

Perceived gender discrimination linked to decline in well-being for older women

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The findings suggest that perceived gender discrimination may be linked to declines in mental well-being for middle-aged and older women. Credit: Pixabay, Pexels CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

A study of more than 3,000 middle-aged and older women living in

England showed that those who believed they had encountered gender discrimination were more likely to report declines in well-being over time. Ruth Hackett of King's College London, UK, and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE*.

Prior research suggests that people who perceive that they have experienced gender discrimination are more likely to report poorer mental well-being. However, most studies have not examined well-being over time, or have focused on [younger women](#).

To better understand this relationship among older women, Hackett and colleagues analyzed data from 3,081 women enrolled in the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA), which follows a large group of people over 50 years of age.

In 2010 or 2011, each woman answered questions about how often they encountered different discriminatory situations—such as being harassed or being treated with less respect or courtesy—and whether they attributed that discrimination to their gender or another characteristic, such as race or age. At two points in time, each woman also answered standard questionnaires for evaluating mental well-being; once in 2010 or 2011 and again in 2016 or 2017.

Some 9.2 percent of the women reported perceived gender discrimination, most commonly situations where they were treated with less respect or courtesy. Overall, those who perceived gender discrimination also reported more [depressive symptoms](#), more loneliness, and lower quality of life and [life satisfaction](#). Between the two time points, they were more likely to report declines in quality of life and life satisfaction, as well as increased loneliness. These results held true after statistically accounting for other well-being-related factors, such as age, wealth, and [physical activity](#).

The findings suggest that perceived gender discrimination may be linked to declines in mental well-being for middle-aged and older women, prompting the researchers to call for more efforts to address [gender discrimination](#). They also note the need for further research to clarify the mechanisms driving this link and to address the limitations of their study, such as its lack of non-white participants.

The authors add, "We found that middle-aged and [older women](#) who perceived sexism were more likely to be depressed and lonely than women who did not perceive sexism. These women also reported low levels of life satisfaction and poor quality of life. The study findings are particularly concerning as they indicate an enduring impact of gender-based discrimination on [mental health](#) and well-being six years later."

More information: The relationship between gender discrimination and wellbeing in middle-aged and older women, *PLoS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0299381](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0299381)

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