

Report on a Seminar

Human Rights of Seniors: Community Reflections and Actions

November 16, 2016
Mill Woods Seniors Association
2610 Hewes Way, 2nd Floor, Edmonton

Seminar organized by
Indo Canadian Women's Association

In partnership with
Mill Woods Seniors Association
SAHAARA: A Community Service Organization
Hameed Law

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Summary

The number of seniors in Canada and in the world is increasing at an unprecedented rate. Yet there are not adequate human rights protections for seniors and there are many gaps in policies and programs for them. In addition, there is age related discrimination along with discrimination on other grounds. Hence serious thinking and action are needed to deal with these problems. To reflect on these issues and to find solutions, a seminar and community discussion was held at the Millwoods Seniors' Centre in Edmonton. The aim was to elicit seniors' views and opinions about their needs and to provide a forum for seniors to build connections and to identify challenges in various aspects of their daily living. The event was organized by the Indo Canadian Women's Association (ICWA) in partnership with Hameed Law, the Millwoods Seniors' Centre and SAHAARA.

The seminar was framed under a broad-based approach to elder rights as human rights, noting that current laws, policies and prevalent social attitudes in Canada do not recognize the significance of age discrimination. Small group discussions were held, covering the following areas: (1) legal rights of seniors in Alberta (2) accessing the health care system for seniors (3) retirement and post-retirement living (4) financial planning for seniors (5) building community and social support networks.

Many participants in the forum were newcomers to Canada and were part of the Friendship Circle. The participants also included seniors from the wider Edmonton community and representatives of seniors' organizations, service providers and advocacy groups serving seniors in the Edmonton area. The forum was successful in that it provided a platform to engage seniors and to discuss challenges of direct relevance to their lives. Several comments, concerns and experiences were shared by participants and recorded by note takers. Summaries of these comments, organized by small-group discussion theme, are attached as [Appendix A](#). In [Appendix B](#) readers will find a list of institutional participants, government representatives and service providers.

The high level of engagement of the participants was evident in the energetic dialogue in each of the small group sessions. It must be noted that there were barriers to communication (lack of interpretation support) and gaps in participation (notable in the under-representation of women). This document provides some ideas to better strategize and organize for future events and build on lessons learned from the planning and execution of this event.

The Key Theme of the Seminar: Seniors as Advocates for Themselves

A key theme of this forum was to emphasize the importance of seniors identifying their challenges and the solutions that would be meaningful to them.

Yavar Hameed opened the seminar by talking about ageism, i.e. discrimination against seniors on the basis of age in society and in law. He pointed out that the seminar is about articulating human rights in a way that seniors understand their rights and how to exercise them. Seniors need to learn to articulate their aims and claim their needs themselves in terms of protection of their human rights. When seniors can understand, articulate and claim their needs within the framework of human rights 'they become their own advocates.' Seniors also need to collectively mobilize to



bridge the gap between the letter and spirit of law and the unhappy reality when it comes to their human rights. The aim of collective mobilization would be to move beyond mere articulation of needs, aims and rights towards the achievement of aims, realization of needs, and the creation of substantive autonomy and enjoyment of rights and freedoms.

Ruth Adria, founder of the Elder Advocates of Alberta Society, forcefully pointed out that elder abuse and neglect are underreported crimes. She concluded that there is 'no justice, no accountability for victims of abuse.' No one speaks out of fear or shame or of family dishonour. There is no law that allows automatic charges being laid in such cases. Victims of abuse often drop charges for fear of losing family support or in order to protect the family. Ms Adria urged elders to raise their voices. With Ms Adria at the helm, the Elder Advocates of Alberta Society have been actively involved in protecting the interests of senior Albertans for decades. The organization champions the cause of seniors in the Courts and on the public agenda on issues including (but not only) seniors' long term care, deficient protections under the Alberta Human Rights Act, trusteeship concerns to driver's license testing for seniors.

Ms Rosalie Gelderman of the Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council said that the most effective strategy for seniors rights is community action. She described the value of information published by the Alberta Abuse Awareness Network and emphasized the importance of creating 'good, dynamic and generative spaces for seniors in the community.' To achieve that end 'people should be galvanized to ask and pressure authorities for such spaces.'

