and sexageism (Featherstone and Hepworth 2005; Twigg 2012; Ylänne 2012; Ablett 2018; Edström 2018; Gullette 2018; Loos and Ivan 2018; Tiidenberg 2018; Boyle and Rathnayake 2020; Majón-Valpuesta *et al.* 2021; Makita *et al.* 2021; Rosenthal, Cardoso and Abdalla 2021; Ng and Indran 2022). This was particularly evident during the peak of the COVID pandemic (Jimenez-Sotomayor, Gomez-Moreno and Soto-Perez-de-Celis 2020; Meisner 2021; Swift and Chasteen 2021; Graham 2022).

Often, for older women, their most significant experience of sexageism in the media is their absence, i.e., not seeing themselves represented. Even when they are visible, for example in the television series *Golden Girls* or *Grace and Frankie*, the narrative is closely implicated

in promoting successful ageing and the masking of signs of ageing among older women (Tortajada, Dhaenens and Willem 2018; Van Bauwel 2018; Shimoni 2021). Older women are rendered both hypervisible (‘marked’ by the physical signs of ageing) and invisible, i.e., going unrecognised (Woodward 1999; Bouson 2016). Invisibility is a powerful aspect of sexageism. Laura Bates (2016: 3370) observed in her book “Everyday Sexism”, that:

... every now and then through the thousands of stories we have collected comes a recurring word or description that echoes through the pages, used by woman after woman after woman to describe her lived experience. In the case of older women, that word is ‘invisible’.

Pilcher and Martin (2020: 714) have commented on “how ageism and sexism combine to literally cut out – invisibilise – older women.” Ward and Holland (2011) have suggested that “invisibility emerges as a meta-narrative in accounting for the social experiences of older women” (298). In their own research with older women, their respondents described themselves as being “socially invisible; sometimes ignored in conversations, or overlooked in shops and bars” (299). They also described accounts of “physically-enforced invisibility” which included “being almost run over by bike-riders, and barged out the way on busy streets” (299). Cecil *et al.* (2022: 222) have also observed that: “older women are alert to age-stereotyping and discrimination and the hazard of invisibility, social devaluation, and irrelevance.” Their research highlighted how women are conflicted between wanting to age authentically and feeling the need to mask the signs of ageing, especially grey hair.

Not being seen or noticed is a powerful microaggression (Sue 2010; Lewis and Neville 2015; Kattari 2019; Williams, Skinta and Martin-Willett 2021). Recognition is a key social justice concern (Thompson 2006). Recognition is one of the three arms of political theorist Nancy Fraser’s tripartite model of social justice consisting of resource distribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser 2003). For Fraser, there can be no social justice without recognition – being culturally/socially valued and seen as equal to others – which is also inter-implicated in access to resources and having a political voice (representation). By contrast, misrecognition – being culturally/socially devalued and seen as ‘less than’ – and non-recognition – “being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one’s culture” (Fraser 1995: 71) – are profound personal and social harms causing “an injury to one’s identity” (Fraser 2000: 109) and are “unjust”:

It is unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated and which disparage their distinctive characteristics or the distinctive characteristics assigned to them. (Fraser 2009: 3)

This report explores the social injustices encountered by older women through the lens of sexageism.

Methodology

The aim of this project was to explore UK older women’s understandings and subjective experiences of everyday ageism sexism and sexageism.

Design

The project comprised an online survey of UK women aged 50 and over. The survey¹ was made up of elements of two established and validated questionnaires: the Everyday Ageism Scale (Allen *et al.* 2021) and the Schedule of Sexist Events (Klonoff and Landrine 1995), with supplementary questions developed by the researcher specifically relating to sexageism.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via e-flyers and email invitations to local and national women's groups (including those representing Black and Minority Ethnic – BAME – women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer – LGBTQ – women) older women's groups (e.g., the British Red Hatters Society), women's organisations (e.g., the Fawcett Society); Age UK (national and local); the British Society of Gerontology, social media (Twitter and Facebook), and blogs on the project website.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were identified for their frequency, significance, exemplifications, complications, saliency and significance (Buetow 2010).

Respondents

170 people completed the survey. After excluding spoiled/falsified scripts, a total of 158 scripts were analysed, with participants' ages ranging from 50 to 87. The participant profiles are outlined in Table 1.

