



Call for Papers: Special Issue of the *JIWS*

Reclaiming Sexuality and Selfhood: Ageing Women Beyond Socio-cultural Stereotypes

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Description

This issue seeks to expand feminist and interdisciplinary understandings of sexuality as a core dimension of ageing women's health and identity, embracing both physical realities and cultural-philosophical experiences of ageing. By integrating diverse voices and expertise, the issue aims to shift public and scholarly discourse towards recognizing ageing women's sexual autonomy, well-being, and vibrant selfhood.

Paul Simpson (2021) uses the term "ageist erotophobia" to refer to the failure or refusal to see older people as sexual beings, which may have serious consequences for them. More so, ageing women's sexuality remains one of the most neglected and misunderstood dimensions of ageing across cultures. Social stereotypes often desexualize or marginalize older women, while cultural narratives frequently overlook how menopause, mothering, and health challenges shape their sexual identities and well-being. Cultural gerontology studies the neglect that ageing individuals face based on socio-cultural stereotypes. However, stringent socio-cultural standards imposed on the body of ageing women are rooted in the link between desirability and youthfulness (Calasanti, 2005). Moreover, ageing curtails women's agency in many private and public spaces while older men, on the other hand, enjoy continued sexual freedom along with wealth, settled careers, prestige, and social dominance as their grey hair is generally viewed as a sign of maturity and authority. It was at the turn of the century that Kathleen Woodward (1999) highlighted the in/visibility of ageing women as they become socially invisible with reduced domestic roles, sexually invisible with an absence of male attention, and culturally invisible within media and cultural iconography.

Older women experience intersectional discrimination at the nexus of ageism (Nelson, 2004; Bytheway, 2005; Gullette, 2013) and sexism (Bates, 2016) sometimes known as "sexageism" (Bouson, 2016). Ageing bodies are culturally devalued in contrast to privileged young bodies attempting to mask the signs of aging. Women who age "authentically" also encounter heightened stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. Similarly, very old women who are viewed as having "failed" to age "successfully" are often subjected to extreme social exclusion and loss of visibility, be they heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual women (Westwood, 2023). Moreover, in many societies, ageing women's health--especially sexual health--is insufficiently addressed, leaving many older women dependent or invisible in medical, social, and family contexts. This invisibility, too, calls for social justice (Westwood, 2023). Invisibility is also reported by media professionals who self-

identify as older women, including journalists, presenters, producers and actors, while many also fight back to retain their visibility (Ross, 2023). This sexageism also helps to ensure the financial well-being of the beauty industry as grey-haired women try to enhance their presentation of self through beauty products, although it is true that some (but not all) women consider grey hair as a symbol of authenticity (Cecil et al., 2021).

Myriad studies have played a pivotal role in in/directly foregrounding ageing women's sexuality. The publication of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), which was translated into dozens of languages and became a global phenomenon, embraced a lifecycle approach to women's sexuality and emphasized the relationship between emotional and sexual health as women age. Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying* (1973) normalized discussions of women's sexuality although the protagonist was a young woman in her late 20s. Much more recently, the special issue on *Sexuality and Aging: Let's Keep Talking About This, Shall We?* (2023) published by *The Gerontologist* (<https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/issue/63/2>), focused on sexuality and ageing with reference to all genders, encompassing topics such as aging and disability and intersectional and queer sexuality.

Contrary to dominant notions about sexuality later in life, studies report that many older women in their 50s or 60s still have sex or want sex (Rowntree, 2015), and they find these decades to be a time of self-discovery or renewed sexual exploration (Sandberg, 2013) in spite of postmenopausal challenges like declining interest and painful intimacy (Romashchenko, 2025). In this regard, remaining sexually active is debated as a way to resist ageing chronologically. Thus, sexuality later in life is increasingly considered a form of positive or "active ageing," in opposition to the narrative that sees ageing as a "decline" in terms of bodily and mental functioning (Looman et al., 2024; Villar & Vasconcelos, 2025). Literary texts and films play a pivotal role in this regard. For example, Raquel Medina Bañón (2025) challenges the patriarchal, ageist, and phallogentric narratives that have long shaped cultural understandings of older women's erotic lives by analyzing three Spanish films. Moreover, some studies show older women's interest in digital dating sites (Fileborn et al., 2015), increased assertiveness in pursuit of sexual pleasure (Miller, 2019), and confidence and freedom in sexual relationships (Watson et al., 2017). Nonetheless, older women may decide not to engage in sex later in life, the causes for which are more complicated than just growing older (Looman et al., 2024). Some of these factors are rooted in geography, society, culture, psychology, family pressure, and health. A dire predicament, in this regard, is faced by older women sex workers as an ageing body curtails their earnings and condemns them to alienation and rejection (Avieli et al. 2025).

