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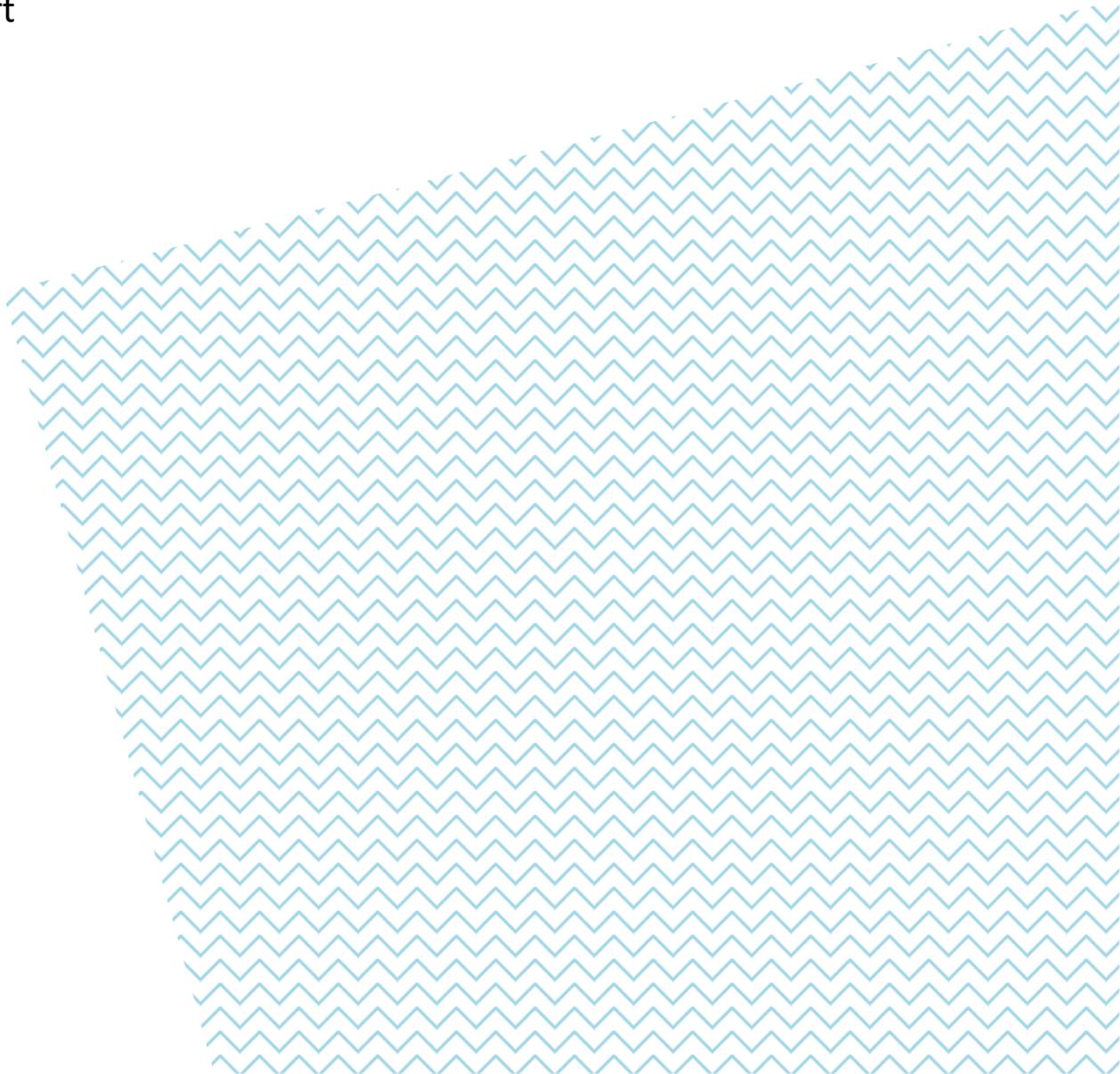
**CAWRI**

Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative

# **Through their lenses: Creativity, wellbeing and women's experiences of ageing**

Final report

24 June 2021



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## Project summary

Active participation in the creative arts offers women ways to counteract negative narratives about ageing. The *Through Their Lenses* study used women's creative participation in the Victorian *500 Strong* photography project to explore their experiences of wellbeing and ageing. In *500 Strong* women over fifty posed for nude or semi-nude photographs using props and stances of their choice. The study was part of the wider *Flesh after Fifty* project to promote positive images of older women in art. Through in-depth interviews, 18 women reflected on their creative participation in the photography shoot and how creative engagement contributed to their wellbeing and ageing. The study identified the complex and intersecting factors that shaped the processes of ageing and proposed that creativity had an important role to play in ageing and wellbeing.