Age		Ethnicity	
50-54	29 (18%)	White British/White Other	149 (94%)
55-59	36 (23%)	Mixed/multiple ethnicities	4 (3%)
60-64	31 (20%)	"Other ethnicity"	4 (3%)
65-69	26 (16%)	Black British	1 (<1%)
70-74	21 (13%)	Disability	
75-79	13 (8%)	Disabled	31 (20%)
80-84	1 (<1%)	Not disabled	127 (80%)
85-89	1 (<1%)	Religion or belief	
Gender identity		No religion or belief	103 (65%)
Same as at birth	156 (99%)	Christian	31 (20%)
Different from birth	2 (1%)	'Other' (Humanist, Pagan, Spiritual, Quaker, not specified)	13 (82%)
Sexual orientation			
Heterosexual	97 (61%)	Buddhist	3 (2%)
Lesbian/gay	44 (28%)	Jewish	2 (1%)
Bisexual	10 (6%)	Muslim	1 (<1%)
Asexual	1 (<1%)	Sikh	1 (<1%)
Other	6 (4%)		

Table 1. Participant profiles.

¹ A full list of the survey questions is available on request.

Findings

The findings reported here cohered around six main themes: language and discourse, patronisation, invisibilisation, intersectionality, media representations, and solutions.

Language and discourse

There was considerable awareness of, and sensitisation to ageism, sexism and sexageism in everyday language and discourse.

Ageism

The women described recently witnessing/experiencing older people being referred to as “Boomers”; “Coffin Dodgers”; “Crumblies”; “Crusties”; “Oldies”; “Silvertops”; “Silver Surfers”; “Wrinklies”; “the Elderly”; and “Pensioners”. Some reported recently hearing older people described as being “a drain on society”; “over the hill”; “out of touch”; and “past it.”

One woman wrote:

I heard someone [...] make a negative comment about older people being knocked over by electric scooters - saying what does it matter they wouldn't have long to live anyway. (ES21, heterosexual White British woman, aged 70)

Many women referred to discourse about older people during the pandemic, such as:

A lot of the coverage of COVID risk - all older people are seen as frail (ES146, bisexual White British woman, aged 65)

I was deeply disturbed by the way in which the COVID crisis revealed how many people considered the old dispensable and certainly not worth shutting down the economy for. (ES53, heterosexual White British woman, aged 68)

[I have heard people say] that COVID mostly effects old people who don't have long to live and have had their time anyway. (E1186, heterosexual “White Other” woman, aged 72)

The notion that older people should ‘get out of the way’ (also described by Ward and Holland, 2011), was most evident in this account:

I was in a queue for a rail ticket and an impatient traveller in the queue said "You people shouldn't be travelling at this time. We have to get to work" (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

Here we can see several processes and normative assumptions in play: the ‘othering’ and presumed homogeneity of older people (‘you people’); the privileging of economic productivity (assumed to be the domain of younger people) over other activities; and the simple disrespect shown by a younger person to an older person, basically indicating they should be ghettoised into using public transport at only certain times of the day. This was echoed in another woman’s observations:

Going out at night, the streets and venues now belong to the young. It can be quite scary to go into town to a restaurant. That’s why older people tend to stick to lunch. Not because they can’t digest food after 6 or can’t dance or [are] too tired to watch a play. It’s because we are old and

the young don't want old people out and about. (ES91, lesbian/gay White British woman, aged 61)

This woman articulated an intergenerational temporal sensitivity among older people to their welcomeness (or not) in public spaces, and how many withdraw as a consequence.

Sexism

The women demonstrated an equally, if not greater, awareness of everyday sexism. They described a range of sexist language and discourse which they had recently witnessed or experienced, including a wide range of sexist terms such as: “Babe”; “Bitch”; “Bird”; “Cow”; “Cunt”; “Minger”; “Slag”; “Slapper”; “Slut”; “Tart”; “Whore”; “Witch”. One woman wrote about “Aggressive language in rap music e.g., referring to bitches and whores” (ES90, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 61). Other respondents reported recently hearing women referred to as “fit” (ES21, heterosexual White British woman, aged 70), “all tits” (ES71, heterosexual White British woman aged 72), and “thick as shit” (ES71, heterosexual White British woman aged 72). One woman had heard “She obviously doesn't have a brain in her head”, in reference to a woman's appearance (ES17, heterosexual White British woman, aged 67).

Many of the respondents referenced recent violent, often sexualised, attacks on women and girls as exemplars of more extreme forms of sexism. Several women wrote “where do you start?” for example:

Honestly, where do you start - casual everyday sexism is endemic (ES121, heterosexual White British woman aged 63)

Where do I start? Every day there is a femicide in the news. (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76)

As with ageism, then, the women respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness of, and sensitisation to, everyday sexism, particularly in relation to younger (sexualised) women.

