

Grey is

fe

s a

Grey is a feminist issue

Claire Robinson

minist

issue

2015 was the year grey hair went mainstream. What started in the noughties as the street-fashion trend ‘granny chic’ — younger women wearing old or pre-owned clothes — had by the end of the decade moved to the catwalk, with fashion designers using older, grey-haired women as models in their campaigns and styling their younger runway models with silver hair. The hair trend was picked up by celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Pink, Rihanna, Nicole Richie, Kelly Osbourne, Cara Delevingne and even by the characters in Disney’s hit movie *Frozen* — Anna has a silver streak in her red hair, and Elsa’s hair is platinum-white.

In the northern spring of 2015 young women flocked to salons to have their hair coloured steel-grey, silvery grey and platinum-white with violet undertones. Fashion blogs and magazines proclaimed it the ‘hottest’ hair colour trend in 2015. BuzzFeed and YouTube videos explaining the process of dyeing hair grey were viewed millions of times. Social media acknowledged the phenomenon with #grannyhair. Twitter had a #grannyhair feed, Facebook a granny-hair community and, by the end of 2015, over 100,000 images celebrating grey locks had been uploaded to Instagram. The *New York Times* reported that searches for grey hair dye on Amazon tripled, while 2015’s Google Beauty Trend Report noted a spike of 234 per cent in searches for the term ‘silver hair’. And it wasn’t a trend limited to young women. When former member of the boy band One Direction Zayn Malik dyed his

hair grey at age 23, the hysterical headline on BuzzFeed read ‘Zayn Malik has grey hair now and people are losing their damn minds’.

Commentators in mainstream media agreed it was fundamentally a ‘visual signature’, an attention-seeking calling card. In a *Guardian* story titled ‘Grey and proud: the hairstyle trend where millennials and middle-aged men meet’, columnist Priya Elan noted ‘a hint of irony and a Warholian poise about the colour [grey] on a young head: it is about redefining and reappropriating the shade’.

‘It’s a statement,’ said expert English hair colourist Jo Hansford in the *Daily Telegraph*. ‘All the celebrities, they’ve done every bright and bold colour under the sun, so what’s next? The only other “shocking” colour left is grey.’

While it may have been about redefining the shade, the last thing it was about was redefining ageing. More complex than just getting to the only unused colour in the hair colour spectrum, the success of the granny-hair look relied on the surprising juxtaposition of having an ‘old’ hair colour on someone who still looked very young. Implied by the *New York Times* headline ‘For millennial men grey hair is welcome’ was that, for anyone not a millennial, it wasn’t.

The term ‘granny’ conjures up feelings of endearment and respect. We think of grannies as loving, caring, staunch women who support their families through hard times and crises. According to Dr Laura Hurd Clarke, a researcher of health, ageing and the moving body at the University of British Columbia, the stereotype of the sweet, kind and nurturing grandmother exemplifies one of the few culturally valued roles available to older women. But let’s get real. The grannyhair hashtag wasn’t celebrating how much women want to be like their grannies. If anything it was the exact opposite: a statement that only served to emphasise how far away from being aged these young people were; how looking ‘with it’ was defined by being at the other end of the spectrum from looking ‘past it’.

Over the past 60 years, a complex web of economic, cultural and technological influences has constructed an anxiety about women’s ageing, and fed that anxiety with hair colour products, messages and appeals to persuade women that colouring their hair will help them retain respect and beauty as they age. The truth is the polar opposite.

Keeping women thinking they have to have the same hair colour as their teenage selves only renders mature women invisible, a factor that unquestionably contributes to the inequalities that still exist between men and women in the twenty-first century. This makes grey hair a feminist issue.

Grey hair is caused by a time-dependent progressive decline of specialised pigment (or colour)-producing cells called melanocytes. In grey hair there are still some melanocytes present in hair bulb pigmentation units; white hair is the absence of pigment altogether. While the precise events that cause and control hair greying and whitening are still unclear to scientists, what is clear is that most people's hair, whether they are Caucasian, Asian, Polynesian or African, starts out coloured and loses pigment with age.