This project ran from June 2019 to June 2020.

## Research team

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## Acknowledgements

The Creativity and Wellbeing Hallmark Research Initiative (CAWRI) at the University of Melbourne funded this project.

We are grateful to the women who participated in this study. We would also like to thank photographer, Ponch Hawkes, and curator of the *500 Strong* exhibition, Jane Scott, for their support.

# Background

## Research context

Women over fifty are a growing population in most parts of the developed world. Discourses on their ageing have proliferated in scholarly and popular literature, primarily based on medical models of agency and independence or frailty and decline, and often assuming cultural homogeneity (Lamb, 2014; 2018; Hofmeier et al., 2017). By linking women's creative participation, wellbeing, and experiences of ageing, *Through Their Lenses* offers an integrated way of analyzing women's diverse experiences. It connects the creative agency demonstrated by the women (actively participating in the photo shoot, bringing the props they wanted to, and selecting their poses) with their life experiences of ageing. Studies that examine the intersecting dimensions of ageing are limited in Australia and they construct ageing as 'a deficit that must be managed, primarily by individuals' (Asquith, 2009, p. 256). The project purposively selected a diverse group of women from those who presented at the photography sessions, to generate a complex range of insights into ageing and wellbeing and to contest the more reductive and universal discourses of ageing.

## Project aims

The primary aim of this project was to use the creative participation and visual images of women over fifty to explore issues of wellbeing and ageing. Conventional images of older women in the visual arts are rare and tend to contain stereotypical and homogenizing representations. The *Through Their Lenses* project aimed to disrupt these stereotyped portrayals using the lived experiences of older women and their participation in the *500 Strong* photography project. The project also aimed to broaden ageing discourses by showing how socio-cultural and political factors shape women's experiences, and to analyse the intersection of creativity, ageing and wellbeing.

## Methodology

The 18 women who participated in the *500 Strong* photography project were invited to an hour-long semi-structured interview to share their insights on creativity, wellbeing, and ageing. Interviews were held in Melbourne, Geelong and Kyneton. The women were aged between 50 and 86 and included women born in Australia, England, Germany, Malaysia, Romania, Scotland and Uzbekistan. Two of the participants in their early 50s were visually impaired.

Questions asked at the interview focused on their reasons for participating in the project, their experiences of the photo shoot, their selection of props, the poses they adopted and the resulting photographic images. These initial questions expanded into broader questions about factors that facilitated and hindered their experiences of ageing and expressions of creativity. With their consent, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The women were also invited to

take part in a 4-hour workshop to discuss the themes emerging from the interview transcripts and their reflections on the photography exhibition. This workshop did not take place because of Covid-19 restrictions and the postponement of the *Flesh after Fifty* exhibition.

The data from the individual interviews were thematically analyzed guided by the women's feedback and the research questions (Bryman, 2012). The project's qualitative approach generated complex and rich perspectives on ageing, creativity and wellbeing. The opportunities to explore and reflect on the factors that support and impede women's ageing experiences shifted discussions away from singular themes of autonomy or decline. This qualitative research also allowed for the input of women from a diverse range of intersecting backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, age, relationship status, educational level, geographic location, as well as with regard to employment and housing status.

## Key findings

### Motivations for participating in the project

*'I wanted to participate, offer a view that life can still be joyous as one is ageing, that you can leave behind stuff that's been a bit baggage-like and get on with doing more of what you want' (A, aged 70)*

The motivations for participating in the photography project were varied. For some women, it was an individual project that marked their recovery from an illness, such as a way to illustrate their physical fitness or to signal of a new phase of their life. Others saw it as a challenge to do something outside of their 'comfort zone' and to embrace the experiences of getting older.