The small group sessions were successful in that participants spoke freely and candidly about their own interests and experiences and raised questions that were specific to their personal circumstances. The majority of participants were immigrants and/or newcomers to Canada. While individual experiences cannot be reduced to generalities, it is important to recognize the broad reality that newcomers experience specific barriers and challenges. These include cultural and intergenerational attitudes, financial dependency upon sponsoring relatives, and linguistic and knowledge-based challenges in accessing services. Within networks linked to the co-sponsoring organizers of the event, certain forms of educational and logistical assistance are being made available for seniors in the South Asian community. However, the discussion of the needs of South Asian seniors is in its infancy and needs to be the subject of further forums for addressing their concerns. While service organizations like ICWA are already doing work with South Asian seniors, a concerted focus on the needs of seniors is vital to developing stronger and more effective community based support and advocacy for elders within the South Asian community.

Who was there... and who was not

While most participants in the forum were South Asian, seniors from different backgrounds participated and contributed to the discussions. Many had learned of the forum through the Friendship Circle. From a planning perspective, there was no

intentional or deliberate focus upon South Asians. As indicated below, there is strategic importance in diversifying the range of attendees, so that the observations, challenges and responses can be understood beyond the constraints and filters created by culture.



Of particular note was the underrepresentation of women at the forum. This may have been the product of cultural norms in South Asian homes that subtly or more directly discourage women's participation in community and public activities. However, the fact remains that significant work needs to be done to reach out to senior women and to build stronger networks with them. The role of women in every society is crucial - and, quite universally their work is socially and economically devalued in comparison to men. Specific

thought should be given to how cultural nuance and sensitivity should be addressed in order to encourage strong participation from women in the future. One idea might be even to hold a "women only" or woman-centric discussion on seniors' human rights.

The Message and the Medium

The forum was conducted exclusively in English. However, it was apparent that several newcomer participants had a low or passive level of English comprehension. For this reason, the organizers approached an interpreter to facilitate simultaneous "whisper" translation. This service, however, was not made available and, instead, the interpreter indicated that he would be translating for a group of newcomers at a future session. For future events, it is vital that proper simultaneous whisper translation be provided to anyone who requires it. To this end, it is also important to get a good sense of the linguistic breakdown of the participants in advance of the date, so that appropriate interpreters can be secured.



The Challenge of Forging Intercultural Linkages

A risk of recruiting and/or drawing participants primarily from the South Asian community of Edmonton is that mobilization and strategizing tend to be siloed. The creation of a culturally “appropriate” response may entail a lowered potential for developing cross-community intercultural solidarity. While it may be advisable to take a culturally nuanced approach to understanding and addressing problems of elder rights and elder treatment, it remains just as important to construct intercultural connections so as to foster stronger social support networks and mobilization among seniors across Alberta and throughout Canada.

Building New Strategic Partnerships

Several of the service providers, facilitators and discussants involved in the forum had considerable experience in working with seniors in Alberta. In looking towards any follow-up forum or discussion group, it is important that the organizers tap the knowledge and experience of those who involved themselves in this first forum. This will improve the planning and execution of future discussion, for example, in creating appropriate formats of delivery and increasing the diversity of participation.

Conclusion

Dr. Sheree Kwong See, Alberta’s seniors advocate since 2016, delivered the concluding remarks. She assured the participants that the seniors’ advocate office can play an important role in the lives of seniors. The office helps seniors through appropriate referrals and follow-ups to ensure support and resolution. The seniors’ advocate office also provides advice to the government, for example, by highlighting both system gaps and the measures that work well. She emphasized that people can contact the office if they need any support or resolution and if they need to give feedback on any systemic issues. She acknowledged the widespread barriers that confront seniors and the need for related solutions. There need to be measures that will allow seniors to age while living in their own homes. In rural Alberta, seniors face problems of transportation. Widespread ageism makes seniors invisible and inaudible. Seniors care needs improvement. Finally, Dr See emphasized that there is a need for senior advocate offices in all Canadian provinces.

The preliminary session of the seminar and the small group presentation and discussion were summarized at end of the seminar. Participants agreed with the summation. The seniors’ advocate Dr. Sheree Kwong See asked for the seminar report to be finalized and shared at the earliest so that the wider community as well as the seniors advocate office have access to seniors’ evidence of the problems that they face on daily basis.