In October 2012 the *British Journal of Dermatology* published the results of a study of 4192 women and men from 23 regions of the world spread out over five continents, which confirmed that the incidence and intensity of grey hair increased as people got older irrespective of their ethnic or geographical origin. The researchers found that at 45 years, 57 per cent of the people in the study were already affected by grey hair. Between 45 and 50 years of age the incidence of grey reached 63 per cent, between 51 and 55 it was 78 per cent, at 56 to 60 it rose to 86 per cent, and over 60 years it rose to 91 per cent.

Within these figures, intensities of grey differed. Between the ages of 45 and 65 Asians (especially Thai and Chinese) and Africans, with darker hair at the start, had less intense greys than Caucasians of northern European origin. The study found the highest geographical frequencies of grey hair in this age group were French (93 per cent), Lebanese (91), Mexican (89), North African (87), Caucasian American and Australian (85) and Russian (84).

And yet, while greying and then whitening occurs naturally with chronological age, culturally it is viewed as a sign of premature physiological ageing. From their twenties men and women start to worry that, with the first wiry shoots of grey hair, their body is telling the world that it is past its prime and going downhill. Not coincidentally

this is a period that aligns with the age at which arbiters of youth culture, such as fashion magazines and blogs, begin to regard youth as 'ending'. This is despite the reality that it is not. Greying is quite out of sync with other aspects of ageing: fading memories and aching joints, illness, weakening, thickening waists, sagging busts on women (and men for that matter!). In fact, of all the indicators of ageing, grey hair has the least relationship to slowing down, with absolutely no causal impact on the ability of the brain and memory to process information or the body to complete physical tasks.

While paranoia about signs of premature ageing can affect both sexes, men and women have a very different relationship with grey hair. On men, grey hair is associated with being trustworthy, competent and respected. No one questions the authority of male newsreaders, or the qualification of grey-haired male politicians to stand for higher office. Grey hair signals experience and a maturity that is regarded as a positive in these roles. The grey hair colour of most of the men on the *Forbes* top 100 has not prevented them from achieving business success and influence.

Grey hair on men is regarded as fashionable — witness the number of hipster men who flaunt grey beards — and sexually attractive. Actor George Clooney, the poster boy for male grey hair, went grey in his early thirties. 'Clooney's salt and pepper locks enhance his Old Hollywood appeal, while adding weight to his image as an activist and humanitarian on the world stage' proclaimed one online headline. Clooney regularly features on lists like 'The 6 sexiest silver foxes alive right now'. Website Thoughtcatalog.com explains, 'A silver fox is much more than your omnivorous mammal with pointed ears and a long, bushy tail. The new silver foxes — attractive older men with heads of grey — have taken over and are on the prowl . . . though most of them are married. These men are charismatic, funny and adorable. They're all over the media. They've influenced internet blogs and — even — magazine articles!'

It's a totally different story for women. The words charismatic, funny and adorable, sexy, silky, confident, mature and modern can't

form part of the narrative about naturally greying female celebrities in their thirties because there aren't any. In February 2015 photographs of seven months pregnant Kate, Duchess of Cambridge, wife of the future king of England, stepping out in public with grey roots at age 34 made front-page news in the UK. Celebrity hairdresser Nicky Clarke told the *Daily Mail* that 'Kate needs to get rid of her grey hair — it's not a good look . . . She does have amazing things done to her hair and it can look great, but unfortunately it's the case for women — all women — that until you're really old, you can't be seen to have any grey hairs.'