Sexageism

The respondents showed an acute awareness, and direct experience, of sexageism in language and discourse in several ways: a) pejorative language; b) reference to physical appearance; c) the ‘granny’ stereotype; and d) disparaged sexualities.

a) Pejorative language

In terms of pejorative language, the respondents identified only a few terms specifically relating to older men, such as “Old Codger” and “Old Git”. By contrast, they highlighted how many of the pejorative terms used to refer to younger women were also used in reference to older women, with the epithet ‘old’ added on, i.e., “Old Bitch”; “Old Cow”; “Old Cunt”; “Old Minger”; “Old Slag”; “Old Slapper”; “Old Tart”; “Old Whore”; and “Old Witch”. Additionally, they identified a range of other terms which specifically referred to older women, i.e., “Batty Old Woman”; “Blue Rinse Brigade”; “Old Bag”; “Ugly Old Bag”; “Old Biddy/Biddies”; “Old Bird”; “Old dear(s)”; “Old Fluffies”; “Old Girl”; “Harridan”; “Hag”;

“Old Hag”; “Little Old Lady”; “Prune”; “Golden Oldies”; “Auld dolls”; “Karens”;¹ and “Grannies” (as a generic term). One woman described hearing an older woman called “old pissy-knickers” (ES145, asexual White British woman, aged 73). These narratives both resonate with, and add to, previous research which has highlighted how the English language has far many more disparaging linguistic terms for older women than older men (Cuddy and Fiske 2002). This is often linked to their physical appearance.

b) Reference to physical appearance

The respondents described hearing pejorative descriptions about older women’s bodies, including “bingo arms”, “crinkly”, “shrivelled”; “wrinkly”; “not wearing well” and “mutton dressed as lamb”. Other women gave these examples:

A younger relative recently said to me that I wouldn't look so old if I coloured my grey hair which made me look very unattractive. (ES21, heterosexual White British woman, aged 70)

Other older women described being discounted because of their physical appearance:

[I was called a] “Dried up old hag” when I challenged someone’s offensive language. (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

I was speaking on a YouTube broadcast and male trolls in the live chat were commenting on my age and ugliness. (ES39, heterosexual White British woman, aged 61)

'Christ, look at the state of that...' [overheard] remark passed about Angela Merkel. (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

In the first quote an assertive older woman is discounted with a sexageist pejorative term referencing her embodied ageing, in the second, a woman presenter is discounted by males who reference her age and evaluate attractiveness. In the third quote, Angela Merkel, born in 1954 and the first female chancellor of Germany (2005-2021) is discounted because of her age and perceived attractiveness. In all three examples older women’s power is undermined by a focus on how they look rather than what they say and do.

The theme of inverted ageism – congratulating women on looking younger than their age – was frequently mentioned:

'Compliments' when people look younger than their chronological age - happens all the time in day-to-day interactions. By implication better to look young. (ES110, heterosexual White British woman aged 61)

I wouldn't have thought so, you look much younger (ES104, heterosexual “White Other” woman, aged 76)

The back-handed compliment, “You’re amazing for your age” etc (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

These inverted compliments have previously been identified as a type of ageist microaggression (Gendron *et al.* 2016). However, there is clearly also a gendered dimension to them.

The women also referred to how they see their own bodies:

I have heard friends talk about their ageing and their unattractiveness - hair going grey. No longer being able to dress how they would like. (ES58, bisexual, White British woman, aged 51)

Jokes about our necks! Becoming self-conscious (ES163, lesbian/gay, “White Other” woman, aged 64)

Groups of older female neighbours, [other neighbours] laughing at their/our sagging breasts and arthritic bodies. Laughing at aging is acceptable ...and bonding in a horrid way. (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

It is open to question whether the ageing neighbours were laughing about their ageing bodies in solidarity and resistance – which might be a buffer to the damaging effects of ageism – or ridiculing themselves, which would constitute internalised ageism. Very probably it was a combination of both, which is concerning, given the harm internalised ageism can cause to the physical and mental wellbeing of older women (Chrisler, Barney and Palatino 2016).

c) The ‘granny’ stereotype

Several respondents objected to being called ‘granny’ and/or being assumed to be a grandmother:

Referring to me as 'grandma' - the assumption is that, as a woman, one's identity is solely related to procreation and we have no other value as a human being, especially after a certain age. (ES34, “other sexuality”, not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

Being asked, as a conversational gambit, about my grandchildren (I don't have any) in a way that implies old women have nothing else to talk about. (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76)

The ‘granny’ stereotype is one of the few positive stereotypes associated with older women (Cuddy and Fisk 2002). The assumption that older women are grandmothers obscures the experiences of the growing number of older women who are ageing without children (Hafford-Letchfield *et al.* 2017) many of whom are current cohorts of older lesbians, for whom access to motherhood was historically limited (Traies 2016; Westwood 2016). By contrast, another woman observed that she felt becoming a grandmother had ‘aged’ her social status:

I became a grandmother recently for the first time and received so many derogatory remarks about needing assistance [due to supposed frailty associated with new grandmother status] (ES160, heterosexual White British woman aged 56)

This woman found herself newly slotted into the ‘granny’ stereotype, but with comments about her lack of competence rather than her warmth, suggesting that grandmotherhood status may be more nuanced and not always in a positive way.

