



Women's Age Lab

IMPACT REPORT

2021/2022

Message from the Founding Director



With women tending to live longer than men, they are more likely to act as caregivers for family members, live alone and live in long-term care. They are also at greater risk of experiencing multiple chronic health conditions, being prescribed inappropriate medications and reporting feelings of loneliness and isolation. In Canada, women make up 60% of people over 65, yet when it comes to their emotional and physical health, they're dramatically underrepresented in conversations and research about health and social services.

This is why we founded **Women's Age Lab at Women's College Hospital, the first and only centre of its kind**. To our knowledge, no other research centre in the world is solely focused on older women. Women's Age Lab is striving to transform the aging experience by using science to address the needs of older women, which have gone unmet, until now. Women make up much of the older population and face unique challenges throughout the aging process that are singular to them. As a result, Women's Age Lab is committed to emphasizing diversity and inclusion of individuals from all genders, age, race, and socio-economic backgrounds in everything that we do, to ensure better quality and more well-rounded evidence that considers the distinct health experiences of older women.

We envision that by 2030, the unique needs of older women will be recognized, and our social and health care system will provide tailored supports and care to older women.

As a geriatrician, scientist, and the Founding Director of Women's Age Lab, my career focuses on promoting the health and well-being of older adults, particularly women, and **finding ways to improve their lives through research**.

In our first year, we have accomplished so much in the world of healthy aging for women, and we are pleased to share our very first **Women's Age Lab Impact Report** with you. In the coming years, we aim to continue creating a space for national and international collaboration on science-driven health and social change and be the catalysts that will improve the lives of older adults, specifically women.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paula Rochon".

Paula Rochon, MD, MPH, FRCPC

Founding Director, Women's Age Lab

Senior Scientist, Women's College Hospital

Professor, Division of Geriatric Medicine, Department of Medicine and Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and RTOERO Chair in Geriatric Medicine, University of Toronto

VISION

A world where science is used to recognize and address the unique health and well-being needs of older women

MISSION

To improve the lives of older women by using science to transform care and practice, and drive health system and social change

About our Team

Our team at Women's Age Lab consists of scientists, staff, and trainees from diverse backgrounds, who are passionate about health equity and healthy aging. Their unique expertise and talents have helped to bring our initiative to life. [More on our Team here.](#)

About our Advisory Council

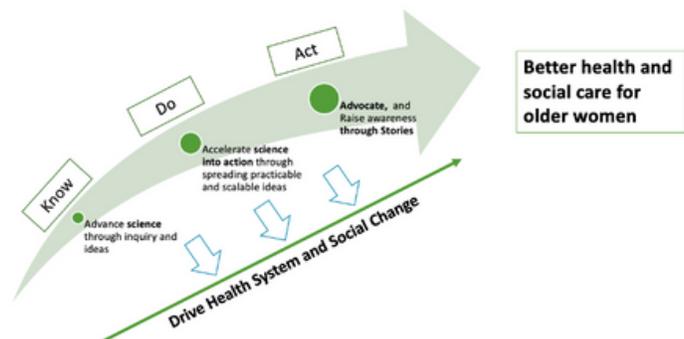
Women's Age Lab has assembled an international advisory council to work with us and provide advice in-line with our strategic goals. The council provides decades of diverse experience, knowledge, and senior leadership that can help push the lab forward. [More on the Advisory Council here.](#)

About our Trainees

Women's Age Lab is at the forefront of training the future generation of scientists and clinicians. Our trainees support the development of key research and initiatives. They have published articles in high impact geriatric medicine journals such as the Journal of American Geriatric Society (JAGS) and have had abstracts accepted at the international European Geriatric Medicine Society (EuGMS) Conference. They have also received many awards such as the 2021 Eliot Phillipson Clinician-Scientist Training Program (CSTP) Phillipson Scholar award, the 2021 Canadian Geriatric Society Dr. Jack and Dr. Asa Award, the Helen Marion Soroptimist Women's Health Research Scholarship, the Frederick Banting and Charles Best Canada Graduate Scholarship-Master's, the Canadian Geriatric Society Annual Meeting - Edmund V. Cowdry Award, and the Alzheimer Society Research Program Doctoral Award, the 2022 Dalla Lana Esta Wall Award of Excellence in Gerontology, and the prestigious Vanier award. One of our trainees also placed first out of 378 awardees for the prestigious CIHR Doctoral Research Award: Canada Graduate Scholarships. [More on our Trainees here.](#)