Many of the participants viewed it as a collaborative undertaking that challenged stereotypical representations of older women in art and unsettled normative ageing discussions. They hoped the collective photographs would initiate conversations about the contributions made by older women.

### Experiences of the photography session

*'I came to a point where you say, 'hey this is also part of me, like the bumps and lumps and not be afraid to show it to people. I think that was important for me as well.' (Abby, aged 60)*

Taking part in the photography project was described as a positive experience by most of the participants. They commented on the trusting environment facilitated by the photographer and on having the freedom to select props and poses that reflected how they wanted to portray

themselves. They commented on the soft lighting and the private space that allowed them to feel safe. They enjoyed co-creating their images with the photographer.

Others described their experience as a chance to be playful. They enjoyed trying out the different poses and thought their active stances were a contrast to the typical passive portrayals of older women in art.

### **Intersection of creativity/ageing/wellbeing**

*'A project like this is so important because it's not trying to draw up a set of rules, it's not trying to change a government policy, it's trying to create a socially aware way of thinking about ageing.'* (Norn, aged 86)

The study revealed that understandings of creativity and wellbeing were located in the lives and experiences of these older women. The term 'older women' is a broad term and there were differences within this group. The issues raised by the two visually impaired women in their 50s focused on their experiences of living with a disability instead of their ageing experiences. They did not think older women with disabilities were supported adequately and that their poor employment prospects were amplified by the intersection of ageing and disability.

Others suggested that wellbeing for older women was impacted by financial, employment and housing considerations. They spoke of issues like homelessness that affected the lives of many older women and felt that conversations about such women overlooked some of the structural barriers to their wellbeing. Women who were financially secure felt they had the freedom and the time to pursue their creative interests and to support projects like '500 Strong'.

### **Shifting ageing discourses**

*'I don't see the gathering gloom of an ageing population, of the baby boomer population as a burden. They are the volunteers, they are contributing in all sorts of ways.'* Wordsworth, aged 73

Many of the participants felt they were making a valuable contribution to shifting current ageing discourses that view ageing as a time of decline, and older people as a burden on the nation's resources. They viewed the experiences of ageing as being diverse and complex, believing that older women needed to be seen as a 'resource, not a burden'. They hoped the exhibition would work towards disrupting reductive ways of thinking about older women.

## **Project outcomes**

- The creation of a factsheet outlining the key findings from the project. A copy of this was provided to all participants.

- A journal article analysing the findings of the study was published in December 2020 as Moosad, L. & Vaughan, C. (2020). Care, collaboration and critique: The intersection of creativity and wellbeing in older women. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 10(5), 100-116. <https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v10i5.1485>

In 2021 we hope to undertake further research regarding the ageing, wellbeing and creative experiences of women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We are currently investigating funding opportunities to facilitate this study.

## **Discussion, implications and future directions**

COVID-19 has shone a light on the health inequalities that persist in Australia. This has been especially apparent in discussions of older members of our communities. Isolation, vulnerability and heightened risk of infection, access to quality care and services, representations of older people in the media and resource allocation debates have all highlighted the disproportionate burden on older Australians. Interdisciplinary research using creative approaches could, potentially, contribute to policy formulation that acknowledges the complexities of ageing discourses.

A key observation from the study is that more than 80% of the participants were from a sample of urban, tertiary educated, middle-class women. The ageing and wellbeing experiences of women from other cultural, geographic and economic backgrounds would strengthen the findings regarding the nexus of creativity, ageing and wellbeing.

Some older women may have been discouraged from participating in a nude photography shoot, preferring to engage creatively in other ways. Projects that enabled creative agency and were participatory in methodology include Photovoice, where participants take photographs to reveal their experiences and capture their realities. The photos are then used as the basis for reflection, discussion and analysis. As a creative research method, Photovoice offers participants a way to share their perspectives individually as well as collectively. Photovoice has been used effectively in Australian aged care accommodation settings.

In order to facilitate richer and more complex insights into ageing and wellbeing we recommend a) the development of an ageing and wellbeing project with older women who are Indigenous, newer migrants and refugees, from rural Victoria, unemployed, and/or have disabilities; and b) the development of an ageing and wellbeing project using Photovoice methodology.

