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“It’s the not being seen that is most tiresome”: Older women, invisibility and social (in)justice

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ABSTRACT

Older women experience intersectional discrimination at the nexus of ageism and sexism. This is embodied, women’s aging bodies being culturally devalued within youth-privileging cultures and the hyper-sexualization of younger, able-bodied, women. Older women often face the dilemma of attempting to mask the signs of aging or aging “authentically” but encountering heightened stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Very old women in the fourth age who “fail” to age “successfully” are subject to extreme social exclusion. Many older women speak of experiencing a loss of visibility as they age, however how this occurs, and what it means, has not yet been analyzed in depth. This is an important issue, as recognition—cultural status and visibility—is essential for social justice. This article reports on findings taken from a U.K. survey on experiences of ageism and sexism completed by 158 heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women aged 50 to 89. Their perceived invisibility took five forms: (a) being under-seen/-mis-seen in the media; (b) being mis-seen as objects of sexual undesirability; (c) being “ignored” in consumer, social, and public spaces; (d) being “grandmotherized,” that is, seen only through the lens of (often incorrectly) presumed grandmotherhood; (e) being patronized and erroneously assumed to be incompetent. The findings are compared with Fraser’s social justice model. The argument presented is that older women’s experiences of nonrecognition and misrecognition are profound sources of social injustice. Both increased visibility and cultural worth are needed for older women to enjoy the benefits of social justice in later life.

KEYWORDS

Older women; ageism; sexism; invisibility; social justice

Introduction

This article explores older women’s experiences of becoming “invisible” as they age, considered through the lens of Nancy Fraser’s model of social justice. It reports on findings taken from a U.K. survey on experiences of ageism and sexism completed by 158 heterosexual, lesbian, and bisexual women aged 50–89, specifically the women’s responses to a question relating to the loss of visibility in later life. These are analyzed in relation to the literature on the intersection of ageism and sexism, and to Fraser’s argument that misrecognition and nonrecognition are profound sources of social injustice.

Older women experience prejudice and discrimination at the intersection of ageism (Nelson, 2004; Byetheway, 2005; Gullette, 2013) and sexism (Bates, 2016), sometimes known as

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“sexageism” (Bouson, 2016). This informs their comparatively greater cultural devaluation and socioeconomic disadvantage compared with both younger women and older men (Arber et al., 2003; Calasanti & Slevin, 2013; Rochon et al., 2021). It is further complicated by intersections (Crenshaw, 1990) with other social locations, notably class (Krekula et al., 2018), disability (Putnam & Bigby, 2021), race/ethnicity (Rocha et al., 2022); gender identity (Baril & Silverman, 2022); sexual orientation (Slevin, 2013; Westwood, 2016); and their combinations (Reygan et al., 2022).

Globally, according to Age International (2022), older women’s positive contributions to society are less likely to be recognized than those of older men, and they are more likely to be regarded as a “burden” or a “problem” needing attention. According to Claudia Mahler (2021) the current United Nations Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons,

the wide spectrum of experiences and concerns affecting older women is not visible enough in the international human rights system to tackle structural disadvantages and discrimination at the intersection between gender and older age. (Para 69)