d) Disparaged sexualities

There were occasional references to older women being described as “cougars”, implying “that women dating younger men are predatory” (ES48, heterosexual White British woman, aged 59). However, there were many more references to the discounting of older women as sexual beings:

Had a recent conversation in which men openly acknowledged their preference for younger women with 'better' bodies who made it clear [they] would not consider relationship[s] with women of their own age/generation... No thought at all that their aging bodies might be unattractive, just [like] those of older women. (ES53, heterosexual White British woman, aged 68)

This conversation highlights how both younger and older women are critically evaluated in a commodified and sexualised way, with older women being seen as 'less than' younger women, in ways that not all older men of a similar age would be.

Other women described being ignored or mocked for their sexualities:

Not reciprocating if I'm flirting but making jokes [about me doing so]. (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

The (much) younger people I work with laughed when I told them that I have a boyfriend and an active sex life (ES125, heterosexual White British woman aged 65)

These women's humiliating experiences (both lesbian and heterosexual) highlight the ways in which older women's sexualities can be ('humorously') discounted. More overt contempt was also described:

[Overheard] Something along the lines of a young man referring to an older woman and offering to, 'give her one, as a favour.' (ES40, heterosexual White British woman, aged 71)

[Overheard] 'Who'd want to shag that old slapper?' (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

These women's narratives highlight the often explicit and unashamed de-sexualised cultural devaluation of older women (Krekula, Nikander and Wilińska 2018).

Patronisation

Many of the women surveyed said they had recently witnessed/experienced being addressed as "Dear", "Lovey", "Darling", "My Darling" and "My Love" by strangers or near-strangers, which were considered to be "diminishing and patronising words" (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76).

I feel more and more patronised by mostly young blokes who seem to think calling me things like 'young lady,' will be appreciated. (ES40, heterosexual White British woman, aged 71)

A cafe owner addresses me as young lady despite my asking him to stop. He says he's being friendly, kind, as if acknowledging that I am old would be rude. (ES112, heterosexual White British woman aged 67)

This inverted ageism, referring to an older woman as a younger woman, implies there is something wrong with being an older woman and something better about being a younger one (Gendron *et al.* 2016).

Infantilisation was also reported,

Queuing in the bank... male employee approaching said "What are we here for today?" So bloody patronising. Would he have asked a man or a younger woman that? (ES75, heterosexual White British woman aged 68)

The employee spoke to this older woman as if she was a child, which, understandably infuriated her. It was a sexageist microaggression; as she observed, it is unlikely he would have spoken in the same way to a younger woman or an older man.

This adventurous woman and her partner frequently feel patronised by younger people's responses to their activities:

When we've mentioned things like recently doing the highest, fastest zip wire in the world, young folk put their heads to one side and say gently "Oh bless you." In fact, "Bless you" becomes the default response to women over 60. (ES34, "other sexuality", not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

The default 'bless you' response to older women typifies compassionate ageism (Vervaecke and Meisner 2021) and, infantilization of older women.

Older women can also experience patronisation in relation to technology:

I have grey hair and I suspect people see the grey hair and it conveys a message about age/strength/ability etc., I have been asked if I can 'manage' a relatively light box [and] told 'older women often struggle with that (technology)' (ES60, heterosexual White British woman aged 63)

[In a recent class] I was both looked at, talked about and at, as if I was both stupid and unable to work technology because I was older (oldest in class by far). I am, in fact, very tech savvy. (ES120, heterosexual White British woman aged 59)

The technology does not have to be particularly complex,

Being patronised by a [,.,] shop assistant when I purchased a new microwave. He (!) asked whether I'd like him to explain how to use it to me. (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

These quotes resonate with the 'assumed incompetence' attributed to older women (Cuddy, Norton and Fiske 2005) given a new edge through the prism of technological abilities, which can also differentiate 'younger old' and 'older old' people. One respondent in the upper age range felt the "expectation that I can be technology proficient" (ES161, heterosexual woman, "other ethnicity" not specified, aged 79) was ageist, assuming that she would have the same skills levels as younger people, which she did not and did not wish to. By contrast, many of the 'younger older' respondents were keen to emphasise that they were technologically competent. Some of this may be practical necessity, to stay connected in an increasingly technological world, but some of it may also involve resisting ageism: being a 'tech whizz' as a new marker of 'successful ageing.'