Three strategic objectives of the Women's Age Lab - with the goal to drive health system and social change:

1. KNOW 2. DO 3. ACT



Our **four areas of action** are where we are seeking to make the most meaningful impact and improve the health and wellbeing of older women:

1 
Tackling Gendered Ageism

2 
Reimagining Aging in Place and Congregate Care

3 
Optimizing Drug Treatments

4 
Promoting Social Connectedness

Tackling Gendered Ageism:

Reducing and Eliminating Its Impact on Women

Women consistently tell us that as they age, they feel less visible in society and less understood and well-served by our health care system. Women's Age Lab is addressing that reality and actively working to change it through science and advocacy.

KNOW

We have built a science-based case on how discrimination towards older women impacts their health.

We went beyond traditional healthcare and brought attention to [socio-economic disparities facing older women](#), and the existing policy gap with a lack of a federal strategy on supporting the aging population in Canada and globally.

**Globally 1 in 2 are
ageist against
older adults**



**Institutionalized in
healthcare practices
and socio-economic
policies**



**Lack of recognition
of their distinct
health needs**



**Lack of sex and
gender
disaggregated data**

In the past year, we published **comments and articles** on gendered ageism in high-impact platforms including the [Lancet](#), [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development \(OECD\)](#). We shared about the need for a national aging strategy and the importance of sex and age disaggregated data in high-impact journals such as [JAGS](#) and through op-eds published in national newspapers including the Globe and Mail and the [Toronto Star](#). These articles were printed in **26** newspapers with a combined total reach of over **36 million** readers, with most articles reaching just over **275,000** readers per article. Four articles reached over **5 million** readers.

Older women are negatively impacted by **BOTH advanced age and gender** with far-reaching **consequences** for their health and wellbeing

DO

As one of our responses to this wide-spread issue, we have built one of a kind tool to raise awareness about sex and age data gap. "[What Gets Counted Counts](#)" is a self-paced, interactive module created to educate individuals on the importance of disaggregating sex and age data in health research. This module adds to our [Health Research Toolkit](#) and provides guidance to researchers to help them include sex and age disaggregated data in their research so they can learn more about expected and unexpected differences between older women and men. Launched in **September 2022**, it is meant to address this sex and age gap and make it a standard research practice. This is crucial to advancing health and socioeconomic equities.



Tackling Gendered Ageism:

Reducing and Eliminating Its Impact on Women



A thread that runs through the root causes of issues facing older women

ACT

Through events focused on combatting gendered ageism, we have been able to reach variety of audiences through forums like the [Harvard T.H. Chan Public School of Health](#), RTOERO Foundation webinars attended by over **1,200 people**, and Women's College Hospital Foundation.

We have engaged older women in the community by listening to their first-hand account of their experience in our health and social care system to inform our work. They have voiced that they need better information regarding their care as well as and more dedicated care to their demographic. They want to be respected and not "written off" because they are of a certain age.

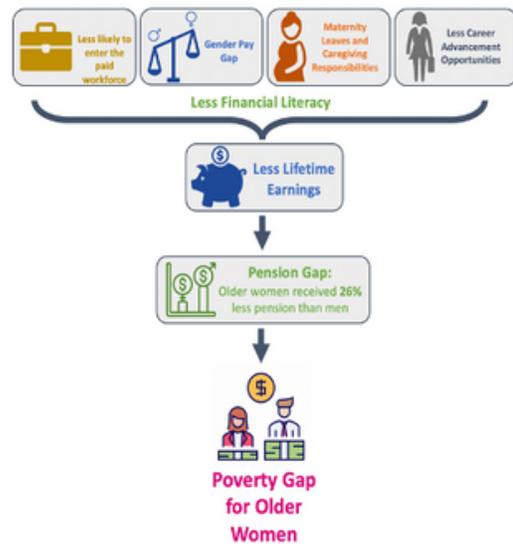


Figure 1 Poverty Gap: [from OECD Article](#)