This lack of visibility is also reflected in older women’s descriptions of their experiences of aging (Chasin & Kramer, 2022). Several pieces of research in the past decade have alluded to them not only being seen and culturally devalued, but also feeling as if they are not seen at all (Bouson, 2016; Cecil et al., 2021, 2022; Pilcher & Martin, 2020; Walkner et al., 2018; Ward & Holland, 2011). However, studies thus far have only touched on this as a peripheral issue and it has not yet been examined in any depth. Yet this is an important issue, relating as it does to theories of social justice upon which recognition—cultural visibility and value—is foundational. This study reports on a recent U.K. survey on ageism and sexism, to which 158 women aged 50 and 89 responded. It focuses on one aspect of the survey, a question which specifically asked about feeling invisible. Five main themes are discussed: (a) being under-seen/mis-seen in the media; (b) being mis-seen as objects of sexual undesirability; (c) being “ignored” in consumer, social and public spaces; (d) being “grandmotherized,” namely, seen only through the lens of (often incorrectly) presumed grandmotherhood; e) being patronized and erroneously assumed to be incompetent. This is discussed in relation to social justice theories of recognition, misrecognition, and nonrecognition. The overarching argument presented here is that older women’s loss of social and cultural visibility and value is underpinned by sexism, exacerbated by ageism, the latter feeding into and reinforcing sexist norms and stereotypes. As such, both sexism and ageism need to be addressed to improve the recognition and social inclusion of older women and promote their enjoyment of social justice in later life.

Background

The “embodied and emplaced” (Finlay, 2021, p. 80) nature of sexageism has been observed by feminist writers for decades (e.g., de Beauvoir, 1996; Friedan, 1994; Greer, 1991; Woodward, 1999). Sontag (1972) argued that aging women experience a “double standard” of aging, being stigmatized and marginalized both for being older and for being women. This has been echoed by subsequent authors, including feminist gerontologists, across the decades (Arber & Ginn, 1991; Cecil et al., 2021, 2022; Gott, 2005; Hurd Clarke, 2018; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Hurd Clarke & Korotchenko, 2012, 2016; Rochon et al., 2021). The general understanding is that

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 & Korotchenko 2012, p. 103)

Hurd Clarke and Korotchenko (2016) have also suggested that older women are far more acutely aware of ageism compared with older men who perceive it as “a distant social problem” (p. 1757).

Gender invisibility and erasure can undermine women’s equal place in society, socially, economically, and politically (Demos & Segal, 2022; Perez, 2019). Marginalized women are more likely to be culturally devalued, that is, seen as “less than” and/or not seen at all. This includes older women (Chasin & Kramer, 2022), who can be both “hypervisible” (“marked” by the physical signs of aging) and “invisible” (Bouson, 2016; Walkner et al., 2018; Woodward, 1999). Laura Bates (2016) 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’ (p. 3370).

Pilcher and Martin (2020), have commented on “how ageism and sexism combine to literally cut out—invisibilise—older women” (p. 714). Ward and Holland (2011) have suggested that “invisibility emerges as a meta-narrative in accounting for the social experiences of older women” (p. 298). Chasin and Kramer (2022) have suggested that this invisibilization occurs at both the macrolevel (media representations, organizational practices, social policies) and the micro-level (individual lived experiences). Ward and Holland (2011) reported on research with older women who described themselves as being “socially invisible; sometimes ignored in conversations or overlooked in shops and bars” (p. 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” (p. 299). More recently, Cecil et al. (2021, 2022) have reported on tensions experienced by older women, conflicted between wanting to age authentically and feeling the need to mask the signs of aging, especially gray hair, to counteract lowered social status associates with perceived gendered ageism. Cecil et al. (2022) have also reported on older women’s sense of increasing loss of visibility with age (“Younger men, look right through me like I am not even there,” p. 7) and of being made to feel “less relevant” (p. 7). More needs to be understood about the specifics of their perceived invisibility.

Being culturally and socially visible, valued and seen as equal to others is central to social justice theories of recognition and its inter-implication in access to resources and political representation (Fraser, 1995, 2003, 2000, 2009). According to Nancy Fraser, both misrecognition (being culturally/socially devalued and seen as “less than”) and nonrecognition (“being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one’s culture,” Fraser, 1995, p. 71) are profound personal and social harms. They are “unjust” (Fraser, 2009, p. 3), causing “an injury to one’s identity” (Fraser, 2000, p. 109). The social justice implications of older women’s perceived invisibility are considered in this article.

Methodology

The project’s aim was to explore U.K. older women’s understandings and subjective experiences of everyday ageism and sexism. It was approved by the University of York’s ELMPs research ethics committee.