I can't be the only person to find Clarke's statement deeply unsettling. Women are living longer today than in any other generation in history and have never been more qualified to access power, income, and decision-making roles that affect the lives of our communities. Yet, despite all the gains made by the feminist movement, we still feel pressured to conceal our true hair colour and look younger than we really are in order to be taken seriously. There's a double standard at work here. We would never expect men to infantilise themselves simply to be visible let alone get ahead, so why do we expect that of ourselves?

Clarke's comment reflected a cultural stereotype that associates grey-haired women over 30 with a large range of negative cultural signifiers: eccentricity, dependence, disengagement, poor health, personal neglect, ugliness, failure, unfemininity and obsolescence. Mary Beard, professor of classics at the University of Cambridge, herself in her sixties with long grey hair, summed it up on a BBC *Newsnight* interview: a woman with grey hair 'looks like somebody we don't have to notice anymore'.

There is an additional association between grey hair and evil, a message reinforced through decades of exposure to Hollywood's wicked stepmothers, witches, villains and devils. Think the witch in Disney's *Snow White*, the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella*, Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmations*, and more recently Meryl Streep's character Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

It isn't until women hit their later years that we start to see a few celebrity poster girls for the grey movement in Hollywood: actress Jamie Lee Curtis in her late fifties, and Dames Judy Dench and Helen

Mirren in their seventies. And it's just as hard finding grey-haired women over 30 in the workplace and political world, where it is widely considered that colouring their hair to look young is the only way women will achieve respect, validation and authority in their careers.

The majority of the women on the *Forbes* top 50 dye their hair. Feminist icon Gloria Steinem, in her eighties, still dyes her hair. Susie Orbach, author of the book *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and now in her seventies, dyes her hair. Sixty-something actress Geena Davis, who formed the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media in 2007 to reduce the stereotyping of females by the male-dominated entertainment industry, dyes her hair. Most of the high-profile female politicians in the Western world dye their hair, including German chancellor Angela Merkel and US senators Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton (all in their sixties).

In New Zealand grey-haired kuia have mana and are revered in Māori culture, and we have had grey-haired role models in senior positions over the past 20 years — Labour Party politician Margaret Wilson, Green Party co-leader Jeannette Fitzsimons, Māori Party co-leader Dame Tariana Turia, Governors-General Dame Cath Tizard and Dame Silvia Cartwright, film director Jane Campion, photographer Anne Noble, writer Elizabeth Knox, radio broadcaster Kim Hill. The publisher at Massey University Press has grey hair, as does this writer.

But while our two main male newsreaders have gone grey, female newsreaders on television are still colouring their hair. In fact it's rare to find a grey-haired woman anywhere on mainstream television. All the current group of female cabinet ministers colour their hair, as does the new female Governor-General. Of the 224 high-powered members of the group Global Women, aiming to transform the leadership landscape of women in New Zealand and champion diversity and its positive impact on business performance, the overwhelming majority colour their hair.

But if there was one thing that the #grannyhair trend definitively proved, it was that grey hair can be hot! As the northern spring of 2016 rolls over into summer there's a noticeable whiff of change in the air. Pockets of resistance are springing up all over social media featuring stories and images of mature women abandoning the dye, going

grey and looking phenomenal. Sarah Harris, 34, the fashion features director at British *Vogue* who went grey at 16, proves it is possible to have a successful career, be ultra-fashionable and have long grey hair. Grey-haired models Yazemeenah Rossi and Cindy Joseph, aged 60-plus, positively radiate glamour. Photographed in the same way as younger models they look just as beautiful, if not more so because the inner confidence that comes with maturity shines through their portraits.

On the other side of the lens photographer Annie Liebowitz in her sixties rocks the grey. And in the world of high finance, managing director of the IMF Christine Lagarde and Federal Reserve chair Janet Yellen, both in their sixties, have white hair. Ordinary women, too, are joining the going grey movement.

The Facebook community Going Gray, Looking Great! is full of stories and images of women choosing to transition to grey, helped by an increasing number of self-help books, websites and blogs that advise women how to do it, and what clothes and make-up to wear to match newly grey hair.

