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Cluster: Gender and Public Policy

Theme: Sustainable and inclusive societies

Further Reading:

Herbert, Alison (2017) What are the perspectives on ageing of mid-life women in rural Ireland? PhD, NUI Galway. [Available at: <https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/handle/10379/6312> from April 2018].

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What are the perspectives on ageing of mid-life women in rural Ireland?

Research Findings

Relatively little is known about how mid-life rural women perceive their own ageing. A recent Irish study (Herbert, 2017) shows this cohort to be highly diverse in attitude and behaviour, challenging some stereotypical gendered assumptions about mid-life women. Qualitative data were gathered by interviewing 25 women aged 45-65 years of age from diverse socio-economic, demographic, and geographic backgrounds, and analysed and interpreted using a constructivist grounded theory approach.

Findings show that mid-life rural women assess their ageing process at mid-life through the prism of perceived quality of life, which is in turn influenced by where they live and their attachment to place; work and purpose in life; physical and mental health; and the quality of their social relationships. Participants also viewed their future ageing through perceived quality of life.

Mid-life is perceived by these women as a juncture at which to review past and present experiences, and plan for the future. The heterogeneity of rural women at mid-life suggests that most are content with the ageing process, adapting and adopting behaviours to fit new life circumstances. They reveal relatively little interest in their appearance, but are very focused on retaining good health in order to secure personal autonomy in older age and avoid institutional care. Neither the menopause nor the 'empty nest' appears to be of great concern to most participants; developing their own potential through work or other means takes priority. Most participants interviewed did not enjoy financial security, but this was tempered by having either job satisfaction or a sense of purpose. Relationships with family and friends helped ensure many mid-life women a good quality of life; whilst for others such relationships were the cause of their perceived poor quality of life. Similarly, rural living enhanced the quality of life and perceived ageing of most participants, but for some, rural living was considered claustrophobic and detrimental to their health.

Policy Implications

As a growing cohort in Ireland, mid-life rural women must face many challenges in order to secure a positive ageing experience as they progress into older age. Gendered policy initiatives are needed to address deficiencies at the mid-life stage of the lifecycle, thereby enhancing quality of life. More women are and will be living alone due to personal choice, widowhood, divorce/separation. Some have children, many do not; many may have to become used to living alone. At possible risk of social exclusion, mid-life rural women may benefit from creative policy initiatives that address: public and private transport, and improved public and private health services. The study recommends that flexible approaches to training/up-skilling for salaried and self-employment are needed that cater for a cohort of women who typically have access mainly to low-paid casual, part-time work.