Patronisation can occur in healthcare contexts,

Ladies of a certain age - ([said by] male GP during my internal examination). (ES148, heterosexual White British woman aged 64)

I had a total knee replacement and the young physio asked me what I wanted to achieve with the physio did I "want to be able to pop down to the local shops" I told him, I shop online and I wanted to get back to full mobility with the knee and do everything I did before. I was furious! (ES146, bisexual White British woman, aged 65)

Recently I was sent flying by an over boisterous dog and the extremely dramatic impact broke my arm. The hospital referred to me as "an elderly lady who's had a fall". Instantly I was in an

inappropriate category that made me feel frail (which I'm not!) and dismissed. (ES34, "other sexuality", not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

In the first quote, the woman's doctor seems embarrassed to mention her age, implying there is something shameful about it (Bouson 2016). Given the incident took place mid-internal examination it is unlikely she felt herself to be in a position (literally) to challenge this even if she had wanted to. In the second quote, the physiotherapist's limited imagining of the life of an older women informed his minimal expectations for her recovery, with implications for her physiotherapy and potential outcome (Chrisler, Barney and Palatino 2016). In the third quote, the older woman's fall has placed her in the 'elderly' category, i.e., being associated with her age and implied frailty, which it would not have been if she had been younger. The term 'elderly' is itself problematic, being an empirically unsound ageist stereotype (Avers *et al.* 2011; Westwood 2015; Berridge and Hooyman 2020; Ng 2021).

Invisibilisation

Many women described a loss of social visibility (being seen and heard) with older age:

I feel women of my age are invisible. (ES75, heterosexual White British woman aged 68)

As I have aged I am becoming aware that older women become increasingly invisible. (ES138, lesbian/gay White British woman, aged 67)

Frankly I think it's the not being seen that is most tiresome. (ES40, heterosexual White British woman, aged 71)

I recall when (some) younger people stopped listening to me, and I was shocked and annoyed and thought 'oh, this is how it happens.' (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

This lost visibility was described as taking place in a range of contexts, including public meetings:

I am ignored when I put my hand up to speak in an in-person meeting, even when after some time I wave a card to attract attention. (ES73, heterosexual White British woman aged 82)

Saying something in a meeting, being ignored then someone male or younger reiterates it and it's heard. Infuriating! (ES33, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 75)

Some women described not being recognised professionally:

As a comedian and performer, it is often assumed that I am the comedian or performer's mother or grandmother, as if people can't believe that older women would have the confidence to perform. (ES83, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 72)

I went to book a flight to North America (to speak in a conference). Travel agent not only assumed I was going to visit my children/grandchildren - why else would an old woman travel? - but continued to assert that, even after I told her I wasn't! (Not only invisible, also un-listened to!) (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76)

Retired women also described feeling professionally discounted:

Feel strongly that my past professional life is ignored now that I am retired. (ES38, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 65)

I am seen by many people as just old. The fact that I had an important job and am still capable is completely ignored. Best to stay quiet. (ES92, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 75)

This was heightened among women care recipients:

Feeling generally invisible when out and about and/or professional health workers expressing surprise at learning of my professional experience/expertise. (ES17, heterosexual White British woman, aged 67)

These examples demonstrate how older age erases older women's identities and presence when exercising their political voice (representation) and/or professional/ex-professional voices (recognition). Women also described being erased as consumers:

Standing waiting to be served in a shop and being completely ignored as if I'm invisible. (ES145, asexual White British woman, aged 73)

Shopping with a younger person... being talked over by salespeople. (ES71, heterosexual White British woman aged 72)

Being ignored in a queue, with a man jumping in front of me. Made me feel angry, humiliated, invisible. (ES35, lesbian/gay "White Other" woman, aged 74)

One woman wrote of her resistance strategy:

I have been ignored in shops when wearing ordinary winter coat and hat. It makes me furious so I tend to wear more eccentric clothes which stop that happening. (ES112, heterosexual White British woman aged 67)

Bolder styles tend to be more socially acceptable when worn by younger women (Twigg 2009), however, some older women choose to reclaim them as acts of resistance, as with the Red Hat Society (Hutchinson *et al.* 2008), and as this respondent has.

Being ignored in bars and restaurants was described, especially by women in the upper age ranges:

I am often ignored when I go up to a bar to order. (ES73, heterosexual White British woman aged 82)

I was hosting my family at a restaurant. I made the booking in my name, but when it came to any reference to where we sat, ordering, and finally paying the bill, the waitress referred to my son first every time. (ES92, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 75)

Sometimes the loss of visibility was nebulous and hard to pin down:

Sometimes it's very subtle in the way you get blanked from a conversation or not included. (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

It doesn't need to be direct, it's more subtle - being overlooked or ignored, put down. (ES104, heterosexual "White Other" woman, aged 76)

For some women losing visibility was a mixed blessing:

We've had a lifetime of sexism so the cumulative effect has an impact. I'm relieved sometimes that I'm invisible these days, but it's also frustrating from a work perspective. (ES57, heterosexual White British woman, aged 54)

This echoes research which has described older women's simultaneous relief at becoming free from the 'male gaze' (Ponterotto 2016) and frustration with their loss of power, authority and perceived "relevance", particularly at work (Cecil *et al.* 2022: 222).