The global hair care market in 2016 is estimated to be worth about US\$83.1 billion, of which hair colour accounts for more than 20 per cent. The Americas are the largest revenue contributor to the hair colour sector with a market share of around 40 per cent. In this region the US is the largest market with a revenue share of 12 per cent, which amounted to about US\$1.5 billion in 2014 (the last published year of data). In western Europe, the UK remains the largest hair colour market, worth an estimated £327 million in 2014. Both the US and European markets have been slowing down, and in some brands declining, in recent years. For example, in 2014 US sales of L'Oréal Excellence (a brand targeted at older women) dropped by almost 10 per cent on 2013.

According to Technavio (a global technology research and advisory company), the global hair colour market is forecast to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.22 per cent over the period 2014 to 2019, reaching US\$29.14 billion by 2019. With the slow-down in traditional markets, the industry is looking to others: highly populated China, India and Latin America, with increasingly disposable income

among their ageing middle class, now offer the highest growth potential. In April 2012, market leader L'Oréal opened the largest hair colour production plant in the world in terms of production capacity in Villa de Reyes, State of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, a factory geared at doubling the production capacity in Mexico, supplying both Latin and North America.

The granny-hair trend will have seen hair colour industry executives rubbing their hands with glee at the prospect of a new revenue stream. Transforming coloured hair to grey can take up to eight hours and can cost anywhere between US\$200 and \$700, depending on hair colour and condition, with touch-ups required about every four weeks.

On the other hand, the prospect of older women going grey in greater numbers will be filling the industry with dread. With the most common use of hair colour being for covering grey hair, and a business model reliant on unending use (colour has to be reapplied over and over again), it's an industry that largely exists thanks to the women's grey dollar.

It is no coincidence, then, that while the beauty industry celebrated young women turning grey, older women were being steered well away from it. L'Oréal leads the way when it comes to messaging hair colour products to older women. Fronting an April 2015 video on YouTube promoting the L'Oréal Excellence Age Perfect hair colour for mature hair campaign, 70-year-old actress Diane Keating is asked, 'What is the most important trait in a woman?' Confidence, independence, and gratitude, she answers. 'I think we should be grateful for what we have. I really do. I think it's an important element. It makes you really appreciate life more if you're gracious about it . . . and grateful.' The message — with its clever alliteration — is that for mature women it's OK to be grateful and gracious, just not the unspoken word grey.

Connecting hair colour with 'appropriate' ageing would have to be one of the greatest examples of successful persuasion in twentieth-century advertising. When advertising agencies sell hair colour to older women they locate their appeals in terms of baby boomers' redefining ageing. Making it more convincing, the focus on redefining ageing has also been interwoven with a feminist discourse — in particular women's 'right' to colour their hair to contest and 'resist' cultural

expectations of what ageing women 'should' look like. The argument goes that by rendering their chronological ages less apparent women are able to demonstrate and reinforce their functional and personal independence.

This is whitewashed by popular advertising histories reminding us that it was strongly independent, female copywriters who wrote the first mass advertising campaigns encouraging women to dye their hair to cover their greys. Those histories tell us that the big boom in hair dyeing came in the late 1960s, following a Clairol advertising campaign developed by New York copywriter Shirley Polykoff, a dark-haired daughter of immigrant Jewish parents, who began dyeing her hair blonde as a teenager in the 1920s because she always felt like a blonde.

In the 1960s Polykoff devised the long-running TV and magazine advertising campaigns for a colour called Loving Care, specifically targeted at younger women with grey hair: 'Grey hair, even when it's premature, says you're older than you are.' Use Loving Care and 'all anyone sees is that you look so much prettier, younger, after the very first wash'. 'Hate that grey? Wash it away!' Timed to align with mass colour photographic printing in large-format magazines such as *Life*, advertisements made dyed hair look shiny and luscious. According to Rose Weitz, author of *Rapunzel's Daughters: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*, the Clairol campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s caused the percentage of US women who coloured their hair to skyrocket from 7 per cent in the 1950s to 40 per cent in the 1970s. Today up to 75 per cent of US women colour their hair.

