

# WE ARE NOT ALL THE SAME

Key law, policy and practice strategies for improving the lives of older women in the Lower Mainland.

## INTRODUCTION

The Older Women's Dialogue Project (OWDP) explores:

- What are the pressing law and social policy issues impacting older women?
- What can we do to address these barriers to quality of life for older women?

In 2013, we published the report, *Your Words are Worth Something: Identifying Barriers to the Well Being of Older Women*. The report documented findings from 22 consultation events involving 312 older women from across the Vancouver lower mainland, identifying 24 barriers to well-being and 31 strategies for change in law, policy and practice.

This mini-report summarizes the second report of the OWDP, *We are not all the same: Key law, policy and practice strategies for improving the lives of older women in the Lower Mainland*. The second report reflects the experiences of 162 older women we met during 14 consultation events held in the Vancouver lower mainland in 2014-2016. The goal of this second phase of work was to reach women who were particularly politically marginalized, such as women with disabilities and Indigenous women.

## FINDINGS

### KEY ISSUE # 1: POVERTY AND LACK OF INCOME SECURITY

*"We are all a partner, a job or an illness away from poverty. All three are layered on me."*

Women overwhelmingly expressed concerns about poverty and income security at every single consultation. Many older women survive on very low incomes. As a result, they cannot afford appropriate and safe housing, healthcare, food, interpretation services, and legal assistance. Disability, caregiving, violence, and being an immigrant further impact their income.

Women identified four key barriers related to poverty:

- Inadequate pensions
- Inadequate funding for prescription medication and oral healthcare
- Unpaid family caregiving reduces pension income
- Lack of financial support for grandmothers raising grandchildren

### KEY ISSUE # 2: DISCRIMINATION, AGEISM, RACISM, AND SEXISM

*"It's not just that older women are treated poorly, but if you're older, a woman and not white, you're treated worse."*

Older women are very diverse and consequently experience different kinds of discrimination. Ageist, sexist and racist attitudes in healthcare, social services, housing and other sectors mean that older women can have difficulty accessing much needed services.

Women identified five barriers related to discrimination:

- Ageism and age discrimination
- Racism and racial discrimination against indigenous women
- Poor treatment on public transit
- Lack of interpretation for women who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Systemic discrimination against elder lesbians and queer older women living in long-term care

### KEY ISSUE # 3: LACK OF ACCESS TO ADEQUATE HEALTHCARE AND HOME SUPPORT

*“There is a gap in services. Why take an Elder away from their home when all they need is a little help (with) cleaning?”*

Lack of access to healthcare was a universal barrier. Women with disabilities require additional support.

Women highlighted two barriers in this area:

- Problems accessing physician care for women with disabilities
- Barriers to accessing appropriate home support

### KEY ISSUE # 4: VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

*“I am a two-time survivor of rape, and as I am aging I am less able to defend myself. It is always a concern.”*

Safety and abuse were a central concern shared by women at consultation events. Older women live with different fears, as they have had various life experiences ranging from residential schools to immigration.

Women identified four main barriers:

- Living with fear
- The impact of historic trauma on older Indigenous women
- Abuse and neglect by family members
- Barriers to accessing transition house services

### KEY ISSUE # 5: ACCESS TO JUSTICE

*“Cost makes the legal system inaccessible”*

Older women find it difficult to access legal representation and legal advice. Most of them cannot afford these services and do not know how to find a lawyer when they need help. Cost is the biggest obstacle to getting legal help.

Women’s stories highlighted three issues in particular:

- Lack of legal representation for grandmothers
- Lack of knowledge about options for legal assistance
- Lack of language interpretation to support access to legal advice for immigrant women

Read the full report online at  
[www.bcli.org/owdp](http://www.bcli.org/owdp).



