

The Camaraderie of Men's Sheds

Inside the movement that
seeks to help older men
combat isolation and
build friendships¹

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The positive physical and mental health effects of older adult participation in community activities have been well-documented. Studies suggest that older adults enjoy a host of physical and mental health outcomes, including increased lifespan and resiliency in the face of age-related changes, that come about from the increased social connection and support from community participation.

Despite the plethora of benefits associated with engaging in community activities, older men, as compared to older women, are less likely to participate in these programs.² There is a significant body of evidence that demonstrates that men are significantly less active in health-seeking behaviours than those of women, even with similar levels of demographics.³ The lack of willingness among older men to participate in community activities and social programmes, even when they experience social isolation, might also be a result of men being socialised to value masculine ideals such as autonomy, strength and independence (Thompson, 2006).

There is a tendency for society to de-sex older adults, stripping them of their

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

² Men's Shed Association. (n.d.). *Sheds*.
<https://menssheds.org.uk/sheds/>

³ UK Men's Shed Association. (2023). *Researching the value and impact of Men's Sheds on their members*.
https://menssheds.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/1000-faces-report-final.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

identity as gendered and sexual beings. Consequently, interventions designed to promote community participation among older adults are conceptualised as gender neutral. This is troubling because it overlooks gender differences in ageing and the need to continue performing and expressing one's gender identity in later life. By extension, it also diminishes the significance of gendered interventions for improving health and wellbeing among older adults.

This article presents the global movement of Men's Sheds and distils learning points for gendered social activities to promote older males' health and well-being in Singapore.

The Men's Sheds Movement

Men's Sheds were established to provide a dedicated space for older men, particularly those facing social isolation and loneliness, offering opportunities for peer interaction and community engagement to enhance their well-being. In essence, Sheds provide older men with a space to mingle, teach and learn new skills and participate in "DIY" projects with their peers.⁴ Originating in Australia in the late 1990s (Box 1), the Men's Sheds movement has since grown to over 2500 Sheds in more than 12 countries, including New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark and Canada.⁵

⁴ Australian Men's Shed Association. (n.d.) *What Is a Men's Shed?* <https://mensshed.org/about-mens-sheds/what-is-a-mens-shed/>

What distinguishes Men's Sheds from other social connection initiatives is their adaptability to local contexts and responsiveness to the specific needs of each community. While Sheds may be managed and financed by an organising body, it is the older men themselves who choose the activities they will undertake in the Shed.

Box 1: Men's Sheds in Australia

The first Men's Shed was established in 1993 in Goolwa, South Australia, as part of an activities centre for the elderly. Maxine Chaseling, the centre's coordinator, is widely credited with initiating the first Shed and laying the foundation for the movement. Her presentations at health conferences during the 1990s helped drive the establishment of Men's Sheds in various communities. In 2007, the Australian Men's Shed Association (AMSA) was formed to support the growth of new Sheds and provide practical assistance to existing ones.⁶

Initially, Men's Sheds focused on activities such as woodworking, carpentry, and DIY projects, providing men with opportunities to work collaboratively on practical tasks.

Over time, these activities expanded to include gardening, metalwork, mentoring programs, and cooking classes, all aimed at promoting social interaction, skill development, and community engagement.

⁵ Men's Sheds Canada. (2025). *History of Men's Sheds*. <https://mensshedscanada.ca/history-of-mens-sheds/>

⁶ Ibid.

Overall, participation in Men's Sheds helps alleviate social isolation and generate better health outcomes as a by-product. Shedders reported that attending a Shed reduced social isolation, leading to better mental and physical health outcomes. Participating in Shed activities also increased older men's engagement with their communities.⁷



Figure 1: A Men's Shed in Australia (Image source: Australia Men's Shed Association⁸)

Using the case study of **Men's Sheds in the United Kingdom (UK)**, the next section explores two key ways in which Men's Sheds enhance the well-being of older men: 1) by promoting healthy behaviours through indirect channels; and 2) by providing a space for the expression of masculinity in later life.

“Health by Stealth”

Sheds have been successful in improving health-seeking behaviour among older men through indirect ways, which Milligan et al. (2015) have termed “health

by stealth”. Sheds provide older men with a space to talk about health-related issues and health-seeking behaviour, which they otherwise might not feel as comfortable doing in other settings. Even though men are more reluctant to discuss such issues as compared to women, men have attributed the gendered environment of Sheds, or the absence of women, as an enabling factor in making them feel more comfortable sharing experiences about health and ailments and providing reassurance and advice to one another (Milligan et al., 2015).

