

Report on the Findings of a Roundtable and Survey conducted by Women's Centre for Health Matters with older women in the ACT about their involvement in the decision making aspects of service provision

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Background

The Women's Centre for Health Matters Inc. (WCHM) is a community-based organisation which has been supporting women in the ACT and the surrounding region for 20 years to improve their health and wellbeing.

WCHM believes that health is determined not only by biological factors, but by a broad range of social, environmental and economic factors known as the 'social determinants of health' - the environment and life circumstances that each woman experiences have a direct impact on her health, and in many cases, women's poor health is rooted in social disadvantage. WCHM focusses on areas of unmet need and on groups of women who experience disadvantage.

WCHM performs social research and seeks evidence based information to gain increased knowledge about the factors that act as barriers to social inclusion and which impact adversely on the health and wellbeing of ACT women, particularly marginalised and isolated women. WCHM uses this to inform policy, services and programs and to advocate for change in response to ACT women's needs so that they can achieve the highest possible standard of health and wellbeing.

From our research, WCHM has identified one of the key areas of focus for WCHM's Strategic Plan as Older Women, and our workplan aims to increase knowledge about the factors that act as barriers to social inclusion and which impact adversely on wellbeing for older women.

The ACT has one of the fastest-growing populations of people aged 60 years and over in Australia. This is expected to grow from 15.8% in 2010 to 19.6% by 2020, and to 22% by 2030. And while living arrangements for men and women up to the age of 65 years is similar in the ACT, it varies in later years, and women are more likely to live alone in their old age, due to a greater life expectancy and the experience of widowhood and divorce. Research shows that living alone may be linked to the development of depression, as well as increased isolation and reduced participation in community life.

Evidence also shows that for independence and a good quality of life, interaction with the local community is important for health and wellbeing - older women who are socially isolated tend to experience illness and poor health more often. The way in which older women are viewed by wider society, and how this is different for men, also impacts upon women's experience of the ageing process.

In the ACT, our research has also shown that cultural and family expectations of older women can impact on the ability of older women to participate in society, including expectations that older women will provide care for partners, other relatives and grandchildren. Access to transport can also significantly affect older women's ability to engage and participate in their community.

Executive Summary

The vision of the ACT Strategic Plan for Positive Ageing 2010-14 is for Canberra to be an age-friendly city, which encourages active ageing and provides opportunities for people to increase their quality of life as they age, and which ensures that organisations are accessible to older people and provides services to meet their needs.

The Women's Centre for Health Matters (WCHM) received funding from the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services Seniors Grants Program to facilitate a roundtable of stakeholders working with women in order to:

- Develop an understanding of the issues about including older women in all aspects of service provision including but not limited to planning, participation, program and policy development and evaluation; and
- Identify strategies that could lead to an increase in the:
 - number of older women involved in decision making roles in stakeholder organisations; and
 - participation of older women in stakeholder organisation services.

A Roundtable was held to identify the capacity of organisations to provide services to older ACT women and to involve older women in their decision making and planning.

To ensure that the themes discussed at the Roundtable were consistent with those of older women in the ACT, WCHM also conducted a Survey to explore the views of and the issues for older women in the ACT.

Both the Survey and the Roundtable reinforced that:

- older women have a wealth of wisdom, skills and knowledge that can and should be utilised to improve services; and
- it is important that older women have access to information that enables them to make informed choices and to be included in making decisions about their lives, and in the planning and delivery of services for older people. (This is consistent with the findings from the ACT Strategic Plan for Positive Ageing 2010-2014 - 'the need for better coordinated information and communication emerged as the most important issue for older people.')

But overall, only 27.2% of the women Survey respondents agreed that "older women in the ACT are provided opportunities to be included in making decisions about how organisations provide services".

Some of the main issues highlighted as barriers for older women to participate were:

- being a carer was a significant factor impacting on the ability for contributing - many were caring for grandchildren and family members with poor health or disabilities. Some felt that it prevented them from volunteering their time and capacities and from being able to attend certain activities if they were not able to get respite;

- the impact of negative perceptions about older women and the lack of recognition and valuing the contributions of older women - 'Many seniors feel that they are not respected for their knowledge and skills and for their past and current contributions to the community';
- transport impacted on older women's ability to participate, particularly for those reliant on public or community transport;
- the need for more flexible arrangements in organisations for including older women; and
- the need for provision of support, training, recognition, guidance and reimbursement for personal costs/expenses.