Design

The project comprised an online survey of U.K. 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., 2022) and the Schedule of Sexist Events (Klonoff & Landrine, 1995), with supplementary

¹A “Karen” is a meme (in the United Kingdom) for a stereotyped white middle-aged woman (Nagesh, 2020).

questions developed by the researcher specifically relating to sexageism. The following questions and response types were included:

- I hear, see, and/or read degrading and/or sexual jokes about older women (Likert scale 0–5)
 - If Affirmative (4/5 on the scale): Please give a recent example
- I hear, see, and/or read things suggesting that older women are unattractive or past their prime (Likert scale 0–5)
 - If Affirmative (4/5 on the scale): Please give a recent example
- I hear, see, and/or read words used to refer to older women that I find offensive (Y/N)
 - If Yes: Please say what those words are
- Women become less visible when they are older (Likert scale 0–5)
 - If Affirmative (4/5 on the scale): Please give a recent example
- Have you been personally affected by ageism and/or sexism as an older woman? Y/N
 - If Yes: Please give a recent example
 - If Yes: How did this make you feel?

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 Hat Society), women's organizations (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. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure an equitable representation of heterosexual and nonheterosexual women.

Data analysis

The survey data were collected via Qualtrics[®]. Quantitative data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were coded, anonymized, and initially analyzed by the lead researcher. Themes were identified, using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis procedures, in several ways: for their frequency; for the significance placed upon them by particular participants; for the ways in which they compared and contrasted with one another; and for their saliency and significance (Buetow, 2010). Themes were then tested, synthesized, and data moved around within and between them, to further fine-tune themes, in collaboration with a research assistant. The themes and data reported here relate to responses to and/or making connections with the statement “Women become less visible when they are older.”

Sample

Respondents

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

Only a small percentage of women from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds were represented in the research. In this study, 94% of the sample were white and only 6% were from a Black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic group. According to the U.K. census, 82% of people in England and Wales are white, and 18% from a Black, Asian, mixed, or other ethnic group (UK Government, 2022). However, the white U.K. population is older overall than the

Table 1. Participant profiles.

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 (8%)
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 2. Participant responses to the statement “Women become less visible when they are older,” by heterosexual, lesbian/gay and bisexual sexual orientations and age.^a

	All (%)	Heterosexual (%)	Lesbian/gay (%)	Bisexual	Age range	Mean age
Strongly/slightly agree	84	87	78	71	50–89	64
Neither agree nor disagree	5	3	11	n/a	52–79	55
Strongly/slightly disagree	11	10	11	29	50–79	64

^aNB figures for other orientations/identity categories were too small for analysis.

population of people from BAME backgrounds, reflecting U.K. migration trends in the previous century, meaning that there are fewer older than younger BAME people in the United Kingdom (UK Government, 2018). As a result, lower percentages are to be expected. Even so, this reflects wider concerns regarding the underrepresentation of people from BAME backgrounds in U.K. research (often attributed to issues of language, recruitment, and researcher ethnicity) (Redwood & Gill, 2013).

Findings

Quantitative data

As can be seen from Table 2, in response to the statement “Women become less visible when they are older,” 84% of the women selected “slightly agree” or “strongly agree.” Slightly higher percentages of heterosexual women (87%) compared with lesbian/gay (78%) and bisexual (71%) women responded in the affirmative. There was no age difference between women who responded in the affirmative and women who responded in the negative, although the women who responded “neither agree nor disagree” were, on average, younger than both.

Qualitative data

The respondents’ narratives regarding the loss of visibility cohered around five main themes: (a) being under-seen/mis-seen in the media; (b) being mis-seen as objects of sexual undesirability; (c) being “ignored” in consumer, social and public spaces; (d) being “grandmotherized,” that is, seen

only through the lens of (often incorrectly) presumed grandmotherhood; (e) being patronized and erroneously assumed to be incompetent.