Through gendered activities, men can feel more at ease discussing health and health-seeking behaviour. This performs an informal awareness-raising function that may help to reinforce more formal health messages and encourage older men to seek screening or treatment. As compared to formal health promotion that could alienate and isolate some, these informal touchpoints provide a safe space where men feel less judged and more inclined to engage in informal health talk among their peers (Milligan et al., 2015). These findings are significant from a policy standpoint because they suggest that gendered initiatives like Men's Sheds, while not directly delivering a traditional health service, still yield tangible benefits and have value in being implemented.

Expression of Masculinity

While society tends to de-sex older adults, this does not negate the fact that older adults still need to perform, express and

⁷ URBIS. (2018). *Review of Support for the Men's Shed Movement Current State Report*. [https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/doc](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2022/01/review-of-support-for-the-men-s-shed-movement-current-state-report_0.pdf)

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⁸ Australia Men's Shed Association. (n. d.). Op. cit.

reaffirm their gender identity to contribute to their sense of self and well-being.

As such, Men's Sheds provide gendered activities that facilitate an outlet for older men to express their masculinity. In the UK, many Sheds have also been designed to resemble industrial workshops, recreating environments familiar to older men from their working years (Box 2).

Box 2: Men's Sheds in the UK

For instance, Men's Sheds under the Scottish Men's Sheds Association are typically equipped with workshops to provide members with opportunities to engage in "tinkering" or hands-on activities reminiscent of their past professions.

Similarly, the Maxilla Men's Shed in London offers a community workshop and maker space, allowing participants to engage in carpentry, wood working and metal crafting workshops in settings reminiscent of industrial workshops.



Figure 2: A spoon carving workshop at Maxilla Men's Shed (Image source: ACAVA⁹)

However, research on how age influences gender construction among older men is scant and what exactly contributes to an older man's sense of masculinity remains an open question. An added layer of complexity arises when we also consider how conceptions of gender shift over generations. Current interventions that are centred upon gendered experiences shaped by particular work, social and political contexts, run the risk of eventually being made obsolete since successive generations of older men might hold different notions of gender and masculinity and consequently, would differ in terms of the types of interventions they believe would meet their needs.

Interestingly, Sheddars have expressed that the masculinity expressed within these spaces and through their relationships with other Sheddars is different from the forms of masculinity they sought to attain in their younger days (Milligan et al., 2015). It appears that the performance of masculinity in later years is characterised by sociability; a 'busy' rather than a performance-related work ethic; and connections with others rather than acts of individuation (Ekerdt, 1986). As such, masculinities in older age are supposedly more focused on "activity and relational concerns than the victories and achievements older men used to define themselves as younger men" (Milligan et al., 2015). This might explain why the peer relationships in Sheds demonstrate less of a 'competitive edge', characteristic of the performance of hegemonic masculinity

⁹ ACAVA. (n.d.). *Maxilla Men's Shed*.

<https://www.acava.org/programmes/maxilla-mens-shed/>

experienced earlier on in life, and are instead more relaxed, supportive and convivial.

Key Takeaways: The Case for “Men’s Sheds” in Singapore

Gender is often glossed over in the conversation surrounding community participation among seniors in Singapore and it is common for interventions to be rolled out in a gender-neutral fashion.

One such gender-neutral intervention is the Senior Activity Centres (SACs). Similar to Men’s Sheds, SACs function as drop-in centres that provide support to older adults through various programs, activities and outreach. They were set up to reach out to vulnerable older adults living in HDB rental flats and studio apartments.

A study on SACs revealed that older men (40%) were less likely to frequent the centres as compared to older women (60%).¹⁰ This suggests that more needs to be done to enhance the appeal of SACs for older men.

Grassroot participation opportunities also appear to be more female-oriented. The Women’s Integration Network Council, run by the People’s Association, manages a network of Women’s Executive Committees (WECs). WECs run a range of programs to meet the needs of women of

different profiles and organise interest groups for women to interact with each other over shared interests and volunteering opportunities. However, similar interventions, oriented towards men, have yet to be implemented.

Given the gaps in the current landscape of community participation efforts for older men, there is certainly room to explore piloting the Men’s Sheds initiative or similar social programmes for older males in Singapore.

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¹⁰ Lee, J., Manap, N., Chan, A., & Balakrishnan, B. (2019). *Senior Activity Centres: Challenges and Possibilities*. [https://www.duke-](https://www.duke-nus.edu.sg/docs/librariesprovider3/research-policy-brief-docs/care-research-brief-7---senior-activity-centres---challenges-and-possibilities-(online)254e45a36fd54a818d4f3540b7ec7a43.pdf?sfvrsn=3c9d7dd9_0)

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