



# VITAL CONVERSATIONS

## KEY FINDINGS



**GIVING OLDER  
WOMEN IN GREATER  
MELBOURNE A VOICE**

**THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED  
BY DR SUSAN FELDMAN &  
DR HARRIET RADERMACHER  
FOR LORD MAYOR'S  
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to acknowledge the generosity of all the women who took part in this study, and who so openly and enthusiastically offered their views and opinions. Thank you for sharing your hopes, fears, tears and laughter.

We would also like to acknowledge the kindness and motivation of all the individuals and organisations who so willingly offered help and assistance to identify and recruit such a wonderful mass of women to speak to.

Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation wishes to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and celebrate our events, the People of the Kulin Nation. We pass on our respects to their Ancestors and Elders, both past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their tireless work in continuing their traditional lore and practices, and their commitment to protecting their traditional land and waterways.

## FOREWORD

**The findings of the *Greater Melbourne Vital Signs 2017* indicated that older women were facing challenges and, in some cases, extreme disadvantage across diverse aspects of their lives. Between 2012 and 2017, the number of older women couch surfing increased by 83 per cent and a 75 per cent increase in older women sleeping in their cars and presenting at homelessness services.<sup>1</sup> Financial security is now the most common factor influencing a person's decision to retire.<sup>2</sup> On top of this, at least one in ten people aged over 60 experience isolation and loneliness.<sup>3</sup>**

Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation wanted to hear more directly from older women about their lives, the challenges they face and potential solutions.

We commissioned Dr Susan Feldman and Dr Harriet Radermacher to consult with older women and give them a voice on the issues they are facing as part of our Vital Conversations series.

Social connectedness emerged as the enabler (or barrier) to positive outcomes in housing, financial security, health and wellbeing, and technical literacy.

Social connectedness is not only about participation in the community but also a deep sense of belonging. Connectedness provides the foundation for economic participation leading to financial security and housing affordability, access to and knowledge of digital tools, which help combat isolation and enhance participation in many areas of life including unpaid and paid work and recreation. All these factors together lead to older women having a sense of self-worth as active and valued participants in our community. Social connectedness is the glue that makes a valued life possible.

What this report also finds is an untapped resource of older women with a great deal to contribute. Some are doing it very tough. Despite a lifetime working in paid and unpaid roles in the workplace, their families and local communities, the life they experience today is not the later life they expected. For some a stable home is out of reach. Others face financial insecurity. Many of these women feel sidelined and disconnected from mainstream policy development and economic and social opportunities.

**Older women are in fact a missing powerhouse of wisdom and energy.**

This report provides some concrete recommendations for the Foundation and our colleagues in philanthropy, the not-for-profit, enterprise and government sectors to action. We look forward to developing collaborations to help make sure older women are a respected and vital part of our community.

Catherine Brown  
Chief Executive Officer  
Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation

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1. Council for Homeless Persons, *Hidden Homelessness on the Rise*, 2017
  2. Australian Bureau of Statistics Table 0.1 *Labour Force Status by Age, Social, Marital Status and Sex*, August 2017
  3. Commissioner for Senior Victorians, *Ageing is everyone's business*, Department of Health and Human Services, Melbourne, 2016

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In the words of one woman who participated in the Vital Conversations study and which reflected the views of many of the other contributors:

**“Stamina and persistence. You have to keep at it and at it and at it... you’ve got to be seen. We’ll be ignored if we don’t get out there.”**

**(Group 7)**

## PROJECT AIMS

- To engage with groups of older women over 55 years from a range of cultural, geographic and economic backgrounds living in Greater Melbourne to discuss their experiences of ageing, particularly in the context of health, housing, demographic and climate change.
- To inform and build on the development of innovative strategies and solutions to address the issues highlighted in *Greater Melbourne Vital Signs 2017* relevant to older women.

## KEY RESEARCH QUESTION

- Given demographic changes and urban development across Greater Melbourne, what matters to older women as they grow older?

## PROJECT DESIGN AND METHODS

- A qualitative research project comprised of facilitated semi-structured group discussions conducted with older women across Greater Melbourne.

**18 group conversations**  
**| 127 women | 22 local government areas**  
**| 50 - 91 years**  
**(average age 70)**

## PARTICIPANTS

- 18 group conversations were conducted with 127 women. The women lived in 22 Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Greater Melbourne, and ranged in aged between 50 and 91 years (average 70). They were born in 28 different countries (56% in Australia) and 23% spoke a language other than English at home.
- Just over half of participants (56%) were widowed, divorced or single, and 48% lived alone. 43% of participants were married or in a de facto relationship, and 61% lived in their own home. 75% of participants were retired, the majority were on a full (35%) or part (19%) pension, and 41% of participants had tertiary qualifications.