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In addition to continuing our traditional research, we are looking to continue to raise awareness about this important issue and its impact on older women by launching a global first campaign on combatting Gendered Ageism in October 2022. This campaign focuses on raising awareness and addressing discrimination faced by older women in our society. We plan to continue to engage audiences through spreading our research and knowledge

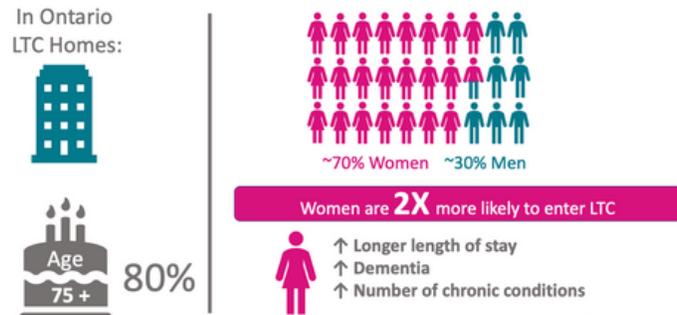
Re-imagining Aging in Place & Congregate Care:

Improving living environments to support healthy aging in the community and improving outcomes in congregate care settings

Long-term care homes deliver an essential type of care that will always be needed by some older people but more than 93% of older people live in their homes. Most of these are women who want to stay in their homes.

KNOW

We have honed our focus on Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities (NORCs) to support healthy aging within our communities. Our innovative project is designed to reimagine NORCs, which generally consist of large apartment buildings where **more than 30%** of the residents are older adults.



Recently, we published **4 comments/articles** on congregate care in journals including the [Canadian Medical Association Journal \(CMAJ\)](#), the [Journal of the American Medical Directors Association \(JAMDA\)](#) and [JAGS](#), and a national newspaper, the [Toronto Star](#). These articles led to a combined total reach of **over 3 million readers**.

DO

Our efforts led to one of our **largest research proposals** to date submitted to the CIHR Healthy Cities Team Grant competition. This proposal is dedicated to understanding how different NORC-based interventions, of varying support intensity, can improve the health and well-being of older adults living in NORCs.



We fostered **key partnerships** with University Health Network (UHN) OpenLab, the City of Toronto, City of Barrie, Public Health Units, libraries, and older adults living in the community to successfully submit this proposal to CIHR. The potential reach, and impact of this project, is tremendous given the population size and diversity of the cities participating in the initiative.

Re-imagining Aging in Place & Congregate Care:

Improving living environments to support healthy aging in the community and improving outcomes in congregate care settings

ACT

We brought forth real, practical solutions through our work with the Ontario COVID-19 Science Table and the [science briefs](#) that we led or contributed to through the congregate care setting working group. One recent [science brief](#) that we led and contributed to within this year has been **viewed more than 6,500 times** and **downloaded more than 820 times**.

We supported aging in community for older women and at WCH by identifying opportunities through funding and WCH to support older women in the community.

In Canada, 2.6% of the older adults population live in long-term care homes, yet more than 50% of all deaths from COVID-19 were among these residents. The majority of LTC home residents are women. This has been a wake-up call, hence a key focus area for Women's Age Lab.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Women's Age Lab will continue to make health aging a priority. Our initiative on support healthy cities and NORCs will bring a long-term focus to issues facing older women living in the community, with identifying solutions that can be scaled throughout various communities across Canada. This project will spark interdisciplinary collaborations across sectors and jurisdictions. Our work brings together a team of designers, healthcare providers, scientists, public servants, and decision-makers with complementary expertise in aging, user-centred design, loneliness, community engagement, realist evaluation methods, and practical experience implementing NORC-based interventions. Our team of scientists will mentor early career researchers, trainees, and other team members to build capacity in implementation science. A diverse National Stakeholder Advisory Committee of older adults, building owners, leaders from municipalities, program staff, and the research team will shape this work across all stages and help us develop practical tools. These tools will fill important knowledge gaps to support the spread and scale of NORC-based interventions across Canadian and international cities and position Canada as a leader in implementation science that improves the health and wellbeing of older adults.