Intersections

Intersectionality was identified as being significant for social disadvantage, such as in this comment:

Intersecting characteristics generally move you further down the ladder of respect. (ES26, heterosexual White British trans woman aged 64)

While intersections can compound social disadvantage – of which this trans woman is very likely personally aware (Toze 2019) – they can also exacerbate privilege in context-contingent ways (Valentine 2007). The intersection of sexism and ageism was understood in terms of the sexualisation of younger women and the desexualisation and discounting of older women:

Younger women are treated as sexual objects whilst older women become invisible or treated like “grannies”. (ES79, lesbian/gay woman, “other ethnicity” not specified, aged 78)

Referring to me as 'grandma' - the assumption is that, as a woman, one's identity is solely related to procreation and we have no other value as a human being, especially after a certain age. (ES34, “other sexuality”, not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

Each of these quotes speak to the way in which women’s value is sexualised and linked to their reproductive potential, which in turn informs their cultural devaluation in later life (Arber and Ginn 1991). The respondents also identified ways in which other social identities intersected with sexageism to complicate it. Two lesbians took very different views:

As an older lesbian who frequently campaigns and challenges the stereotyping I don’t get much direct sexism, but I do experience ageism within my community. It tends to be more patronizing than direct. Speaking over or for me. (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

I’ve always loved older women so I would just discount it as ignorant if I heard it [ageist comments about older women]. In my community of friends, which includes lesbians of varied ages, we love older women. (ES90, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 61)

These two respondents reflect the mixed experiences of older women in lesbian communities: some feel discounted because of their age; some feel valued because of their age, but in a desexualised way (Copper 2015). This can be compounded by relationship status: single older lesbians tending to feel their sense of cultural devaluation more acutely than those in couples (Westwood 2016; Hafford-Letchfield *et al.* 2017).

Other women highlighted how race and ethnicity exacerbate sexageism:

The way they are portrayed on TV "she doesn't look her age", we all have to aspire to young white women's ideology these things are more complicated for a non-white woman (ES161, heterosexual woman, “other ethnicity” not specified, aged 79)

I am white, so don't have first-hand experience of raced ageism, but Black and Asian friends tell me stories. (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

Older women from ethnic minorities often feel doubly disadvantaged and invisible. (ES94, heterosexual White British woman aged 57)

Women from racial and/or ethnic minorities experience sexageism differently from white British women, just as Black women experience racism differently from Black men, and sexism

differently from White women (Crenshaw 1991). This is also at the intersection (Holman and Walker 2021) with sexageism, about which more needs to be understood.

Several women thought that disability exacerbated ageing: “Being old and disabled is harder than just being old” (ES40, heterosexual White British woman, aged 71). One woman wrote:

As an older woman with a disability, I am completely invisible. (ES61, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 55)

Older disabled women also spoke to a loss of agency:

I am old and disabled. Sometimes at gatherings I will be handed a drink without being asked my preference. People changing or cancelling things in my home without asking me first. Visitors to my home being met at the door by a carer, not invited in, and just passing on a message instead of allowing me to have a conversation. (ES27, lesbian/gay White British woman, 72)

One woman thought that there was less tolerance for her disabled partner now that she is an older woman:

My partner is disabled. When she was younger people in general were sympathetic and helpful, but now she's older they seem to have less patience, as though it's just part of ageism and (to some extent understandably) something they prefer not to think about. (ES34, “other sexuality”, not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

Disability is itself stigmatised through a gendered lens (Shildrick 2009) and there are overlaps between ageism and ableism (van der Horst and Vickerstaff 2021). For both older women ageing with a disability (Westwood and Carey 2018) and into disability (Sheldon, 2014), age then compounds that stigmatisation and associated loss of agency, choice and control.

Body size was also mentioned:

The representation of fit, slim older women is very different to those of fatter, differently abled women; and it's harder to buy clothes when one is old and fat (harder than young and fat). (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

So, here we can see how sexageism and “fattism” (Solanke 2021) can combine to complicate older women’s ageing via the limited availability of clothing choices for larger sized older women.

Two women identified how certain key intersections buffered them from experiencing the most severe forms of sexageism. The first observed that a combination of her assertiveness and her social circle meant that she was less likely to encounter sexageism:

Most people I know would not do anything in ear shot of me because they know I would challenge. Mostly [it’s] strangers or what I overhear. (ES16, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 77)

The second noted her relative position of power:

I also realise that I live in a pretty much protected bubble as I'm a professional woman living in a fairly wealthy area and I don't have to listen to or watch things that I don't want, and I don't have to hang out with people I don't want to. I'm in a position of relative power at work so

people have to behave appropriately around me. (ES142, bisexual White British woman, aged 56)

These quotes highlight some of the factors which mitigate sexageism: professional status, comparative affluence, choice of environment and social networks, and age itself. Underpinning all of these, as the second respondent observed, is power (Cooper 2004). Access to power – resources, recognition and representation – can mitigate sexageism, especially for ‘younger older’ women. However, with greater age, those sources of power can diminish, with the associated loss of employment and professional status (as seen earlier), reduced income, and less choice and control, especially in the fourth age (Gilleard and Higgs 2010: 2018).