## KEY THEMES

- Addressing the key research question – what matters to older women as they grow older – the overarching theme is social connectedness and belonging. Seven sub-themes encapsulate both the challenges and enablers for social connectedness, and while they are distinct they are also inextricably interrelated with each other.

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## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

**01**

Social connectedness and a sense of belonging coupled with concepts of autonomy, choice and respect are key to the health and wellbeing of older women.

**02**

Housing insecurity is increasing and of prime concern to older women.

**03**

Rising costs and unaffordability of electricity, gas and water impact older women's quality of life.

**04**

Affordable housing and rental only properties specifically designed for single older women are a missing component in proposals for housing developments within the Greater Melbourne area.

**05**

Excessive and exploitative child care responsibilities exist within family settings and can often lead to compromised physical, mental and social health.

**06**

Increasingly poor mental health of older women is of growing concern.

**07**

Family breakdown and abuse of older women is a hidden issue requiring immediate attention.

**08**

Universal design principles including those related to the environment and energy efficiency are fundamental to planning for neighbourhood housing developments.

**09**

Physical changes that may accompany growing older do not necessarily limit a women's participation in family and community.

**10**

The over development and changing face of neighbourhoods can be alienating for older women.

**11**

Transport is vital for engagement and participation within the community.

**12**

Public transport networks are not particularly reliable, regular or take into account the needs of older women travellers.

**13**

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) older women who do not speak English are at risk and form part of the hidden face in the community on account of not being able to communicate with or participate in the wider community.

## 14

**Lack of access to up-to-date, timely, relevant and accurate information about a range of topics, including financial management, legal rights, available services and support, greatly reduces the capacity of older women to be in control and make informed decision about their own affairs.**

## 15

**Inexperience or difficulties encountered with new technologies can be alienating and undermine an older woman's confidence and self-determination.**

## 16

**The extensive volunteering activities of older women provide meaningful and invaluable contributions to community.**

## 17

**Whilst involvement in volunteering activities provides older women with a sense of purpose and belonging, there is the potential for exploitation and abuse.**

### CONCLUSION

- This project, by specifically including and valuing the views of older women themselves, has addressed a gap identified in previous work commissioned by the Foundation.
- The study has served to generate deeper insight into *Vital Signs 2017* through the eyes of older women and make important connections between the domains.
- This study has added an important dimension to existing knowledge about women's health and wellbeing, revealing a nuanced picture of their lives and added depth to an understanding of the changes that they face associated with growing older in a wide range of areas.
- This study identified and confirmed the importance of social connection and of having a sense of belonging over and above anything else.
- The importance of social connectedness is perhaps not surprising, given the huge shifts in pace of society today, in which people find themselves with less and less time for meaningful connections.
- Older women want to be included in public life and contribute their experiences and ideas to policy and planning.
- Engaging with older women in discussions about subjects of concern to them is positive for their health and wellbeing.

#### **Potential areas for further research and funding for the Foundation might include:**

- Reviewing the literature around the value of heat registers for connecting and supporting vulnerable older women with other community members on extremely hot or cold days.
- Investigating the hidden face of extensive child care responsibilities on older women's health and wellbeing, including more recently arrived migrant women.
- Exploring the potential of short and longer term, mutually beneficial, shared living arrangements to address concerns around social connectedness and housing affordability.

# CONCLUSION

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**Older women across Greater Melbourne participated in small group discussions, or ‘Vital Conversations’, to talk about and reflect upon their experiences of growing older. This project, by specifically including and valuing the views of older women themselves, addressed a gap identified in previous work commissioned by the Foundation (*Time of Our Lives?*).**

**In addition, Vital Signs 2017 provides a snapshot of Greater Melbourne across a whole range of domains for people of all ages. This study served to generate deeper insight into these snapshots through the eyes of older women and make important connections between the domains. The women’s perspectives revealed the complexity behind the statistics and a more comprehensive picture.**

**Engaging with a broad range of women over 55 years – including those from multicultural backgrounds and those in the older cohorts – has added an important dimension to the existing knowledge about their health and wellbeing. The study has revealed a nuanced picture of their lives and added depth to an understanding of the changes that they face associated with growing older in a wide range of domains.**

Engaging with communities of older women, although time consuming was fundamental in the identification and better understanding about the complex interaction of life experiences, risk factors and opportunities for women over the age of 55 years.