Optimizing Therapies

Reducing preventable harms from drugs among older women

Medicines and drug development have made longer lives possible — but at the same time, older women, more often than older men, experience adverse effects from inappropriate drug use. One reason for this is prescribing cascades — an issue in which a drug side-effect is misinterpreted as a new condition and treated with a new drug therapy.



KNOW

Our team of scientists and researchers at Women's Age Lab have built on our incremental, innovative and world-renowned research on [prescribing cascades](#). We were awarded new CIHR funding on prescribing cascades to find ways to optimize prescribing for older women and men. We are currently working with investigators from Canada and the United States and stakeholders including the RTOERO, Ontario Ministry of Health, Health Excellence Canada along with collaborators from 6 countries.

DO

We are translating our knowledge about prescribing cascades research tailored for the needs of older women and men into real practice settings by building pathways using the [GENDERNET](#) funding that creates partnerships with investigators from six countries. We are sharing our work at the European Union Geriatric Medicine Society meeting in London England. We held our annual investigators meeting in London England and will be meeting in Paris France for a workshop sharing experiences on including gender in research.



A paper on prescribing cascades has received the [2021 CIHR/CAHSPR article of the year award](#), which recognizes ground-breaking research that has significantly contributed to the field of health services and policy research in Canada.

Optimizing Therapies

Reducing preventable harms from drugs among older women

DO (CONTINUED)

Our trainees are investigating whether there are sex-based differences in the relationship between loneliness and polypharmacy (concurrent use of 5 or more medications). Findings were presented at the [Annual Scientific Meeting of the American Geriatric Society](#).

ACT

We have presented on prescribing cascades using a variety of platforms with broad reach such as Health Excellence Canada and including this information in invited keynote presentations to geriatric medicine and to pharmacy at the University of Alberta.



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We aim to bring meaningful change among healthcare providers around deprescribing. This involves building/recommending a checklist for deprescribing among clinicians and patients

More broadly, we will ensure that healthcare providers have the tools they need to make decisions in partnership with patients and caregivers, and to address the preventable harm that affects the health of older women everywhere.

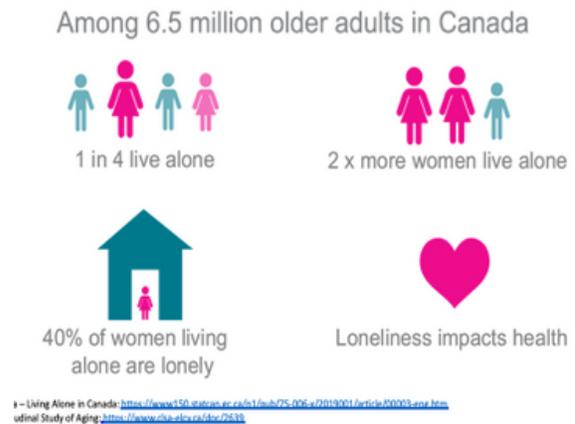
Promoting Social Connectedness

Implementing initiatives to enable older women to meaningfully participate in their communities and reduce loneliness

We know that being connected to family, friends and society doesn't just improve the well-being of older adults, it's good for all of us. Many older women continue to be socially isolated and/or lonely because of major life transitions like retirement, widowhood, chronic illness, and living alone. Since they live longer than men, loneliness is a major issue for older women.

KNOW

In the past year, we published an op ed and two articles on promoting social connectedness in the high impact geriatric journal [JAGS](#) and the [British Medical Journal Open \(BMJ Open\)](#). Our article on [technology and aging for women in the Toronto Star](#) reached **over 5 million readers**. We also discussed the impact of loneliness in older adults in [Canadian Living](#).



Our research has shed new light on an important issue - Older adults living in long-term care homes who did not have personal contact with family or friends experienced greater excess mortality than those who had contact during COVID-19's first wave. These results speak to the need to support maintaining social connection of older adults living in congregate care settings.



