

Sleep, Health and Gender Inequalities – a new perspective within ageing research

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Although sleep is largely invisible and has been the subject of little social or gerontological research, it provides a rich site for understanding aspects of gender inequalities with ageing. Sleep is fundamental for health and well-being, while also being affected by physical disabilities, depression and dementia. Given that health changes often accompany ageing, sleep may be compromised, with far-reaching implications for the older person, their partner and any caregivers.

The quality and timing of sleep is influenced by the social context within which it takes place. The majority of people share their sleeping space with a partner; each partner's actions influence the quality of the other partner's sleep, but in gender differentiated ways. However, older women are often widowed, with implications for their sleep. The paper illustrates how the study of sleep can be used as a window to examine the changing dynamics of gendered relationships with ageing. For example how the changing constraints of paid work, caring responsibilities, the menopause, illhealth, partner's behaviour (snoring, illhealth, etc) and worries impact on women's sleep as they age.

The paper draws on EU funded research on 'Women's Sleep and Ageing' based on focus groups, qualitative interviews, audio sleep diaries and a survey of 1400 women aged from 40 upwards. The benefits of using these multiple methods to collect information about the quality, timing and gendered nature of sleep will be examined.