In a 1999 *New Yorker* article journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell described Shirley Polykoff as 'a trailblazer, a woman concerned with expressing her independence from her family, her self identity, a career, and reflecting concerns of ordinary women of her generation . . . a woman of the fifties caught up in the first faint stirrings of feminism . . . [who was] compelled to fake it in a thousand small ways, to pass as one thing when, deep inside, you were something else'. Gladwell also documents the story of Ilon Specht, a female copywriter in the 1970s who devised the 'Because I'm worth it' tag line for L'Oréal hair colour, a campaign that catapulted L'Oréal's rise over Clairol to become the top-selling hair colour brand in the world. The slogan is still in widespread

use today, with the variations 'Because *you're* worth it' and 'Because *we're* worth it'.

Back in the 1970s a then 23-year-old Specht wrote the line out of a sense of frustration at being young and working in a business dominated by older men who would cross out the word 'woman' in a line of copy and replace it with the word 'girl'. 'I could just see that they had this traditional view of women, and my feeling was that I'm not writing an ad about looking good for men, which is what it seems to me that they were doing. I just thought, Fuck you. I sat down and did it, in five minutes. It was very personal. I can recite to you the whole commercial, because I was so angry when I wrote it.'

Today the message that L'Oréal is aligned with ageing women's empowerment is continued in the appointment of actress, fitness guru, writer, political activist, feminist and icon of the baby-boomer generation Jane Fonda (78) as a spokeswoman. In a 2015 advertising video produced by L'Oréal she says, 'I almost gave up hair colouring, [it] looked so heavy, so harsh.' The male voiceover says, 'New Age Perfect from Excellence. The very first hair colour for mature hair. Its unique layer tone technology adapts to the nuances of mature hair, so colour is full of harmonious highs and lows.'

This is confirmed by Fonda: 'Beautifully blended at the roots, grey's gone, so flattering to my skin.' Fonda ends by urging women: 'Keep your colour, never give up. We are totally worth it.' All this is underpinned by a clever business model which means that, of all the techniques available to us to conceal ageing, hair colouring is cheap and easy to do in the privacy of our own homes. No one, apart from our nearest and dearest, ever needs to know how grey we actually are. It's all so credible that we don't have to think too deeply about what is really going on.

But what might have been an appropriate concept and expression of choice and self-worth in the 1970s is more problematic in the twenty-first century. Not only does it implicitly position the increasing numbers of women who choose not to colour their hair as *lacking* worth, the concept of 'giving up' hair colouring nonsensically implies that those who don't colour their hair anymore are morally weak and resigned to failure. What was once, to quote Gladwell, 'an example of a strange moment in American social history when hair dye somehow

got tangled up in the politics of assimilation and feminism and self-esteem' is now symptomatic of an industry increasingly out of touch with the needs of its market and moving into the decline phase of its product cycle.

Why should women be obsessed with defining or redefining ageing by colouring their hair, when most men aren't at all concerned about it? (Yes, some men dye their hair, but it is a small proportion.) If greying hair was genuinely located within an ageing discourse, wouldn't ageing men be worried about it in just as great a number? But grey hair is not about ageing. Ageing is a diversion. Deep down the issue is about controlling definitions of what is 'normal'. For men grey hair is normalised, for women it is not. And so the question must be: Why? Why is grey hair not considered normal on women?

Most of us live in a visual world. Although our history has largely involved taking meaning from seeing things in 'real time', over the past 100 years we have taken more and more meaning from images in popular cultural channels, such as advertisements, movies, television, YouTube and social-media feeds. Regardless of the image source, the process of making meaning of the things we see is complex. It might appear as nonsense to many readers, but while things exist in a *physical* sense, nothing has an inherent or inbuilt *meaning*.