Acknowledgements

The organizers of the seminar are profoundly grateful to the speakers and the seniors (participants) who contributed their valuable insights and shared their experiences. Mrs

Jagjeet Bhardwaj, ICWA Board Member (Executive Committee), played a central role in the planning and execution of the seminar and in ensuring its resounding success with those who attended. We greatly appreciate the service of the volunteers responsible for the facilitation and note-taking. Please refer to [Appendix B](#) for further details.

Appendix A: Summaries of Group Discussions

During lunch the participants were asked to choose and join one of the small discussion Groups. The following pages present a summary of the small group discussions among the seniors, mostly in their own words. The groups discussed the following themes.

Legal rights of seniors in Alberta

1. Seniors' centres are crucial to prevent the isolation of seniors and to protect the rights of seniors.
2. Presently (2016), family members often live far away from each other. Thus, seniors may feel isolated and may not have family members who can advocate for their rights. This makes the need for seniors 'centres, places where seniors can communicate and interact with others, and learn about their rights, of particular importance.
3. There needs to be more information on senior rights available for senior's indifferent languages. As well, immigrant seniors need to be encouraged to learn English and English classes should be made accessible to them. As many immigrants and refugee seniors do not know their rights, they need translators to learn about their rights.
4. Many people make assumptions about seniors and their capacity, because they might have health issues. It is necessary to work against the societal perception that seniors are less deserving of services, respect, and so on, as this perception leads to elder abuse and the erosion of elder rights.
5. When seniors approach politicians, sometimes they find that politicians do not take seniors seriously and find them patronizing to seniors.
6. The city of Edmonton has created a team of staff that works in the area of senior's rights. The goal of the initiative is to build the capacity of organizations working with seniors and to help seniors feel that they have equal access to services.
7. Seniors may have issues with their finances and specifically with their will; for example, their children may pressure them to make certain financial decisions. It is important to educate seniors about their rights, but also to educate banks about the rights of seniors and the obstacles they may

- face (specifically, recognize when children are taking advantage of their elderly parents).
8. Lawyers need to be better informed about the specific concerns, obstacles, and legal rights of seniors.
 9. Often physicians can determine that a person is incompetent, and this determination is difficult to challenge. There needs to be a way to make physicians accountable if they determine that a senior is incompetent, when they are in fact still competent to make decisions for themselves.

Accessing the healthcare system for seniors

1. Participants agreed that proper healthcare is provided when a patient's unique needs are met.
2. There needs to be less red tape, which limits or makes it very difficult for seniors to access the healthcare they need.
3. More services are being privatized, which creates problems for seniors.
4. Seniors have trouble finding their way around the healthcare system.
5. Seniors need more information on home care and how it works.
6. Seniors should have access to medical education sessions so that they can have a better understanding of the healthcare system and how to use it.
7. The centralised healthcare system needs to be improved. For example, "net care" should be used so that physicians can have access to all the medical information they need about their patients.
8. The healthcare system should incorporate different types of healthcare treatment. At present it is the responsibility of patients to find a general practitioner, and each practitioner has a quota. If this quota is full, patients must find a new practitioner. This system needs to be changed as it is challenging for seniors to find general practitioners.
9. The availability of female general practitioners is low, and this can be a problem for some seniors who would prefer to have a female physician.
10. Physicians can be selective and may not choose seniors as their patients.
11. Wait times to see specialists is too long.
12. Since many people use emergencies when they don't have an emergency, there is less access to emergency rooms when there is in fact an emergency.

13. Paying 30% for prescription drugs is too costly for many seniors.
14. Learning English or having access to translators is important for immigrant seniors and their access to healthcare. Sometimes immigrant seniors are hesitant to go to the hospital if they are unable to understand the healthcare providers.
15. There is a perception in society and among healthcare workers that seniors are less deserving of healthcare. Some awareness about seniors human rights should be created among healthcare workers to challenge this perception.
16. Physicians will sometimes listen to a senior's adult children more than to the seniors themselves and this causes many problems.