# LAW AND POLICY STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS BARRIERS TO THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER WOMEN

- 1:** Enhance the Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement programs to ensure that senior women are not living in poverty.
- 2:** Create a national Pharmacare program to ensure that low-income seniors can afford the medication they need.
- 3:** Create a dental care program for low-income seniors.
- 4:** Amend the Canada Pension Plan to include a drop-out provision parallel to the Child-Rearing Provision that would be applicable to all years of full-time family caregiving.
- 5:** Develop a coordinated public childcare system that provides affordable and accessible care for all children in BC.
- 6:** Review Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement eligibility criteria respecting access for older immigrant women who otherwise have no financial support.
- 7:** Create a financial benefit program for kinship caregivers that will permit appropriate financial and other supports regardless of guardianship orders.
- 8:** Develop programs and activities to raise awareness within public, private and post-secondary learning environments about the positive contributions of older women to community and family.
- 9:** Undertake comprehensive public education regarding human rights, discrimination and aging with particular attention to ageism and the experiences of older women.
- 10:** Prioritize public legal education activities aimed at enhancing understanding of, and preventing, ageism and age discrimination.
- 11:** Provide BC public service staff with anti-racism, human rights and cultural competency training with particular attention to the experiences of older Indigenous women.
- 12:** Review the delivery of the Aboriginal Patient Navigator program with a view to enhancing its capacity to serve Indigenous women in the Lower Mainland.
- 13:** Provide Healthcare staff with cultural competency, human rights and anti-racism training with respect to serving Indigenous people.
- 14:** Display prominently within government agencies information regarding staff codes of conduct in relation to racial discrimination and racism that describe clearly the steps older women may take to address violations.
- 15:** Research healthcare accessibility for older women who are deaf and hard of hearing with a view to reducing barriers to service and raising awareness of existing American Sign Language interpretation services amongst healthcare staff.

**16:** Ensure assisted living and community care facility staff across BC receive training in cultural competency and respect for the human rights of elder lesbians and queer older women.

**17:** Identify and implement strategies for enforcing the rights of older people and people with disabilities to priority seating on public transit.

**18:** Conduct regular service audits to ensure that measures implemented by public bodies to address racism, discrimination and ageism are having a positive impact.

**19:** Develop a patient advocate or navigator program to provide support and assistance to older women who experience barriers to receiving timely and appropriate healthcare.

**20:** Explore models of healthcare delivery that better serve women with complex health circumstances. Two such models are the population-based payment model currently in use in a number of health practices across BC and Community Health Centres that bring together primary care physicians and allied health professionals.

**21:** Develop or enhance publicly-funded programs aimed at providing house-keeping assistance, such as meal preparation, laundry and housework, in order to assist older women to live independently or semi-independently.

**22:** Consult with older Indigenous women and band leadership in order to better understand community safety challenges and strengths from an Indigenous and feminist perspective and support older Indigenous women to be safer in their communities and their homes.

**23:** Support the printing, translation and distribution of accessible legal rights information for older women, including the handbook *The Roads to Safety: Legal Rights for Older Women Fleeing Violence*.

**24:** Fund initiatives to enable older Indigenous women, women Elders and their communities to develop locally-based and culturally appropriate programming to support healing within their communities.

**25:** Enhance support for organizations that assist older women experiencing or fleeing abuse, including transition houses, safe houses, seniors-serving agencies and immigrant-serving agencies, specifically to develop or enhance outreach to older women.

**26:** Enhance support for transition and safe houses across BC to implement practices identified in the Atira Women's Resource Society' report *Promising Practices across Canada for Housing Women who are Older and Fleeing Abuse*.

**27:** Provide sustainable funding for programs that provide legal representation to grandmothers who are the primary caregivers of children, including in-house staff lawyer positions within key community agencies.

**28:** Identify practical solutions to barriers to access to justice facing older women in BC, with particular attention to outreach strategies that have proven effective in reaching older women.

**29:** Increase the number of hours of funded legal representation in instances where an older woman who qualifies for legal aid will require language interpretation in order to communicate with her lawyer.

**30:** Provide individuals who qualify for free legal advice appointments with a one-hour appointment, as opposed to the standard 30-minute appointment, where language interpretation is required.