This study identified and confirmed the importance of social connection and of having a sense of belonging over and above anything else. Being connected to other people is a fundamental human need. The importance of social connectedness is perhaps not surprising, given the huge shifts in pace of society today, in which people find themselves with less and less time for meaningful connections.

The study identified some additional factors that can either enable or hinder the development of the sense of being and feeling connected: health and wellbeing; neighbourhood, urban development and infrastructure; financial and housing security; family and generational change; ageism and abuse; volunteering and advocacy; and information and technological literacy.

Climate change was not discussed as an issue directly affecting older women. However, the implications of climate change in relation to coping with extreme weather conditions was widely acknowledged particularly in relation to high costs of heating and cooling. In this regard, there was strong support for developers to consider energy efficiency of housing.



The trajectory of the lives of many of the older women who participated in this research clearly demonstrates a sense of resilience and adaptation to changing life circumstances. In addition, engaging with older women to better understand their personal resources and experiences and how they continue to play a valuable role in family and community life must be central to any future understanding about the life course of older women.

The wide-ranging conversations offered new insights and perspectives which will assist the Foundation, as well as other funding bodies, policy makers, communities and services to better support community dwelling women as they grow older in Greater Melbourne. In particular, the study revealed alternative ways to tackle specific problems from the view of the older women themselves.

This project not only provided important insights into the lives of older women, but in bringing together groups of women it also served to unite them further, increasing their sense of connection with others, and inspiring both reflection and ongoing action. Older women want to be included in public life and contribute their experiences and ideas to policy and planning. Furthermore, engaging with older women in discussions about subjects of concern to them is positive for their health and wellbeing.

Potential areas for further research and funding for the Foundation might include:

- Reviewing the literature around the value of heat registers for connecting and supporting vulnerable older women with other community members on extremely hot or cold days.
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## DR SUSAN FELDMAN

Dr. Susan Feldman was the founding Director of The Alma Unit for Women and Ageing established in 1994 at the University of Melbourne. The Unit was Australia's first multi-disciplinary research and teaching unit dedicated to promoting an understanding of the health and wellbeing of older women. She continued to direct the unit for more than 20 years. Susan has held the position of Associate Professor Monash University's Healthy Ageing Unit Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and health Sciences and until most recently the position of Adjunct Associate Professor in that Faculty.

As a qualitative researcher Susan has been involved in multidisciplinary research engaging with communities of older women in order to understand the range and nature of health and wellbeing issues facing them as they age.

Her work has included research about the impact of the death of a spouse and widowhood on the quality of life of older women. Susan has also focused on gender issues for older women and men, including individuals from multi-cultural and diverse backgrounds. Susan also has a keen interest in the relationships between generations and their role in the quality of life of individuals, family and community and has researched, written and published extensively about these topics. Dr Feldman has undertaken research for government, non-government and philanthropic organisations.

She has published her research extensively in over 50 peer reviewed journals and book chapters. Her own books include: *The Art of Ageing Well and the Art of Caring for Older Adults*, Baywood Press 2007, *A Certain Age: Women Growing Older*, 1999 Allen & Unwin, *Something that Happens to Other People* 1996 Random House, and *Family Violence: Everybody's Business, Somebody's Life*. 1991, Federation Press.



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## DR HARRIET RADERMACHER

Dr Harriet Radermacher is a research and evaluation consultant. Her work over the last 15 years has focused on the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds in a range of areas including ageing, gambling, disability and palliative care. Harriet is an adjunct lecturer at Monash University and also works as a policy officer at the Australian Psychological Society. She completed a doctorate in Community Psychology in 2006, and is currently on the editorial team for the Australian Community Psychologist.

Underpinning Harriet's research interests is her desire to give voice to the lived experiences of those people who are often excluded and marginalised in current society; and to contribute to knowledge about how to better access and include these voices in research. She is committed to working in ethical, strengths-based and participatory ways with the community to ensure that her work is relevant, meaningful and useful for those that are the focus of the research.



Level 15, 1 Collins Street, Melbourne 3000  
GPO Box 1851 Melbourne 3001  
(03) 9633 0033  
[info@lmcf.org.au](mailto:info@lmcf.org.au)  
Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation  
Lord Mayor's Charitable Fund

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ABN 48 042 414 556  
ABN 63 635 798 473

[lmcf.org.au](http://lmcf.org.au)