(a) Being underseen/mis-seen in the media

The women spoke of a lack of/limited visibility in the media. This was mentioned in relation to the traditional media of press, TV, and film,

It's often more an issue of neglect or exclusion from articles in the media where taste or views are presented. (ES22, heterosexual White British woman aged 77)

It's more an absence—very little coverage of older women on TV and in film (ES90, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 61)

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)

The commercialization of products aimed at masking the signs of aging, that is, “invisibilizing” older women’s aging faces and bodies, were frequently mentioned:

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

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

Adverts trying to “fix” ageing. (ES29, bisexual White British woman, aged 68)

Make up adverts very much about looking [younger than] your age is wrong (ES14, heterosexual woman, mixed/multiple ethnicities, not specified, aged 52)

Many women mentioned the predominance of negative images, and the absence of positive ones, of older women in commercial media, especially greetings cards,

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

I'm thinking particularly about cartoons. Often on birthday cards. Old women (and men, sometimes) represented as physically unattractive, grotesque, technically incompetent, risible (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76)

The growing significance of social media in the lives of older women, was reflected in their reference to their experiences of ageism and sexism various social media forums,

Cartoon on Facebook showing very wrinkly and rather crabby older woman. (ES62, 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)

Ageing women—middle-aged women are often the butt of jokes—“Karen” jokes.² [On social media] (ES58, bisexual, White British woman, aged 51)

On Twitter—comments about an older woman being “worn out and ugly” (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

Supposed humour relating to women with menopausal symptoms pasted on social media (ES61, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 55)

A “joke” on social media about a young man thinking he will kiss a younger woman but she turns out to be old and wrinkled (ES112, heterosexual White British woman aged 67)

Consumer products which stereotype older women were also mentioned, for example, Jellyatics jelly babies³ and the “Racing Grannies” game⁴ (ES48, heterosexual White British

²ibid.

woman, aged 59). The women conveyed a sense of, for them, “surroundsound” everyday sexism and ageism, which bombarded their lives.

(b) Being mis-seen as objects of undesirability

While 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), the dominant narrative was in relation 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 ... (ES53, heterosexual White British woman, aged 68)

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)

The majority of the women in the sample who spoke of discounted sexualities were older heterosexual women. Only one lesbian also mentioned this, for example,

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

More overt statements of contempt/disgust were also reportedly overheard:

[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)

“Christ, look at the state of that ...” [overheard] remark passed about Angela Merkel.⁵ (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

One woman described this first-hand experience,

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)

Inverted ageism was also mentioned, that is, “complimenting” a woman on looking younger than her age.

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

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

When people say they can’t believe how old you are (ES97, lesbian/gay White British woman, aged 66)

“Complimenting” a woman on looking younger than her age, both implies there is something wrong with being her age and reinforces the idea that it is “good” to be able to conceal it. One woman also observed that this had a racialized element to it,

.... “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)

Several women made explicit reference to the intersection of the sexualization of women and gendered ageism:

³“Jellyatric” jellybabies (<https://jellyiatrics.co.uk/>) are small chewable sweets shaped like older people, including a woman with a walking frame and a man with a stick.

⁴“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 gray hair in buns, sitting in bathchairs covered with blankets.

⁵Angela Merkel, born in 1954, was Chancellor of Germany 2005 – 2021.

In the patriarchy that we live in, any older women is seen (or not seen) by men as whether they are a potential sexual partner or fantasy, consequently any older woman, whatever their race or abilities will be regarded as of less “use” to men. (ES66, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 60)

This was also recognized by some as racialized,

It feels like it is about “fuck-ability”—if men don’t want to, then that seems to be “our fault” for being old and unattractive. Then we become invisible. Add in other characteristics that intersect with desirability—like race (young black women are fetishized, older black women are not) or disability... This then gets taken on by women who get caught up in the desirability game, where they contrast their own desirability against older women (and the fear that they, then will become those older women one day). (ES120, heterosexual White British woman aged 59)

For one woman invisibility was a source of relief:

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 woman is describing a double-edged sword: invisibility brings her relief from the male gaze (Ponterotto, 2016) but at the same time, it can also remove her from “gazes” she still wants and needs, that is, in employment contexts (Cecil et al., 2022).

