

Aging in a New Land

By Rachel Aber Schlesinger

“Every act of immigration is like suffering a brain stroke. One has to learn to walk again, to talk again, to move around the world again, and probably, the most difficult of all, one has to learn to re-establish a sense of community.”

—Dr. Vivian Rakoff

Waves of immigration are associated with certain historical shifts. Since the Second World War we have seen an increase in both refugees and immigrants coming to Canada. While much attention is given to the needs of younger immigrants who are in the workforce, little is written about family members who are older when they come here.

We grow old in a society that often treats the young better than the old. We are surrounded by images of youth. Canadian mass media reflect views of how to keep looking young. Growing old is seen as negative; being young is positive. These are stereotypes of aging.

Old women face these stereotypes about aging, yet they have been influenced by “appropriate” gender roles and behavior in their own cultures. We often refer to the fact that women face discrimination based on age, on race, and on gender.

Toronto has the reputation of being a city that reflects multi-cultural “ideals.” We are no longer all young, but we do arrive here from other places and other backgrounds. Together with our belongings we pack our values, norms, beliefs and traditions. We bring with us ideas about family, marriage, socialization, friendships, and the role of the older person in this society. Sometimes we are able to unpack all of these intact in our new homes and use them with ease. At other times we find that this cultural baggage is no longer useful, or even usable.

We are all immigrants, newcomers, but

some of us travel further in the land of ideas and culture than others. Older women who come to Canada late in life still identify strongly with their native country and culture. They have had life experiences accumulated in another culture, another place and another time. In Canada, they often feel misplaced.

AGEISM

Ageism is defined as discrimination based on being old.

One way to combat ageism is to educate the young about aging, using an inter-generational approach.

An inter-generational approach is defined as ways of getting young and old together, for common goals, understanding and action. This approach is exciting because it can raise the awareness of the young to issues of aging. It can also remove some of the fear of aging. Students meet seniors and begin to think in terms of people, not statistics. These interactions can remove isolation from the old, bringing them in contact with youth. The interviews of young and old allow the generation gap to be bridged: culture is stronger when the young value it, and learn from older members of their community.

Together with several students at York University, I interviewed women between the ages of sixty-nine to ninety-four, often in their own native tongue. Twenty-two interviews were conducted, and recorded on audio-tapes. All of these women had come to Canada as older persons. The following were some of the questions posed during the audio-taped interviews:

What supports do older people need who are moving from one culture to another?

What experiences and expectations do people bring with them?

What is it about race or ethnicity that influences the aging process?

How do life events influence aging?

The interviews illustrated how life course events are influenced by the social and cultural meanings attributed to them by self and community.

The women came from eleven countries: Austria, Greece, Germany, Holland, Italy, Lebanon, Guyana, Hungary, Jamaica, Portugal and Russia. Their religious affiliations included: Buddhist, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim.

EDUCATION LEVEL

The number of years in formal schooling ranged from “no school” to “professional degrees.” Three women reported that they had no formal schooling, two reached fourth grade, and one reported proudly that she had reached “*quarto aula*,” eighth grade.

There were several reasons why many of the women had little education:

- The times — many of these women grew up in countries that were experiencing depression or wars.

- The attitudes towards education differed for men and women in some of their countries. Education was not seen as important for girls. They should be learning how to take care of a home and husband.

- Work experiences. Before getting married many of the girls were expected to work in the home, helping with large families, or working in the fields in rural settings.

- Age of marriage. Several women recounted that they were already married as teenagers, two as young as thirteen years old.

MEETING SOME OF THE RESPONDENTS

Puja was born in Guyana. She is eighty-one years old. She became an orphan when she was two. She moved in with her sister and brother-in-law, who raised her. Her sister was eight years old when she was married. Puja had no formal school-

ing, but her sister taught her to read: "Asa was my mother, my teacher, my friend, my sister."

Puja never had time for school. She was married at thirteen: "I was still a child, he was an old man. At fourteen I had my first child, and then one a year, until I had given birth to eleven children. Four died in infancy. No, I never had time to go to school."