Media representations

The significance of the media was highlighted by many respondents:

The lack of older women on TV and yet there seem to be plenty of older men on TV. (ES36, heterosexual White British woman, aged 52)

Clothes designed for older people modelled by young women (ES160, heterosexual White British woman aged 56)

Constantly in newspapers a woman’s age is noted whereas a man’s age is seldom stated. (ES164, heterosexual, “White Other” woman, aged 68)

Older women are usually defined [in the media] by their role as a carer (grandmother) not any other factor i.e.. retired solicitor etc. where a man would be defined by his previous paid occupation. (ES94, heterosexual White British woman aged 57)

As noted in earlier themes, we see both issues of invisibility (not seen on TV, older models not used to advertise clothes for older women) and hypervisibility (older women’s age and grandmotherhood status being overly focused upon).

Anti-ageist marketing was also mentioned often:

Implicit in every advert for hair-dye, wrinkle cream, cosmetic surgery, 'shapewear' - need I go on? (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76)

The fashion and beauty industry constantly driving older women to 'defy the ageing process.' (ES48, heterosexual White British woman, aged 59)

The anti-ageing industry is deeply invested in promoting products and services designed to mask the signs of ageing (Hurd Clarke and Griffin 2008; Calasanti, Sorensen and King 2012; Hurd Clarke 2018) and as such is deeply invested in perpetuating ‘successful ageing’ norms.

A range of ageist commercial products which were mentioned including birthday cards, “Jellyiatrics” jelly babies,² a “Racing Granny” game,³ and mugs and gifts with ageist ‘jokes’ on them. Many such ‘jokes’ were seen as gendered:

Images on birthday cards - negatively portraying females in "frumpy" dress and showing "sagging bodies". (ES94, heterosexual White British woman aged 57)

A [joke] birthday card with an illustration of an older woman with huge, sagging breasts (ES35, lesbian/gay “White Other” woman, aged 74)

Jokey references to women going through the Change and being sexually unattractive, or over-emotional. (ES72, “Other” sexuality, not specified, White British woman, aged 54)

There were frequent references to social media:

Pop-ups on social media/the internet for 'before and after' so-called beauty treatments and/or surgical interventions [for older women]. (ES17, heterosexual White British woman, aged 67)

Facebook posts - "look at them now" - attractiveness is compared to being about age 30. (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

Cartoon on Facebook showing very wrinkly and rather crabby older woman. (ES62, heterosexual White British woman aged 67)

A 'celebrity' recently tweeted that once women were past child bearing age they had no more use on the planet. (ES34, “other sexuality”, not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

[Ageist & sexist comments] circulated daily on WhatsApp and sent to me without malicious intent demonstrates the extent to which generally considered as factual and accepted by all so all can laugh. (ES53, heterosexual White British woman, aged 68)

These examples highlight how older women are bombarded by everyday sexageism via the media in ways which are difficult to avoid (Edström 2018; Iversen and Wilinska 2020).

Discussion

The women who responded to the project survey make very clear connections with both ageism and sexism in their experiences of sexageism. Notably, their accounts do not frame sexageism as solely or even primarily a dimension of ageism, i.e., it is not just ageism with ‘a touch of’ gender. Their understanding of sexageism is that it is far more embedded in sexism, that it is an extension of the sexualisation and idealisation of young women’s bodies, which positions older women unfavourably as they age. For many, then, the solution to sexageism is not rooted in tackling ageism alone, but rather tackling sexism and its impact on women of all ages.

This is an important re-alignment of focus, with implications for theories of ageism. It speaks to the normative values which underpin both ageism and sexism, i.e., the valorisation of youthful reproductive power. This is itself gendered, with fertility and childbearing (for which women are prized) ending earlier for women than men, and economic productivity (for which men are prized) ending later, contributing to the earlier and disproportionate cultural devaluation of older women compared with older men.

The findings also highlight the power of language and the ever-expanding list of negative terms and discourse about women in general (often sexualised) and older women in particular (often desexualised and disparaging). The actual words used, many of which are swear words, are not often seen in academic journals or other publications and yet are so much a part of the background (and often foreground) of women’s lived experiences, especially online (Jane 2014; Lewis, Rowe and Wiper 2017; Edström 2018). While previous research has noted that there are more ageist descriptors for older women than older men, this study highlights the vast range of those descriptors, both overheard and directly experienced. Such systematic sexageism, expressed in wide ranging microaggressions, constitutes an oppressive ‘surround sound’ in older women’s lives.

