

**NOTES FROM DOWN-UNDER- AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND
ICW-CIF ASIA-PACIFIC FOURTH SEMINAR AND TRAINING WORKSHOP
HOSTED BY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF WOMEN OF NEW ZEALAND
3-11 November, 2010**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organization representing 33 nationally organized societies and 14 national members. NCWNZ has 23 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies. The Council's function is to serve women, families and the community through research, study, discussion and action. Much like its Canadian counterpart and Councils in 81 countries elsewhere in the world.

New Zealand was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. On 19 September, 1893. This day known as suffrage day was celebrated on 19 September by organizations and the Ministry of Women's Affairs. One way New Zealanders are recognized for their achievements is through memorials. Currently there are over 450 memorials registered in New Zealand. The Ministry of Arts and Culture and Heritage looks after historic graves and monuments in over 81 sites throughout New Zealand.

In my role as the newly elected ICW Advisor on Ageing, representing NCWC, I attended this conference to raise awareness about the ageing population. It is an issue whose time has come, based on the huge demographic shift in age not only in Canada but across the world. This role fits well with my previous and personal experience and I hope to share the how and the why this stage of our life cycle is in need of more education and understanding. I hope I did offer some insight. Perhaps I should not have been surprised, but I was, that I did confront some mild resistance from some of the delegates who mistakenly felt that the focus on ageing may diminish the focus on youth. This view of ageism is not unusual, in that I have experienced it many times here in Canada, and elsewhere, in the media, in the workplace, in politics, in institutions, such as health and education, for example. What is a revelation is that when I was younger it was named sexism. Now I understand it is just another ism, that needs to be met with public awareness.

But it is difficult to raise public awareness with a limited budget and few supporters. Nevertheless, I believe that together, young and older, we can gradually influence attitudes so that respect and dignity for an individual's worth is increased. Behaviour is not shaped by legislation. This became very apparent at the Elder Law symposium I attended before going to New Zealand, which I will report on elsewhere. No, it is shaped by people like you and me with a concern to make this world a better place for all ages. And we must bring the youth with us. Because they will create the leadership of the future. They need to be informed and active so that discriminatory community attitudes and behaviours change. This will not happen by accident. So we need to take every opportunity to dedicate resources to motivate an ongoing younger population to work with us for effective public awareness.

If we do not talk about ageism, if no one hears about it, how can we possibly think its an important thing to do? It makes sense to include ageism among the 'isms' because ageing is one of life's stages that we need to learn about before, during and after we enter it.

In New Zealand, and elsewhere, similar to Canada, when conversation focuses on older adults, there seems to be a kind, simple, straightforward acceptance that yes, we must have more nursing homes, more recreation centres, more palliative care, more respite care for caregivers, and more health dollars must be freed up and..and..and..

Less often is it recognized that older adults want to be accepted as thriving, energetic, skilled, interesting, experienced people who still want to participate in society in whatever capacity they choose - be it paid or unpaid work or policy decision-makers, whatever, to contribute socially, politically, culturally, whenever, wherever, should they choose to do so.

Ageism is a term first used by Robert N. Butler, M.D. in 1968 in the U.S.A. Ageism is another form of bigotry. Although ageism has received relatively little public attention, it has a significant impact on the lives of older adults both in terms of negative attitudes that older persons may face on an individual basis, and as a result of the influence that ageism may have on policies, programmes, and laws. Laws, like government policies and programmes, may be subtly influenced by ageism, and may reflect unwarranted stereotypes, attitudes and assumptions about older adults. As well, neutral law may be administered in an ageist or paternalistic fashion. People often claim, there is no problem, and yet there are daily around us, in various ways, covertly or overtly, ageist thoughts. Here are some:

Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions:

Older Persons are inflexible, resistant to change, and have difficulty learning new things;

Older Persons are chronically ill, dependent, and no longer make a contribution to society;

Older Persons are a burden on their families and loved ones, as well as society at large;

Older Persons are depressed, isolated and waiting to die;

Older Persons have declining capacity, are incapable of making responsible decisions and must be protected from themselves.

The task ahead for those of us that believe in the former and not the latter, is to raise this awareness while recognizing both realities of ageing. And to insist, all policies regarding older adults must include input from those affected; in other words, 'nothing about us, without us'.

In closing, I am reminded of Queen Elizabeth's comment when upon receiving

congratulations on her 80th birthday,
this vital, energetic, amazing leader of a vast realm said, "we all get to be 80 if we live
long enough" . What she meant is, this is a normal stage of life therefore, we are wise to
accept it and plan for it.

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December 3, 2010