We conducted a [study](#) in collaboration with RTOERO, demonstrating that several factors including advanced age, living alone, and low social support increased the likelihood of nonuse of social media in older adults to communicate with friends and family during COVID-19's first wave. Our findings identified socially vulnerable subgroups who may benefit from intervention (e.g., improved access, digital literacy, and telephone outreach) to improve social connection.

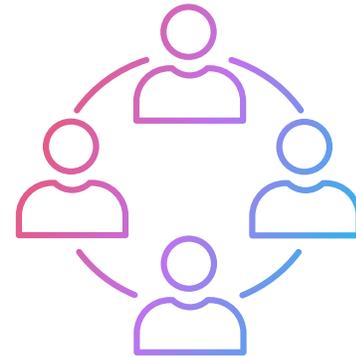
Our trainees are investigating the intersections between sex and immigration and how this affects loneliness. Findings were presented to the [Annual Scientific Meeting of the American Geriatric Society](#) and the Annual Conference of the Canadian Association for Health Services and Policy Research.

Promoting Social Connectedness

Implementing initiatives to enable older women to meaningfully participate in their communities and reduce loneliness

DO

With funding support from the Government of Canada's New Horizons for Seniors Program, we are leading a pilot study to identify older patients at Women's College Hospital who have low digital literacy and who may be experiencing isolation or loneliness. We will offer a series of workshops, co-designed with older patients, to build knowledge and skills that can help patients feel confident in using technology to access virtual healthcare and to stay connected with family and friends.



ACT

At Women's Age Lab, we are bringing awareness to the experience of loneliness in women and building partnerships to share and create ideas to address loneliness. Through the support of our key partnerships, we have established an Intersectoral Collaboration to develop an issue-focused agenda on loneliness. This collaboration includes 18 members from more than 12 national, provincial, and local organizations such as RTOERO, Toronto Public Library, Baycrest, CanAge, Older Adults Centers' Association of Ontario (OACAO), National Initiative for the Care of the Elderly (NICE), National Institute of Ageing and Toronto Paramedic Services.

Through various forms, we have raised awareness on loneliness in older adults and its impact on the health system. We presented three posters at the American Geriatrics Society Annual Scientific Meeting in 2022. These presentations focused on looking at sex-based trajectories of health system use in lonely and not lonely older people, sex-based in the association between loneliness and polypharmacy in older adults and understanding the relationship between loneliness and immigration-related factors in older adults.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

We plan to continue to investigate the impact of loneliness on older adults and the health system, to identify and test solutions to loneliness, and to develop partnerships to bring about action and change in this area. Future initiatives will build awareness of the issue of loneliness and draw attention to how partners from different sectors and government can work together to identify solutions.

WOMEN'S AGE LAB: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Women's Age Lab will continue to use the best science to inform our work and identify and study issues that impact the unique physiology of older women. Putting science into action by making research accessible and mobilizing it into practicable and scalable solutions is crucial to our mandate.

Our Lab will promote equity and inclusion by making a compelling, science-based case for the importance of valuing the lived experiences and contributions of all older women. We will address existing inequities facing older women by raising awareness and identifying interventions for gendered ageism and ensuring that people who plan and deliver health care and social programs for them recognize and take action to address their distinct needs.

We are committed to being informed by the voices and influence of older women. We will continue to strengthen Women's Age Lab's expertise and passion to lead in the development of new ideas, tools and best practices for the country and the world to follow.

Driving positive change requires spreading awareness and elevating the importance of the issues facing older women. Our campaigns to raise awareness through stories among researchers, healthcare providers and decision-makers will support Women's Age Lab in informing leaders, create context and identify solutions to transform health and social care for older women.

Lastly, evidence informed policy making is a foundation to improved health and social care for older women. We will continue to demonstrate the value and importance of using data disaggregated by sex and age to decision-makers locally, nationally and internationally. We will ensure that all initiatives focused on healthy aging include a gender lens to enable the development of specific action plans focused on improving lives and experiences of older women everywhere.

Women's Age Lab, Women's College Hospital and Women's College Hospital Foundation gratefully acknowledge the support and generosity of our donor community in making this work possible. We extend special thanks to:

The Allen Family Foundation

RBC Foundation

Nancy Ruth

The Naraine Family Foundation

Women's College Health Research



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