The findings also offer further nuanced understandings of the ways in which sexageist microaggressions are expressed through patronisation, linguistically, discursively, and interpersonally. These echo the power of the ‘warm but incompetent’ stereotype which inadvertently (or possibly advertently) keeps older women ‘in their place’ of cultural devaluation, also seen through an additional lens of technologization.

While intersectionality is alluded to in previous literature (Holman and Walker 2021), the women’s narratives speak directly to particular dimensions, specifically: sexual orientation, race/ethnicity and class. There was an unusually high proportion of women with minority sexualities in the study, probably attributable to recruitment strategies. However there was little identifiable difference in the responses of the majority sexuality and minority sexuality women respondents. Very few trans women participated in the study, which is less likely to be solely attributable to recruitment issues, as the researcher has previously conducted research with older LGBTQ people where trans people have been well-represented (Toze, Westwood, and Hafford-Letchfield 2021). It will be important to understand how ageing trans femininities and ageing trans masculinities compare with each other in terms of experiences of sexageism, and how these in turn compare with the experiences of ageing cisgender women (and men).

There was only a small number of women from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds who participated in the study and so the ways in which racism intersects with sexism was not explored as much as it might have been. More research is needed to explore how intersectionality informs the experiences of sexageism among women from Black and minority ethnic communities.

The women’s narratives provide additional insights into the significance of invisibilisation. The literature on recognition tends to focus on mis-recognition – being regarded/treated as inferior and/or in stigmatised ways. The women’s narratives highlight how *not* being seen is a powerful microaggression in the lives of older women (Williams, Skinta and Martin-Willett 2021). Becoming ‘absent presences’ constitutes a powerful form of symbolic existential annihilation and actual societal rupture (Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko 2012; Warren and Richards, 2012; Walkner, Weare and Tully 2018). Such non-recognition reinforces positions of power: when structurally privileged people ignore the claims and needs of others not like them, this reinforces both their own structural privilege and those others’ structural disadvantage (Young 2010). Non-recognition matters not only for Fraser’s social justice domain of recognition, but also for older women’s access to resources (material, financial, health, care and protection from violence, abuse and neglect) and to representation (political voice), Fraser’s two other social justice domains in her tripartite model. The invisibilisation of older women is, therefore, a profound issue of social injustice.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the significance of gender, and of sexism, for ageing and ageism. Ageing is not a gender-neutral event, not for women, and not for men either (Clarke and Korotchenko 2016; O’Neill and Léime 2022). Accounts of ageing need, therefore, to always engage closely with issues of gender and gendered power structures (Rochon, Kalia and Higgs

2021: 648) if they are to adequately account for the ageing experiences of older women and older men.

More needs to be understood about how older women feel, at a granular level, about sexageism, and about how specific intersections, contexts and connections impact their experiences. More also needs to be understood about how older women resist sexageism, and how they can be supported in achieving a greater voice in doing so, particularly given UK ageing advocacy groups tend to play down gender issues and UK feminist groups tend to focus more on issues affecting younger women, than those affecting older women.

There needs to be greater engagement with the media in terms of its powerful role in perpetuating sexageism, including in relation to regulatory contexts. Age Platform Europe (2021) has produced a guide on avoiding ageist stereotyping when writing or talking about older people. The Centre for Ageing Better and the Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2021) have also recently produced guidance for journalists, hosted on the Independent Press Regulator's (IPSO) website. The Centre for Ageing Better (2021) has also produced a free digital library of positive images of older people, which can be used by the media, and anyone else who wants/needs to visually represent ageing. While these initiatives are to be celebrated, much more needs to be done.

Ageing, ageism and age discrimination are not gender neutral. Analyses of ageing and ageism always need to take gender into account. Those which do not do so, are only telling a partial story about ageing. It is essential that the whole, gendered story is consistently, and thoroughly, told.

Statement of ethical approval

This project was granted ethical approval by the University of York's Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS).

Statement of funding

N/A

Statement of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is declared

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Rhiannon Griffiths for her excellent research assistance.

Notes

1. A 'Karen' is a meme for a stereotyped white middle-aged woman (Nagesh 2020).
2. 'Jellyatric' jellybabies (<https://jellyiatrics.co.uk/>) are small chewable sweets shaped liked older people, including a woman with a walking frame and a man with a stick.
3. 'Racing Granny' is a wind-up racing toy of an older woman with a walking frame. There are also 'Racing Grannies' Scalextric games involving little toys which, instead of cars, depict old women in dark glasses, with grey hair in buns, sitting in bathchairs covered with blankets.

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May 2022.