Puja was prepared to obey her family, who had chosen her husband for her. She met him for the first time at the wedding ceremony. She is a Hindu, and her religion plays a major role in her life: "The chief duty of a woman is to maintain her 'pativato Dharma,' the vow taken by a wife to obey her husband; to worship him as a god, to serve him with heart, mind and soul."

Her husband died while she was still a teenager, leaving her with five small children. She remarried, had more children, but her second husband died as well. Older sons married, and lived with her. Eventually the sons decided to come to Canada and, as the family moved away, Puja followed. She came to Canada, looked after her grandchildren, and was given a home. A few years ago, her sons moved to Florida. She decided to stay in Toronto. She now lives alone. She feels she has completed her chores and obligations. She now spends most of her time in religious pursuits. She values her independence: "By the grace of God I am alive, healthy, and I can take care of myself."

Irene comes from Italy. She is seventy years old. She had no education, and says she has never worked. She does not include all the years of family work, farm work, or child care work. She married at nineteen, and has four children (all of whom live in Toronto). Her nineteen grandchildren range in age from four to twenty-nine. She was thirty-nine when the first was born: "I thought I was old then, after all, I was a grandmother."

Irene feels that getting older has disadvantages. These include "the sags and the wrinkles, possible illness, poverty and loss of a husband through death." The positive parts of aging Irene noted: "You can slow down, retire, have more time for your children and grandchildren. You can teach the young, and learn about a changing world, and have more time for sex and fun and do volunteer work."

Her time now is spent in volunteer work, teaching the young to read as part of

a literacy program. She also has fears: will there be enough money, where will she live, what will she do if her husband, who is ill, dies...?

Helene comes from Greece. She was born in 1910. She had a great deal of schooling for her generation and background: she attended until grade four. Her story is different. She is the only person in this sample who never married. Due to difficult economic times, civil wars and world wars, she says "... I never met the right man. And even if I had, I didn't have a dowry. Without a dowry, no-one would marry me anyway." For seventy-eight years she never stepped outside her village. It represented the whole world to her: "We lived a sheltered life. We were poor, but it was usual. We ate all sorts of corn every day to live, while meat was a blessing and eaten only every fifteen days..."

Helene came to Canada five years ago, to live with her nephew. She was brought up as a Catholic woman and the ideas of religion influence how she views herself as a woman: "When I had my period I was forbidden to go to Church by my mother, for I was not clean, and it was a sin to take communion when I was losing blood. This was like ridiculing God."

During the civil war, Helene lost her dowry "and my virginity." Although she didn't marry or have children she did have a family. Helene raised her brother's children, and thinks of these as her own. She prides herself on having been able to survive all the years as a single woman. She still resents that the strict mores of her community kept her from marriage: "Above all, in my 80 years of life, I have never felt the love of a man, and that is what I regret"



The comments of the respondents revolved around many issues. The shared concerns included the following:

Language Issues

Older women who come to Canada find that they have little chance to learn English. Younger people can apply to language programs funded by the government. Many of these, however, are geared to people in the workforce. Most of the women in this sample were not able to speak English or to understand it. Lack of English language skills in Ontario isolates older women in the home, or keeps them within their own cultural group. One drawback of the lack of language skills is that many of the women who were interviewed felt that they would not be able to handle a crisis or know how to access support and health services: "I don't know who to call for help, or how to do it. How do I know if I can go to the clinic, how can I even tell them what is bothering me" (Helene).

Without language one can never really enter into a new culture. Too many meanings and expressions are embedded in language. Katya and I looked at each other, then she said: "I can use English for the outside (shopping, for example), but not for the inside ... for thinking, for expressing ideas, for real communication. I use the eyes and the heart, not the tongue."

Isolation

The respondents had lived within their own communities before coming to Canada; many had come from small, rural areas. They were recognized on the street. Coming to Toronto made them become doubly invisible. They knew no one and they were old. Family members are often too busy with their own lives. Older women reported feeling cut off from their friends, neighbors, and extended family members.

Change in Status of Elderly in Canada

The status of older people in our society is ambiguous. Old age is supposed to be "respected," but in reality we live in a country where many aged are poor, abused, isolated and fearful. Immigrant women

may come from a culture where, ideally, age is revered. Canadians feel that as one ages, one's status is lower in this industrialized society. An immigrant woman who has come from a culture where age *raises* status feels betrayed by the loss of position in this culture.

