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Further Reading: Herbert, A. (2021). Why older rural women in Ireland want to work: it's not all about the money. *Ageing & Society* <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X21001501>

Contact:
Alison.herbert@nuigalway.ie

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Why older rural women in Ireland want to work: it's not all about the money

Social gerontology extensively addresses financial reasons to work in later life, and pension inequalities. There is much less focus on the non-financial positive contributions that work provides for the older woman (Jahoda 1981), especially within a rural context. A qualitative study of twenty-five 45-65 year old women in Connemara, Ireland was undertaken from a lifecourse perspective and analysed using constructivist grounded theory.

Research Findings

Mid-life women, even if in lower paid, precarious work or in poorer health may choose to continue working into older age for not only financial autonomy, but also temporal structure, life purpose, personal agency, social connectivity, and a self-identity that most women are reluctant to relinquish to retirement. Participants of this study had largely not yet retired from employment and most were not planning to. Ambivalence towards retirement derived from a belief that paid employment can augment not just the manifest benefit of income, but latent benefits that may protect against cognitive decline in older age, enhanced social networks, sustained self-esteem, and positive mental health. This study shows significant variances to exist in the intersections between work, gender, rural place and age. Work for older rural women largely offered a sense of life purpose, a feeling of usefulness and desired 'busyness', and an alternative identity outside of the home, all of which were highly valued.

Policy Implications

Largely, participants did not wish to be unemployed, retired, or to undertake volunteerism. Thus, support measures that make working later in life easier to access may result in positive social, psychological and economic outcomes. Ageism and stereotyping, both perceived and real proves to be an on-going dilemma in society, including in the workplace and needs to be addressed beyond just legislation. The impact of age stereotypes and 'lookism' on employment opportunities especially disadvantages older women, who are generally judged more unfairly on visual appearance than are older men. As women in developed countries continue to live longer than men they need to be able to access more easily work that relates to their skills-set. If such work cannot be secured, older rural women may have to rely on below poverty-line social welfare payments for extended periods. This is neither good for rural economies nor individual well-being. With rural-sensitive support some may be able to re-train and up-skill in order to exit casual or inflexible work. Policy needs to address the increasing numbers of older rural women who want or need to work into later life, whilst acknowledging their cumulative advantage and disadvantage over the lifecourse and its impact on the risk of poverty and social exclusion. Imaginative gendered rural employment policies could help to release the untapped potential of thousands of women who are out of the workforce or under-employed within it, but could be attracted back under the right conditions.