Meaning is instead created by our coming together as communities of shared interest, agreeing on what things represent, and storing those meanings in our collective memories. This is essentially so that we don't have to repeat learning about the same things every day. We learn and create meanings as we become socialised and acculturated into families and communities. Some of these meanings are literal (a car is for getting us from a to b); others are deeper and more symbolic (the driver of that Tesla is both wealthy and cool).

The more we see things, the more familiar they become. The more familiar they are, the more we accept the meanings that have been assigned to those things as 'normal'. This process makes it easier for us to make sense of and live within a functioning and ordered world. Unfortunately our desire to make our lives easier to navigate also

means that we are prone to stereotyping and bias. Once we accept biases as reality we don't often challenge their constructed and fictional qualities.

Part of learning and making meaning to survive in an ordered world relates to the role of images and symbols in supporting power structures. For thousands of years representational signs of authority have been created, and closely controlled, by social institutions such as the law, the media, education, religion and politics. One of those signs of authority happens to be grey hair. Grey powdered wigs have been worn by members of the (predominantly male) judiciary for hundreds of years. They symbolically represent the qualities we expect of those upholding the rule of law. We expect justice to be delivered by trained, experienced, fair, competent, ethical, objective and independent officers of the court. It is no coincidence that these are the meanings we associate with mature, grey-haired men occupying positions of authority in all our social institutions in the West.

The appeal to women to keep dyeing their hair in order to redefine ageing denies mature women with grey hair the same signs of authority that men have access to. Ageing has become a diversion that normalises all women looking young, which in turn renders mature, grey-haired women invisible and socially excluded, their authority silenced in forms of representation (except when it comes to advertising for sexual dysfunction treatments, aged-care facilities or funeral insurance). Keeping women looking immature normalises the control of traditional social institutions by men who look mature.

The struggle for women to make it to what Americans call the 'C-suite' — executive jobs — and the boardroom is real. Despite making up half the American workforce, women hold just 4 per cent of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies and 16 per cent of board seats in the S&P 1500. A recent report from the US Government Accountability Office said that women may be 40 years or more from parity with men on US corporate boards.

Even more disturbingly, a recent study by Strategy& reported that the US and Canada welcomed only one new female CEO in 2015, and that worldwide the proportion of women filling CEO positions was at its lowest percentage since 2011. In New Zealand it is hardly

better. In 2015, 17 per cent of public listed board directorships on the New Zealand stock exchange were held by women, and in May 2016 the *New Zealand Herald* reported that there were no women listed as CEOs in any of New Zealand's top 50 businesses.

Having grey hair has not stopped men from achieving career success. Yet for some reason women have bought the message that for us to have career success we have to remain looking as young, fertile and sexual as we did in our twenties. But what if looking like young, fertile, sexual women is precisely one of the reasons we do not even cross the radar of those selecting people for chief executive or boardroom roles?

This essay implores women to wake up to the reality that grey hair is a feminist issue. Despite 60 years of waiting for the keys to positions of power as reward for playing our part of the hair colour exchange, the doors aren't going to open any time soon. One way we can turn this hair story around is for the millions of professional women over 40 who have greying hair to say, Enough! I'm not going to buy into this fiction anymore. The more of us that do it, the more it will be normalised.

Let's demand that the producers of popular culture show us younger grey-haired women in magazines, on television programmes, in movies. The more we see younger women with grey hair in popular culture, the sooner wider society, and those who select candidates for senior executive and boardroom roles, will learn to not be afraid of mature women.

I'm not suggesting that women shouldn't choose to dye their hair if it is part of their expression of self-identity. What I am arguing for is its visibility, for grey hair on women to be normalised. So that no qualified, experienced, mature, competent woman ever has to say again that she has to dye her hair in order to be taken seriously and respected.