

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to discover HelpAge and to speak to you. Let me say that I do not represent the Older Feminist Network but speak personally. I think that the personal is political. As an old feminist I would like to share with you the changes that I have experienced in these last 20 years of activism against ageism.

## **INTRODUCTION**

First let me introduce myself I am 81, born in the Middle East and lived in Syria and Lebanon until I was 21. After short stays in Paris, Manchester, Israel where I worked as a nurse, I married and settled in London for the last 56 years. I am wife, mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. I trained and worked as hospital technician in the NHS.

**ASSOCIATIONS** I am a member of the University of the Third Age , Pensioners Forum, Older Feminist Network London Feminist Network and Women in Black. On a variety of ageing and feminist email lists.

**EDUCATION** It is in my 50s at a time where adult education was flourishing and grants were given to people who had missed on their further education that I obtained my Bsc. On my retirement I studied for an MA in film and television. My dissertation was about the representation of an old woman in a French Film and the reactions of reviewers compared with a group of old women. In both courses I had the opportunity of mixing with young students and change their prejudices about old age. Now I blog on the representation of old women in films. I have run an old women in film group for the last 18 years. We watch film featuring an old woman and address ageing issues in the following discussions.

**TWO GRANDMOTHERS** My passionate feelings about resisting the combination of sexism and ageing come from

my childhood experiences rather than the ageing or feminist groups.

In Aleppo and Beirut where I spent my early years I had two grandmothers, and our family lived in their household for extended periods. The Arab speaking grandmother was a widow, she controlled my 4 uncles and 2 aunts with an iron hand. She was feared but not loved. She facilitated the education of the men and marriages of the daughters. They were poor. She died in her late fifties of pneumonia.

My bourgeois maternal grandmother was from Izmir/Turkey. and only spoke Turkish and Ladino. An immigrant, she was fearful and timid, she never adapted to her new homes in Syria and Lebanon. After her husband died she lived in our house but not really with us. She never went out, never took part in our social life except for religious festivals with the extended family. Her physical needs were fulfilled by a living-in maid - a wonderful Armenian woman who spoke Turkish. We the children did not speak the same language - ours was French - and completely ignored her as did all the family adults except for my mother. The young children sometimes teased and tormented her. As for the adults, I remember vividly the heated discussions and disagreements between my aunts about who would look after her in my mother's absences. Not abused but socially excluded, she was forever grateful of being tolerated. She died in her 80s.

Both grandmothers died at home.

**RETIREMENT:** In the 80s The Greater London Council's Women's committee and Spare Rib gave old women a voice in the special issue of their magazines. The OFN (1982) was formed. I quote *We felt that the larger Women's Liberation Movement wasn't giving sufficient attention and value to the experiences and needs of older women.* Also in 1982 The University of the Third Age started.

**Growing Old Disgracefully**

In the late 80s Mary Cooper founded at the Hen House a week long residential course Growing Old Disgracefully. Led by old women for old women it was a consciousness raising effort. The two grandmothers resurfaced in my consciousness when I retired in 1995 and attended the GOD course.

We left the course feeling empowered and at ease with our age and our future. A collective of women wrote two books about the ageing disgracefully experience. GOD is now a national social network. Two women who met at GOD formed a cooperative to offer the only alternative housing solution for old women: OWCH. It took them 18 years to finally see their dream realised and they are moving in the buildings they had designed and will manage themselves this summer. Only one of the original group survives.

**WRITING ABOUT AGEING.** When I researched my dissertation in 1998 there was very little literature about the representation of old women or about ageing in general. In academic papers the old woman was called the post menopausal woman. The events I could access were in the domain of social work.

Since then research papers in different disciplines and books about ageing abound in England and the USA. But academic papers are not available to the general public and because of internalised ageism books about ageing are not widely read.

To demonstrate the sexism/ageism climate we live in I will give two examples: A television programme broadcast in April this year was called "How to stay young" : a TV presenter *looking 'half her age' 71 , told us how to slow down ageing, how research helps us live younger for longer, which exercise holds off ageing the most, what can make us all live seven years longer, how to 'cure' ageing, the research to find the best way of keeping us all young, keep our minds younger than ever before, the fountain of youth.*

A day study on Ageism organised by Positive Ageing does not mention the combined exclusion effect of sexism and ageism. The pronouncements of 'age does not matter' and 'I am not old, I am me' went unchallenged.

**Grants** are allocated to campaigns and time limited projects designed to urge us to age positively, to age successfully to age creatively, to volunteer, even to work until we drop. This is the 'new ageing'. The media embraces old celebrities, old women fashion but not the realities of growing old isolated with chronic impairment and no financial resources.

Yet **HORROR HEADLINES** appear frequently in the general press. But They are here one day gone the next.

*NHS discharge system failing too many elderly patients,*

*Heart attacks kill thousands each year because of poor NHS aftercare,*

*'Hidden army' of carers in their 80s,*

*Scandal of rising abuse in care homes with more than 1600 allegations in one year*

*Urgent action is needed to prevent isolation among older people reaching ' epidemic proportions' by 2030.*

I have personally witnessed appalling incidents of neglect and social exclusion in the relatives of my friends. A close friend installed a camera in his mother's room in a care home for his peace of mind. I witness the cost in quality of life that some of my friends pay to care for their still older relatives in the absence of community projects and decent personal care. Contact the Elderly is the only national charity solely dedicated to tackling loneliness and social isolation. Is this the best we can do? Well todo women offer their well appointed homes for a tea party *Once a Month...* to alleviate isolation ?

A huge gap is growing between the well off and deprived women, between the healthy and those in need of care. A language distinction has been created: the 3rd. age as opposed to the 4th age. I cannot accept this distinction. And yet I do not find in the grassroots feminist or ageing organisations I belong to, a spirit of rebellion and activism.

However - a glimmer of hope - Holstein's book written from a feminist point of view and just published looks at ageing in all its aspects: from the personal to the social and political and expresses the need to resist and change.

## **READING LIST**

Martha Holstein.

Women in Later Life: Critical Perspectives on Gender and Age

Roman Boulder (2015)

Atul Gawande

Being Mortal

Profile Books (2014)

The Hen Co-op

Disgracefully Yours: Inspirational Writings for Growing Older and Living Life to the Full

Piatkus (1995)

The Hen Co-op

Growing Old Disgracefully: New Ideas for getting the most out of life

Piatkus (1993)

Barbara MacDonald with Cynthia Rich

Look Me in the Eye: Old Women , Aging and Ageism  
The Women's Press (1984)

OFN Older Feminist Network <http://www.olderfeminist.org.uk>

GOD <http://www.growingolddisgracefully.org.uk>

OWCH <http://www.owch.org.uk>

OLN <http://www.olderlesbiannetwork.btck.co.uk>

AGLOW <http://www.aglow-london.org.uk>

WOMEN IN BLACK <http://london.womeninblack.org>