Results from the Roundtable

Representatives of community organisations that provide services and/or information to older women in the ACT were contacted and asked to participate in the Roundtable. Fourteen participants from eight organisations participated in this phase of the project (ACT Health, ACT Mental Health Consumer Network, ACT Public Library, Tandem, Supporting Asian Women's Friendship Association, Toora Women Inc., Women's Centre for Health Matters, Women's Legal Centre and YWCA of Canberra.)

The Roundtable looked at 2 key areas:

- the issues faced in involving older women in planning, participation, program and policy development and evaluation; and
- the good practice elements that they felt were needed to ensure the involvement of older women in these activities.

The issues which were identified by the service organisations as impacting on older women's participation were:

- Personal matters such as:
 - Lack of confidence;
 - The timing of meetings of Boards etc that were not good times for carers, or grandparents with caring responsibilities for their grandchildren;
 - The difficulty for older women carers in leaving the person that they are caring for;
 - Lack of skills in advocacy;
 - The need for social contact; and
 - Health and mobility problems that some women may develop as they age.
- Financial issues including:
 - Living on a pension with a limited income can affect many aspects of participation; and
 - Some older women won't identify as being on a low income and needing some support to participate because of pride.
- Access issues, such as:
 - Lack of appropriate public transport options;
 - Buildings not being accessible;
 - Information about opportunities for older women not readily available and not in a range of formats;
 - Information about what older women can be involved in is not always readily available'
- Cultural and societal values that impact on older women and their participation, including
 - Ageist attitudes, and a culture that thinks that women cease to be useful after a certain age;
 - The ideas of older women not being listened to

- A lack of consistency in government funding to maintain services in a way that meet older women's needs; and
- The perceptions that only paid work counts, and that people who are not working are not economically contributing.
- Lack of understanding by organisations of how to adapt and what were the key issues for older women, including:
 - How to identify the barriers;
 - How to identify the activities older women might be interested in;
 - How to give enough flexibility for older women to be involved; and
 - How to overcome issues for older women being involved in evening activities, especially safety.

The best practice elements which were identified by the service organisations which would enable older women to be involved in planning, participation, program and policy development and evaluation included:

- Recognising the time and effort put in by women and reimbursing them in appropriate ways including:
 - Reimbursement for participation/involvement; and
 - Provision of support such as for transport.
- Understanding by organisations of the issues for older women, including:
 - Establishing an organisational commitment to seeking the contribution of women from a wide range of backgrounds including culture, age, and experience ;
 - Developing an appropriate culture within the organisation, including through policy and procedures; which support this;
 - Ensuring flexible approaches within the organisation for involvement which takes account of the different needs of older women including the timing of participation and amount of involvement;
 - Understanding how to identify what they can bring to the organisation and how to use the skills of different older women;
 - Understanding that some older women are isolated but still need social contact;
 - More effective marketing and communication strategies for attracting older women to participate; and
 - The organisation communicating to older women that they are valued and that their skills are wanted and needed.
- Addressing access issues, such as:
 - Skill development and training– put resources into developing the skills of women that is appropriate to their individual needs and learning styles;
 - Development of gender specific approaches; and
 - Better public transport options, including more flexible use of community buses for transport for volunteers.

Results from the WCHM Survey of Older Women

179 older women participated in the WCHM survey:

- 107 (59.8%) participants were from the 55 – 64 age group;
- 58 (32%) were between 65 – 74; and
- 14 (7.8%) participants were 75 and over.

164 women responded to the survey question “Do you feel that you are valued and recognised for the contribution that you make to your community?”

- 48.8% women answered yes,
- 34.8% answered sometimes,
- 10.4% answered rarely; and
- 6.1% were unsure.

In response to a question about the factors that made it difficult for them to participate in volunteering of the 91 women who responded:

- 60.4% reported time constraints;
- 24.2% reported caring responsibilities;
- 17.6% reported chronic or serious health condition;
- 13.2% reported financial issues;
- 13.2% reported transport issues;
- 13.2% reported lack of knowledge and information about options;
- 12.1% reported disability;
- 8.8% reported confidence; and
- 6.6% reporting mobility.