(c) Being “ignored” in consumer, social and public spaces

Loss of visibility was understood to be associated with aging as a woman,

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)

The loss of visibility was described in a range of contexts, including shops,

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 changing the way she dresses to make herself more noticeable:

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)

Women also described being “ignored” in bars and restaurants

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)

These women described being “ignored” at 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)

One woman described the following recent incident involving rush hour travel on public transport,

I was in a queue for a rail ticket and an impatient (younger) 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)

This incident highlights the “othering” of older people (“you people”) which can occur, together with the (often false) assumption that an older woman does not work and therefore should make herself unseen and not in the way of those who do.

Several women mentioned the intersection of aging and disability in relation to being ignored,

You find that people ask the able-bodied or younger person in your company the question. (ES162, heterosexual “White Other” woman, disabled, aged 77)

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, disabled, aged 72)

These older women describe being ignored and/or excluded because of their disabled status. Given that older women tend to be more disabled than younger women and older men (Mahler, 2021), this is a concern associated with both age and gender. This woman also thought that ageism had complicated her disabled partner’s social status,

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 ageing and (to some extent understandably) something they prefer not to think about. (ES34, “other sexuality”, not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

(d) *Being “grandmotherized”*

Several women described being seen through the lens of grandmother status, that is, being presumed to be a grandmother, whether or not they actually were,

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)

This is understood as resulting from a combination of sexist and ageist stereotyping,

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)

This assumption of grandmotherhood was understood to obscure their actual identities and/or other aspects of them,

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)

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)

The grandmother stereotype, then, is understood to presume and privilege an aspect of an older woman’s identity which may or may not be true (and for growing numbers of women is not the case, Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017). Given that current cohorts of older lesbians are less

likely to be mothers and grandmothers (Westwood, 2016) than older heterosexual women, it also especially excludes them.

(e) Being patronised and erroneously assumed to be incompetent

The women described being called “Dear,” “Lovey,” “Darling,” “My Darling,” and “My Love” by strangers, one woman stating that, for her, these were “diminishing and patronizing words” (ES63, lesbian/gay, White British woman, aged 76). The sense of being patronized was acute among many of the women,

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 woman described being spoken to as if she was a child while queuing in a bank,

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 women also described encountering younger people’s assumptions (particularly among young men) that they were incompetent, especially in relation to technology:

There is an assumption that “older”—“more difficulty in understanding what is being said/explained/demonstrated.” I particularly dislike the assumption that I’m unable to use/understand technology. (ES12, heterosexual White British woman, aged 63)

Constantly patronised by younger people—“Can you use a computer?” “I was using the DOS system before your parents were born!!” (ES34, “other sexuality,” not specified, White British woman, aged 73)

[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)

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)

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)

One woman spoke of her relative affluence and employment status protecting her from being patronized and/or perceived as incompetent,

[I] 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)

This woman’s employment status (and relatively young age) is currently buffering her from the effects of ageism and sexism. However, this may change as she ages and ceases to be in her high-status role.

This woman reported that she and her partner frequently feel patronized by younger people’s responses to their adventure 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 & Meisner, 2021), which other women spoke of in relation to healthcare

I had a total knee replacement and the young physio asked me what I wanted to achieve with the physio [and] 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)

These examples highlight how stereotype-based misperceptions can inform healthcare professionals’ perceptions of older women patients, which in turn can potentially lead to lowered expectations concerning healthcare outcomes.