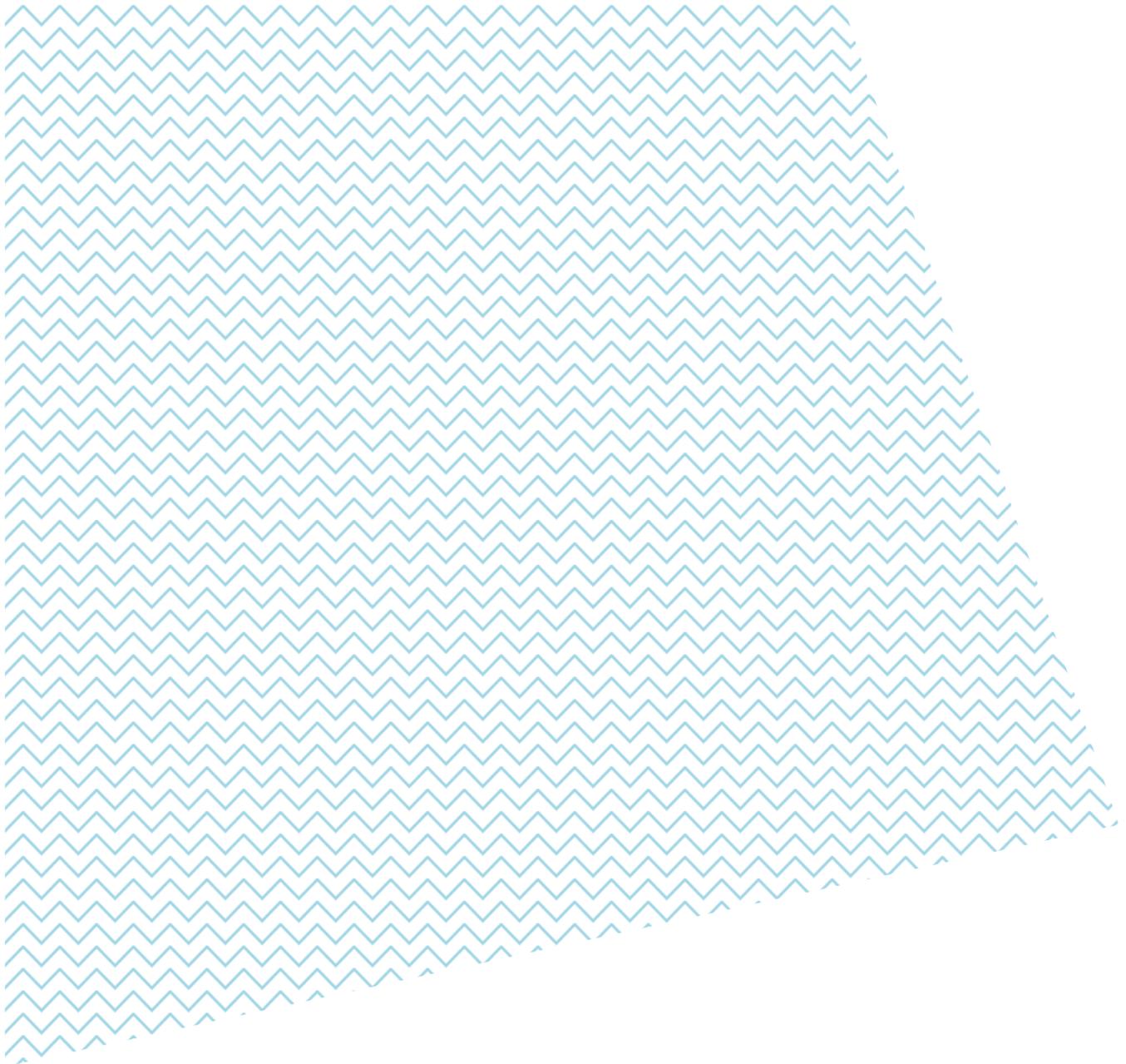
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## **More information**

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For more information about CAWRI, visit <https://research.unimelb.edu.au/creativityandwellbeing>