The women were asked about the barriers facing older women in the ACT in being involved in service delivery organisations. The general themes and comments relating to the barriers were:

Lack of confidence

- *Trying to break into groups that are already established and where everyone knows everyone else.*
- *Lack of power and influence.*
- *Lack of contacts/networks/confidence.*
- *.... lacking the incentive to step forward and offer services.*

Lack of awareness of older women

- *Lack of 'awareness' by decision makers in the community to seek the participation of older women in service delivery*
- *Failure to recognise the skills and expertise that are offered by older women.*
- *Lack of awareness by decision makers in organisations to value the contributions that could be made by older women.*

Lack of information and knowledge about options

- *Easily accessible information isn't readily available.*
- *Time and lack of knowledge of what is available.*
- *Being unaware of opportunities to become involved It can be difficult to find information so people give up trying.*
- *Lack of information about organisations and their needs.*
- *Lack of information about opportunities for involvement.*
- *Lack of knowledge about how to access them.*
- *Many people are not aware of the organisations that exist in the community. Often the people that are aware are not the people who would most benefit from programs nor are they the target group of programs which are offered.*
- *Lack of knowledge/information.*
- *To know of which organisations are available.*

Older women's opinions not being valued or sought by organisations

- *Service delivery organisations don't always involve the women in the planning stages. They often aren't asked what their needs are, but instead, have to accept what the service offers them which is not always appropriate and doesn't always fit the needs of the consumer;*
- *Not considered by organisations as an important group to be consulted/invite.*
- *Opinion not valued or sought by service providers.*
- *Not taken seriously.*
- *Not appreciating the experience that comes with age.*
- *Organisations not making the effort to contact women, or when they do, they do not listen.*
- *Most government services have a clear idea of what they plan to do - they may have community consultations but frequently older women feel undervalued and intimidated in this forum.*
- *Often the consultation is long, verbose, not easily accessible. Plus, older people are discounted especially women.*

Current caring responsibilities

- *Caring responsibilities within family eg older parents, grandchildren. I think the opportunities are there for involvement but as the bulk of family caring responsibilities generally fall on women there is often insufficient time for them to be involved in decision making bodies regarding provision of services especially if these involve giving a lot of ones time.*
- *Mainly I think family responsibilities eg caring for a parent.*
- *Many people in my age group are also caring for elderly parents/or and grandchildren.*
- *Carer responsibilities (grandchildren or ill spouse)*
- *Many of my peers are too busy babysitting their grandchildren to get involved in anything.*

- *Access to support when women are caring for elderly parents or grandchildren.*
- *Other demands such as family and caring for grandchildren because of the outlandish price of childcare.*

Access to transport

- *Financial and transport constraints can impact on involvement;*
- *Lack of being able to afford the transport costs;*
- *Transport is a barrier to the older women.*
- *Transport is a huge issue for many women (older and younger).*
- *Access as some buildings and community centres are not on any bus route and/or with regular bus services.*

Exclusion due to ageist, sexist or generational attitudes

- *The old 'glass ceiling';*
- *There is a prejudice against older women which classifies them as mentally lacking - stupid and forgetful.*
- *A woman past a certain age becomes invisible.*
- *Women have always struggled to obtain involvement in decision-making. It is even more difficult with age.*
- *There are many factors that actively exclude our demographic, the main one being the politics of organisations that actively exclude us.*
- *Age and gender discrimination.*
- *The ratio of men to women put some women off from volunteering.*
- *Gender equality/reduction in ageism and sexism.*
- *Unless you have power position as you are older or connections, be they family or other, it is hard to break into ACT community.*

Lack of flexibility by organisations

- *They nearly all meet in the daytime precluding employed women.*
- *Assumptions that older women don't work full time so programs or activities are at times that would suit only part time workers or retired people.*
- *Few programs offered outside working hours*

The women were also asked for suggestions on what factors would encourage older women's involvement in organisations, and following are the common themes with examples of their comments:

Promotion, information and knowledge about opportunities for involvement

- *Knowledge of what options exist for involvement, and organisations requiring assistance.*
- *Promotion, invitation and support for older women's involvement.*
- *More information - perhaps a web site devoted to this.*
- *More public face of organisation's needs.*
- *There may need to be more advertising to promote it.*

- *Publicity that is clearly inclusive and respectful.*
- *An education campaign about what is available in the ACT. There are many wonderful services but often people are unaware of them.*
- *More publicity and encouragement through media and letter drops.*
- *More advertisements, newspaper articles, just more information out there, one way or another.*
- *More information and encouragement to realise that they have the potential to make a worthwhile and much needed contribution.*
- *More awareness of what is available*
- *More information about the various organisations in local and seniors papers.*
- *Knowledge about the options available - If they were advertised, and the criteria was for older women and if local newspapers, Chronicle, Canberra Times were more prepared to include information in their pages about Women's groups.*