Discussion

The findings highlight how, for the vast majority of this sample of women, loss of visibility is central to their experience of gendered aging. The figures were similar for heterosexual and lesbian/gay and bisexual women, although slightly lower for lesbian/gay women, which might possibly be due to less sensitivity to heterosexist prejudice and discrimination (Slevin, 2013), although there is a need for more research in this area. The women’s narratives show how loss of visibility involves not seeing themselves or seeing themselves misrepresented in the media, to being ignored in a range of contexts, to being seen for something they are not or only through a single dimension (grandmotherhood) to being seen as “less-than” (infantilized, incapable, undesirable). The findings highlight the powerful role both traditional media forms, and newer social media, can play (Edström, 2018; Makita et al, 2021; Warren & Richards, 2012). The overarching message from the women’s narratives is that their experience is that they are either not seen at all or not seen for who they truly are and/or feel themselves to be.

The woman who described being in a “protected bubble” produced by still being at work, and in position of authority in her employment, highlights the significance of socioeconomic status (Cecil et al., 2021; Krekula et al., 2018). Her relatively affluence, high employment status, and associated power, according to her analysis, serve to maintain her sense of perceived competence. As she recognizes, less affluent older women in lower status employment, or not in employment at all, and of course women older than her (i.e., in their 60s and above) are unlikely to share this experience. The women’s narratives also highlighted how experiences of invisibility associated with gendered ageism were also racialized and intersected with ableism, which can of course intersect with each other as well (Reygan et al., 2022).

Unsurprisingly, the embodied nature of their experiences of gendered ageism pervaded many of the women’s narratives, echoing the literature which has identified the de-sexualized cultural devaluation of older women (Krekula et al., 2018). The women describe the sense of a loss of their sexual appeal in the eyes of many others, both younger people, and, for the heterosexual and bisexual women, in the eyes of many men of a similar age to themselves. They experience the plethora of anti-aging products and associated marketing as further indications that their aging faces and aging bodies need to be hidden, to be rendered invisible, to manage their stigmatized identities, echoing the recent findings by Cecil et al. (2021, 2022) among others. Inverted ageism, referring to an older woman as a younger woman, or complementing an older woman for looking younger than her age, positions “old as negative, young as positive” (Gendron et al., 2016, p. 1001). It reinforces the idea that there is something wrong and/or shameful with being an older woman (Bouson, 2016), locating her as a source of (aged and gendered) abjection (Pickard, 2020). This in turn can have a detrimental effect on older women’s physical and mental

health (Chrisler et al., 2016), as is highlighted by the narratives of gendered ageism in healthcare encounters.

The woman who described dressing in ways which make her more visible to strangers is demonstrating resistance to loss of visibility, as do older women who are members of the Red Hat Society⁵ for example. This is interesting, as it suggests an additional response to binary dilemma of authenticity—mask aging and be seen, do not mask aging and be authentic but unseen—previously identified by other authors (Cecil et al., 2021, 2022; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008; Ward & Holland, 2011). It suggests a “third way” involving aging flamboyantly but without the veil of contrived youthfulness to ensure one is still seen in later life. By contrast, the woman who spoke of the relief of being free of the “male gaze” highlights that there can be advantages to invisibility, which also need to be better understood.

The “grandmother” stereotype many women described is one of the few positive stereotypes associated with older women (Cuddy and Fiske 2002). It desexualizes them, discounts their previous/current employment and agency, and positions them as solely caregivers. The stereotype falls within a broader “warmth-competence” stereotype, wherein older women are associated with “High Warmth” (friendly, trustworthy) but “Low Competence” (incapable) (Fiske, 2018). The women’s accounts of being perceived by younger people as being less capable than them, particularly in relation to technology, reflect the “Low Competence” dimension of the stereotype. This again invisibilizes older women’s capabilities, including in relation to technology.