On the other hand, a number of societies do recognize an increase in older women's agency, power, and decision-making, not only for themselves but power over others in ways that can be positive (but not always). This increase in power is especially true for small-scale societies, societies whose livelihoods are horticultural and pastoral, as well as tribal and Indigenous societies, whether or not they are small scale (Ember & Kalodner, 2024). Moreover, even in advanced capitalist societies, there are various ways in which menopause opens doors for women. It is not clear from the research, however, to what degree this increase in power and/or agency translates into sexual empowerment for older women, and researchers have pointed to the notion that women are increasingly viewed as asexual and/or invisible as they grow older (Lemish & Muhlbauer, 2012). Sexual empowerment itself may include in some societies a growing freedom (desired or not) from sexual relationships. This special issue of *JWS* seeks to include multiple types of societies and explore the ways in which some empowering approaches to women's aging might provide adaptive models for other societies, given that studies show how older women's experience and expression of their sexuality can be improved through education (Baldissera et al., 2012). We are mindful of the need to be inclusive of these complex variations and layers across different types of societies, as well as the impact of class and other intersectional variables and new technological interventions reshaping older women's sexuality.

This special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* (JIWS) invites papers, particularly from comparative or interdisciplinary approaches, that analyze specific spaces and texts that center ageing women's sexuality as integral to physical and psychological personal well-being, agency, autonomy, and identity. Sexuality is understood here not narrowly as sex, but broadly as a vital expression of life energy, individuality, and embodied selfhood. Drawing from feminist, gerontological, medical, literary, and activist perspectives, this special issue aims to disrupt reductive stereotypes by highlighting how ageing women negotiate sexual selfhood amid societal, biological, and structural challenges. We welcome multiple feminist and critical perspectives from across the disciplines—psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature, health sciences, media, film, and the cyberworld.

Topics of interest include (but are not limited to):

- Socio-cultural shaping of ageing women's identity and self-efficacy across cultures and history
- The impact of menopause and reproductive history on sexuality and self-perception
- Motherhood's continuing influence on sexual identity in later life
- How social stereotypes shape or silence ageing women's sexual expression
- The neglect of sexual health in ageing populations and its effects on autonomy
- Intersectional analyses of race, class, disability, and sexuality in ageing
- Sexual health as personal well-being: insights from gerontology and health sciences
- Ageing women's sexuality and critical theory beyond gerontology studies
- Narratives of resistance, resilience, and reclamation by and for ageing women
- The role of health practitioners, caregivers, and social activists in supporting sexual autonomy
- Literary, artistic, and cultural representations of sexuality and ageing women
- Policy critiques and recommendations regarding ageing women's sexual health
- Role of cyberspace (internet, social media, & AI) in spreading awareness about ageing women's sexual well-being
- Care work for deep old age and posthuman care for ageing women's sexuality
- Ageing sex workers, self-esteem, and sexual well-being
- Religious discourses on ageing women's sexuality

Call for Interdisciplinary Contributions

We welcome submissions from

- Gerontologists and health researchers
- Feminist scholars and cultural critics
- Medical doctors, psychologists, and mental health practitioners
- Social workers and activists
- Creative writers (women's personal narratives and testimonies)
- Artists, writers, and filmmakers exploring ageing and sexuality
- Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians

Submission Guidelines

Please submit abstracts of 300–500 words, outlining your topic, methodology, and relevance to the CFP. Include a brief bio (150 words). Word limit for full papers (if abstracts are selected) is 6,000–7,500 words.

Send submissions to specialissuejiws@gmail.com with the subject line: *CFP – Ageing Women and Sexuality*

- Abstract deadline: March 1, 2026
- Notification of abstract selection: April 1, 2026
- Full paper submission (for those whose abstracts were selected): July 1, 2026
- Peer reviews report (double-blind) sent: November 1, 2026
- Revised submission: Feb. 1, 2027
- Notification of acceptance (from Executive Editor Diana Fox): May 1, 2027
- Special issue publication: Nov 2027

Authors please consult JIWS' submission guidelines: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/policies.html> and our AI policy: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/ai_ethics.html

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