Role Changes: Family and Work

Women are defined in many countries by their role, according to the family life cycle. The older woman has immigrated, often as a widow, and is now dependent on family members. In her own country, she might now be independent in old age. Many older women who come to Canada care for younger family members. The senior, however, often feels that the younger members do not understand aging or issues that concern growing older in Canada: "*My children send their children to school, but they don't learn about being old ...*" (Malka).

Religion

Religion is a source of strength to these women. As one grows older, there is generally a tendency to become more involved in religious activity. For the seniors we interviewed, religious affiliation was a solution to many of their problems. Language was not an issue when they prayed in their own places of worship, and isolation was lessened by the ability to meet in Church or synagogue.

Social Services and Health Systems

Many of the respondents were most upset because they did not understand what rights and benefits were available to them. They feared illness, they didn't know where to go, how to communicate, or what was available to them.

Networks and Supports

It is harder to adjust to life in Canada if the extended family has been left behind, our respondents told us. As well, people with whom you can share memories are not here. The common base is missing. "*How can you say ... do you remember, when no-one is here who does remember? ...*" (Theresa)

On the other hand, there is less stress, and transitions are facilitated if friends come together to Canada, or if one meets

new friends. Friends help in many ways, and the respondents who had friends reported far less stress and anxiety.

Housing

Half of the women who came to Canada in the last few years already as older persons, did so to live with a child, usually a son and his family. They were resentful that the children came to Canada. If they had remained in Italy, or Greece, or Guyana, then the older family member would not have had to be uprooted. They came not really from choice, but to follow family, especially sons, to Canada.

Minority Women

Women who are of a visible minority are both more invisible and face greater hardships. They have made huge sacrifices, and are often not recognized. In many cases, both in their home country and here in Toronto, they are the ones to rear the third generation. Their function in the home is to return to child-rearing roles. These women were happy to be contributing to the household, especially if both parents were working. Yet many of them felt they were now too old; they had done it all already. This is one of the reasons some chose to move out of the family home, and live on their own as soon as possible.

The older women expressed a variety of responses to aging, based on their own personal histories, when they were interviewed by students at York University.



The interaction was very important to both young and old. It illustrated to the seniors that the students were interested in what they had to say. The students realized how strong the women are: they are survivors, they adapt to change, and provide role models. While a small sample, this group made proposals that policy makers can heed.

SUGGESTIONS: FUTURE PROGRAMS AND DIRECTIONS

Inter-generational Links

1. Making music together. One respondent belongs to a chamber music group, made up of musicians ranging from seventeen to eighty-one years of age. Other examples of music, a common language that needs no E.S.L. classes, are joint choirs (such as the Interlink program).

2. Oral history taking. A great deal of interest is given to the taking of oral histories. It is vital that people are enabled to communicate in their own language.

3. Making videos or audio recordings. Students were creative in the ways they interviewed. They recorded on audiotapes, and in some cases, on video tapes. People who use video cameras tend to record young children, but recording the aged is a valuable tool and future resource.

4. Another way to record the lives of older persons without the use of language, is to make a photo history.

Service Issues

A way to deal with uncertainty in use of social services is to create a "buddy system." This is a way to link young and old, or seniors who understand the community resources with those who need help. By linking people together, isolation is also broken, and the path is cleared for new friendships.

5. Helping each other is a major resource within older, ethnic communities. People who have the ability and the skills want to volunteer time, to keep active, and to contribute to the community. In many cases, however, this help is given informally, since few systems are set up to indicate where the need is the greatest. The informal system works well.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Women shared their past experiences and current perspectives about aging with us. A limitation of this approach must be noted. Seniors may be reluctant to share anger, guilt and frustrations with younger family members, and with strangers. Yet these feelings do exist, for a variety of reasons.

Seniors also find it difficult to admit to problem areas that are taboo, or too painful to discuss with young people (for example, incidents of elder abuse).

One conclusion is clear. We need to find ways to enhance the quality of life for older residents of Canada from every background. We need to acknowledge the strengths these seniors have, and need to understand their uniqueness.

Further Readings

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