Invisibilization is, then, a process of mis- and nonrecognition. Older women report being unseen (nonrecognized) in a range of contexts, both by not being seen at all, or seen through the narrow and often mistaken lens of grandmotherhood, incompetence and infantilization. They are mis-seen as objects of physical and sexual abjection, and they are both un-seen and mis-seen in media which both under-represents and misrepresents them. This misrecognition and nonrecognition, as Fraser has argued, is a profound social injustice. The lack of recognition in consumer and hospitality contexts, resulting in an inferior service (i.e., delays in being served/not being served at all), also confirm Fraser’s argument that recognition and resources are inter-implicated as issues of social justice. The women who described being ignored at public meetings were also denied their political voice(s), also reflecting Fraser’s argument that recognition and (political) representation are intertwined.

The lack of recognition of older women is then an issue of social justice that goes beyond whether one is seen and heard. It relates to whether older women matter; whether their thoughts, views, needs, and wishes are taken into account; and whether their perspectives are included in social policies relating to older people and to older women (Mahler, 2021). For example, many pension systems, including now in the United Kingdom, are gender-blind, often resulting in older women experiencing greater poverty in retirement than older men. Older women are often excluded from research associated with intimate partner violence (Penhale, 2021) resulting in their needs being unmet by IPV service providers. For some older women, then, being invisible can be a matter of life and death. As such, improving older women’s visibility is essential for social justice on many levels.

Limitations

The sample comprised women who were, by self-selection, particularly concerned about the intersection of ageism and sexism. It is by no means representative of all women’s perspectives, and in particular is not indicative of the views of older women who may not feel they have been negatively affected by ageism and sexism. The voices of white women are over-represented, meaning that the intersection of race/ethnicity with ageism and sexism, while addressed, is not explored in as much depth as it might have been. The lead researcher being a white British woman may have contributed to this, in relation to participant recruitment and being an

“outsider researcher,” as suggested by previous studies on the under-representation of people from BAME backgrounds in U.K. research (Redwood & Gill, 2013). Age and ethnicity demographics in the United Kingdom may also have contributed. The study did not explore scale, that is, it did not seek to understand how many and what proportions of older women experience sexism. It was numerically disproportionate in its representation of older lesbians and bisexual women, and as such may over-represent their perspectives, but, at the same time, not those of all older lesbians and bisexual women given they comprise a population partly in hiding (Traies, 2016). Women from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities, bisexual women, women with disabilities, and trans women were under-represented. There is a need to better understand intersectional issues associated with older women’s experiences of ageism and sexism.

Conclusion

This article provides new insights into invisibilization and older women. The literature tends to focus on misrecognition, that is, being regarded/treated as inferior and/or in stigmatized ways. The women’s narratives highlight how *both* abjection (misrecognition) *and* invisibilization (non-recognition) combine to create powerful social exclusions for women in later life. They reinforce positions of power, perpetuating both older women’s structural disadvantage and the relative privileging of younger women and of men (Young, 2010). The invisibilization of older women is thereby a profound social injustice issue.

The United Nations has made combatting ageism one of the four arms of its Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030) initiative (United Nations [UN], 2020). There needs to be greater engagement with older women to develop strategies to combat ageism’s interaction with sexism, including through public awareness-raising, promoting intergenerational relations, educating healthcare professionals (Rochon et al., 2021), and also those working in the retail and hospitality industries. Not only is there a moral and ethical component to the latter, there are, with an aging population, commercial imperatives as well.

There also needs to be greater engagement with the media. Age Platform Europe (2021) has produced a guide on avoiding ageist stereotyping when writing or talking about older people. In the United Kingdom, the Centre for Ageing Better and the Older People’s Commissioner for Wales (2021) have produced similar guidance for journalists. The Centre for Ageing Better (2021) has also produced a free digital library of positive images of older people, including older women, for use by the media. While these initiatives are to be celebrated, much more needs to be done. It is vital that the whole, gendered story of ageism, and of older women’s invisibility, is itself made more visible, and addressed.

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Data availability statement

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