

Older Women's Dialogue Project: Stories of Strength & Resilience

March 6, 2014 (Thursday), 9:00 am to 12:00 pm
800 Robson St, Vancouver, BC V6Z 3B7

Funded by:

Co-sponsored by:



Event Program

8:30	Registration
9:00	Welcome by Penny Bain and Andrea Rolls
9:10	Opening presentation by Professor Michelle LeBaron
9:30	Teresa's story (Polish with Interpretation by Margaret Florczyk) & Discussion
10:00	Shapiri's story (Interview by Krista James with interpretation from Dari by Latifa Fareed) & Discussion
10:30	Health break
10:45	Donna Dickison and Gertrude Pierre's stories Discussion
11:30	Closing panel Kasari Govender—update and background on the Older Women's Dialogue Project Elsie Dean—Women Elders in Action Janine Benedet—reflections on the event
11:50	Bev Pitman—Reflections and Thank yous

Why this Project?

Recently there has been much discussion in Canada of how our population is aging. However, there has been little attention to the experiences of older women. This is true even though we know:

- Women live longer than men;
- A lot of older women in our communities are surviving on very low incomes; and
- Women continue to experience discrimination and inequality throughout their lives.

There is a need to understand better the experiences of older women from diverse communities, so we can develop law reform and policy solutions that address the pressing barriers to their well-being. Women are experts in their own experience, so the starting place for this project was to talk to older women.

What did we do?

In July 2012, the United Way Lower Mainland provided the CCEL with funding for a one-year project focused on older women. The Older Women's Dialogue Project is a community-engaged research project that aims to support further work to enhance the quality of life of older women by asking older women what they need to improve their lives.

In collaboration with the West Coast Women's Legal Education and Action Fund, we organized consultation events in various geographic and cultural communities throughout the lower mainland. We held 22 consultation events in 9 different languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, Punjabi, Farsi, Dari, Polish and Russian). We met with 314 women, hearing from women in their 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s.

At each event we asked women about the barriers to their well-being in the areas of: poor treatment and discrimination; income security and poverty; legal systems, family dynamics; personal safety and freedom from abuse; housing; and immigration. Women talked about their experiences, pointing to both problems and solutions.

What did we Learn?

Older women make tremendous contributions to our communities—as mothers, spouses, grandmothers, caregivers and volunteers—and yet they face significant challenges to quality of life. Women's experiences of being older are shaped by experiences that happen throughout their lives, often things that happen when they are very young. Although there were similarities, different pressing social and legal problems emerged at each event and factors such as poverty, immigration and abuse have a huge impact on aging.

The findings of this project are recorded in the document: *Your Words are Worth Something: Identifying Barriers to the Well Being of Older Women*.

Why this Event?

The goal of this project, and this event, is to start with stories and move on to positive solutions for systemic change. For this event four older women have offered to share their stories in order to help us to better understand each other, raise awareness about the challenges that impact older women's lives, and continue the conversation about identifying solutions.

Today, we're celebrating older women and the crucial roles they play in our lives, families, and society.

Speakers' Bio

Penny Bain (Co-host) is a member of the advisory committee for the Older Women's Dialogue Project. She is a retired lawyer and former Executive Director of the BC Centre for Elder Advocacy and Support. During her career she worked for seven years as the Executive Director of the BC Institute Against Family Violence and fourteen years as a senior manager with the BC legal aid plan. In her retirement she serves on the boards of directors of BCCEAS and Women Against Violence Against Women.

Janine Benedet is an Associate Professor at the UBC Faculty of Law and the Director of the UBC Centre for Feminist Legal studies. Janine teaches in the areas of criminal law, labour law, administrative law, professional responsibility and anti-discrimination law. Her current research focuses on sexual violence against women, including prostitution, pornography and sexual assault.

Elsie Dean has been active since retirement working for the rights of elders and in particular women elders. As President of the Board of Directors of 411 Seniors Centre Society (1977) she is helping the Society develop new programs and services that will meet the needs of elders now and in the future. Elsie is a long time member of the Women Elders in Action (We*Act) Society.

Donna Dickison is a member of the advisory committee for the Older Women's Dialogue Project. She is a Stl'atl'imc Nation Elder and residential school survivor. Donna worked in a long-term facility for 27 years. She was very involved with her trade union, the Hospital Employees Union, for many years, serving as local shop steward and chairperson, with the Handicap Resource Centre, as well as in her local community. She is a member of the Aboriginal Women's Action Network. Donna has been retired for the last five years.