Retirement and post-retirement living

1. Participants agreed that they were not prepared for their retirement. They need orientation information to be prepared for retirement.
2. Retirement is not an event which occurs only once; many people, and particularly women, start a second career or part-time jobs after retirement.
3. Compulsory retirement is against human rights, and affects women with children particularly negatively.
4. Seniors in retirement need secure incomes and government guaranteed interstates for their savings. The financial future of seniors in retirement is very dim if their income is lowered.
5. Participants felt they receive good information from the "Edmonton Prime Times", a newspaper for seniors. They also receive good information in person (but not by telephone) from SAGE (Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton). But they want more such information sessions to be organized in different parts of the city for different communities.
6. Isolation was identified as the biggest danger in retirement. Seniors in retirement must learn to fight against isolation and remind themselves that they are strong. They need to be made aware that they need and must seek social networks and senior's centres.

Financial planning for seniors

1. It is important that seniors are well informed about their finances and that their financial questions are answered.
2. The ability to communicate and receive proper information is essential for seniors to plan their finances. Therefore, learning English is very important.

3. Seniors should know that a will can be revised.
4. Making a will is very important since without it, all bank accounts and assets be frozen once the person dies.
5. A judge can appoint a public trustee or a stranger to execute the will if the will does not identify an executor of the will.
6. A will should contain clear instructions in order to avoid any conflict.
7. A will can be contested, but in Alberta it is difficult to challenge a will.
8. Endowments should be considered and made while the donor is living and is in sound mind.

Building community and social support networks

1. Having informal gatherings among seniors, at coffee shops or malls for example, is a great way to start support networks. For example, a Conversation Circle among seniors in Edmonton started as an informal gathering in a mall.
2. Having good relationships with neighbours, and having neighbourhood based activities are ways in which seniors can create support networks.
3. When seniors participate in activities, such as cooking demonstrations, they can meet others, make friends and create support networks.
4. Intergenerational activities are important and should be encouraged.
5. New Horizons will provide funding for projects for seniors (and those projects can be led by seniors).
6. Seniors who want to create support networks should be proactive, and search for and join groups or activities that interest them. Seniors should encourage other seniors to join groups and create a support network. They should also be welcoming to newcomers who join groups or activities.
7. Being nice to others, even by giving someone a hug for example, can go a long way and can help seniors feel less isolated and more supported.
8. Volunteerism is contagious; if some seniors start volunteering, often others will join too.
9. “Family is not just blood; it is also love.”

Appendix B: Institutional participants, government representatives and service providers

Speakers

- Mohinder Banga, *Councillor, City of Edmonton*
- Rod Loyola, *MLA for Edmonton-Ellerslie*
- Yavar Hameed, *Human Rights Lawyer, Hameed Law*
- Rosalie Gelderman, *Social Worker, Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council*
- Sheree Kwong See, *Senior Advocate, Alberta*
- Ruth Adria, *Founder, Elder Advocates of Alberta Society*
- Peter Wooldridge, *Senior Development Officer, Citizen Services and Program Delivery*
- Zohra Husaini, *Chair, Program Committee, ICWA Board*

Facilitators

- Roger Laing, *Executive Director, Seniors association for Greater Edmonton (SAGE)*
- Dr Reinhild Boehm, *Former director Women's Program and Resource Centre, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta*
- Celeste Nicholson, *Executive Director, Millwoods Seniors Association*
- Patrick Power, *Seniors Protection Partnership*
- Anjali Aggarwal, *Banker, ICWA Board*
- Malcolm Fast, *Chartered Accountant*

Recorders

- Miriam Thomas, *Medical Social Worker, ICWA Board*
- Fauza Mohammed, *Lawyer*
- Papiya Das, *Psychologist/ Social Worker*
- Leeba Putthenparambil, *ICWA Volunteer*
- Manal Alnajjar, *ICWA Executive Director*

Partnered/collaborating agencies

- Canadian Council of Muslim Women
- City of Edmonton
- Edmonton Interfaith Centre for Education and Action
- Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council
- Hameed Law
- Indo-Canadian Women's Association
- Mill Woods Seniors and Multicultural Centre
- SAHAARA
- Seniors association for Greater Edmonton (SAGE)
- Seniors Protection Partnership (Catholic Social Services, Today Family Violence Help Centre, Edmonton Police Service, City of Edmonton Community Services, Community Geriatric Psychiatry and Covenant Health.)
- Society of Retired and Semi-Retired