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Women in their Fifties: main findings from the study

The aim of the Women in their Fifties study was to explore women's experiences of different aspects of life as fifty-something women. We wanted to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing women in a range of different circumstances.

Nineteen women were recruited to the study; eleven women took part in group discussions, and eight women took part in one-to-one interviews with Laura Airey.

Family relationships, employment opportunities & the anticipation of retirement, and issues around health and illness emerged as important aspects of women's lives. This summary gives an overview of the key points from women's discussions of these areas of their lives.

Family

- Many women have experienced changes in their family situations in their fifties, such as children leaving (and sometimes returning) home, the arrival of grandchildren, the need to look after elderly relatives, and divorce or bereavement
- 16 of the 19 women who took part in the study are mothers, and all talked about how being a mother is still a central part of their lives, even though their children no longer need full-time care. Most women have continued to offer practical, emotional and financial support to children who are now in their teens, 20s and 30s.
- Although mothers are still very involved in their children's lives, many women also felt that they have now 'done their job' of bringing up children, and that their fifties are a time to do things for themselves – often saying "this is time for me".
- However, whether or not women can pursue their own goals once their children have grown up largely depends on other aspects of their life circumstances – like their financial situation, or other family responsibilities. For example, several women are involved in looking after their grandchildren, which may be pleasurable, but may also sometimes be a burden.

Work

- 13 of the 19 women were in paid work (split evenly between those in part-time & those in full-time work); 2 women looked after the home; 3 were not working due to health problems; 1 was unemployed and actively seeking work.
- Work was viewed positively for several reasons: the income and financial independence it brings; social contact with workmates; being able to use & develop skills; enhanced self-esteem.
- Women's work experiences were very different - some women felt their work situation was no different to when they were in their 40s. Other women were working more hours in their 50s, now that their children had grown up.
- Ageism in the labour market can be a problem for 50-something women who are looking for work: 2 women talked about negative attitudes they have faced from employers when they have been trying to get a job.

Anticipation of retirement

- Whilst some women saw themselves as "winding down" towards retirement, others expressed the concern that they would need to work beyond sixty in order to maintain a reasonable level of income.
- Concern over pension entitlement was a significant issue. Several women in the sample reported significant gaps in pension contributions due to childcare-related employment breaks, or due to illness, or through re-training.
- Worries about inadequate pension provision were particularly acute amongst single (never married) and divorced women, who were aware that they would not be "cushioned" by access to a partner's financial resources.
- 5 respondents, whose income comes from state benefits, were less likely to express concern about their future financial circumstances than more affluent respondents – a couple of these women reported that their income is actually likely to go up when they reach retirement age

Health issues in the 50s

- Many of the women said they had been aware of bodily changes in their fifties. Although women said that they felt the same inside as they did when they were in their 20s or 30s, they sensed that their bodies were 'slowing down' – they didn't have the same energy that they did when they were younger.
- Women also reported a range of physical and mental changes – such as greying hair, deteriorating eyesight, stiff joints, and wrinkled skin. However, these changes were generally regarded as something to be expected at this stage in life, and they were not seen as a problem.
- Several women commented on the need to look after their health now that they are in their 50s – for example, to avoid osteoporosis, or to keep their blood pressure under control, or just so that they are able to enjoy an active life in the years to come.
- Some women noted that particular health problems have developed or worsened in their 50s, but this was not necessarily seen as being linked to their age.