Latifa Fareed was born and raised in Afghanistan. She left Afghanistan as a child, due to civil war, and went to Pakistan. She came to Canada in 2006 through the family sponsorship program. Latifa has worked with international Rescue Committee for 10 years as a project manager as well as a master teacher's trainer. She now works as a school program helper in Burnaby for Immigrant Services Society, and as an interpreter and group facilitator for Afghan seniors.

Margaret Florczyk has been a counsellor at Vancouver Lower Mainland Multicultural Family Support Services since 1996. She works mainly with women and their families who are immigrants or refugees from Eastern European countries: the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia. She herself is an immigrant, and lived in a refugee camp for two years. Her personal experiences help her to understand and appreciate women's efforts to regain their dignity, self-realization and happiness.

Kasari Govender is Executive Director of West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund, which works to achieve equality by changing historic patterns of discrimination against women through public legal education, litigation and law reform. In addition, she represents the organization in interventions in equality rights litigation such as the Polygamy Reference, and was the co-author of the 2012 report entitled "Blueprint for an Inquiry: Lessons from the Failures of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry". Before joining West Coast LEAF, Kasari practiced constitutional, equality and aboriginal law.

Krista James is National Director of the Canadian Centre for Elder Law and project manager for the Older Women's Dialogue Project. Krista's work is focused on the legal and policy issues impacting older people. Her practice includes legal research, policy analysis and public legal education. She has written on topics such as abuse and neglect of older adults, family caregiving and human rights. Over the years Krista has worked with women's centres and various non-profit community organizations serving low-income people in British Columbia.

Michelle LeBaron is a professor at the UBC Faculty of Law and Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. Michelle's research and teaching interests include intercultural conflict resolution and how creativity, art and storytelling can foster belonging and understanding.

Shapiri Pashan is a refugee from Afghanistan. She came to Canada with her two daughters in 1999. Shapiri is a volunteer with the Afghan Association of BC and President of Afghan Seniors in Action, a lower mainland based group organized through the Immigrant Services Society of BC and funded by the United Way Lower Mainland. Afghan Seniors in Action is focused on combatting social isolation and creating community for Afghan seniors.

Gertrude Pierre is a Seashelt Nation Elder and residential school survivor. Attending residential school for 10 years did not hold Gertrude back. After years of healing she graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work in 2011 at the age of 65. She currently works with the Aboriginal Front Door Society and the Vancouver Aboriginal Community Policing Centre to help people in the Downtown East Side.

Dr. Beverly Pitman is currently Planner, Strategic Initiatives for the United Way of the Lower Mainland where she holds the Seniors Portfolio. She has a PhD in urban and regional planning from UCLA. At United Way, Beverly's work in the Seniors Priority Area has included the creation of 10 seniors-led community planning tables, launching CASI (Community Action for Seniors Independence), a non-medical home supports demonstration project for the frail elderly (in partnership with the Province of BC), known as Better at Home in its present configuration, and helping to put senior-friendly transportation services on the public agenda. Beverly has commissioned research on vulnerable seniors in the region, hosted two major seniors' forums, and worked to improve caregiver supports, outreach to isolated seniors, housing for homeless and at-risk seniors, and senior peer counseling. She has also introduced a dementia-friendly community initiative in the Lower Mainland together with Alzheimer's Society of BC, UBC and SFU, Fraser Health and Vancouver Coastal Health, SPARC BC and the City of Vancouver.

Andrea Rolls (Co-host) is a member of the advisory committee for the Older Women's Dialogue Project. Andrea worked nearly 30 years in provincial government providing community supervision of offenders and family court mediation and conciliation, as well as senior policy planning and advice to government on victim services, restorative justice and crime prevention programs. Andrea is also a Board member of the British Columbia Law Institute and a past member of the BC Adult Abuse and Neglect Prevention Collaborative.

Teresa Swiatczak is a 73 years old woman who immigrated to Canada from Poland in 2002. She came to Canada to help her son and his family to raise their 3 young children. As she will share in her story, she eventually had to separate from her family because of abuse, and has paid a huge price for her courage and determination.

Advisory Committee

The Project is guided by an advisory committee comprised of older women with a diverse array of expertise on gender and aging issues. The Advisory Committee members are:

Jill Hightower	Linda Light	Anne Beveridge	Andrea Rolls
Shashi Assanand	Carol Ross	Elsie Dean	Penny Bain
Hon. Justice Lynn Smith	Donna Dickison	Susan Henry	