Advocate and increase appreciation for older women's opinions/ experiences / contributions

- *Decision makers to be more inclusive in actively encouraging older women to be participants and valued contributors to organisations in the ACT.*
- *Less reliance on physical strength, but more reliance and use of knowledge gained through the years.*
- *Respect for life knowledge.*
- *Making them feel worthwhile members of the community by accepting that they have valuable life skills to offer and that they can contribute in many ways, be it small or large.*
- *Acknowledgement of skills and knowledge that older women can bring to an organisation.*
- *Sense of their ideas and opinions being valued*
- *More recognition for what they contribute in volunteer work would be an incentive for better participation in organisations.*
- *Recognition for effort and achievements.*
- *A society that shows more recognition and value for older people, especially older women.*
- *Greater access to input to processes and practices which affect them; a sense of real contribution to outcomes.*
- *The realisation that their life experiences would be valued, they would be heard and respected, rather than patronised.*

Flexibility

- *Flexible meeting and input arrangements ie not always face to face meetings that require physical presence.*
- *Timing - catching those who prefer to engage in daytime activities whilst still acknowledging that some women have other restrictions on their time.*
- *Location, hours of operation, safety, group size.*

- *Meetings after 5pm.*
- *Not having to commit on a regular basis.*
- *Flexibility. Most women I know in my age group are involved with family in particular grand children.*
- *Having meetings at times that suit women's needs ie not at meal times*
- *Many organisations do not account for women being at work.*

Providing support to older women to engage

- *Understanding of issues that often come with older age and actively supporting older women to engage (eg: financial hardship, difficulties in travel - driving, caring for family members with disabilities).*
- *Reimbursement of expenses.*
- *Respite care.*
- *Transport, and assistance with caring responsibilities.*
- *Paid transport (for older women who survive on the Age Pension) and activities which do not require a substantial financial cost.*
- *Provision of transport.*
- *Easier transport and access to meeting places at local suburban levels*
- *Available transport and easy parking.*
- *A bit of training to increase confidence in their ability to be involved.*

Personal and gender sensitive approaches to get women involved

- *Women respond best to a personal approach, so maybe a campaign in which a person who is involved approaches at least one other woman and invites her to join their activity/organisation.*
- *To have open days or such advising women what the different organisations have to offer.*
- *Being invited to participate.*
- *Someone to support them by going along with them for the first couple of visits to the organisation/group.*
- *Mentor/buddy for first few weeks in new organisation. access to updating skills and professional development or other skill building opportunities at low cost.*
- *Assurance of a welcoming environment, where effort is made to include new participants, existence of a 'buddy' system for new group members.*
- *Profile local female leaders once a month in the local paper – making women visible, inclusive of women, identify women's interests, and what are issues.*
- *Have an 'underboard' – where women (and others) can be trained to the big board table.*
- *Ask older women to evaluate programs designed to increase their representation.*

Conclusion

The findings from the WCHM Roundtable and Survey have shown that older women can face particular barriers and disincentives to participating in decision making about how services are delivered (such as involvement in planning, participation, program and policy development and evaluation).

The barriers can be characterised as stemming from a range of areas:

- older women's perceptions and attitudes (such as confidence, and a perceived lack of knowledge and skills),
- personal commitments (such as work and family obligations) which created some limitations;
- practical barriers (such as transport, health, finances);
- cultural barriers (ageist, sexist or generational); and
- the policies and practices of organisations themselves).

The key strategies which the older women and service providers identified as possible options for removing the identified barriers, and which require further exploration, can be summarised as:

- *Promotion about the opportunities for involvement in the ACT* - so that older women can gain information and knowledge of what options exist for involvement, and organisations require assistance and what they entail;
- *Demonstration of a clear commitment to involving older women* - through clear statements, promotion and support for the involvement and contribution of older women from a wide range of backgrounds including culture and experience;
- *Informal rewards and recognition* - acknowledgement and appreciation of the contributions of older women;
- *Organisations need to ensure their policies and practices are flexible enough to attract older women's participation* – for example fitting the needs of the volunteers and their skills and not just the organisation; tailoring time specific, short term and flexible opportunities for including older women which takes account of the different needs of older women;
- *Leadership and management practices are in place that show a commitment to access for older women* - including from ACT government;
- *Recognising the time and effort put in by older women through consideration of reimbursing them in appropriate ways* including:
 - Reimbursement for out of pocket costs involved in the participation;
 - Respite care; and
 - Provision of practical support such as for transport.

- *Support for organisations to ensure their policies and practices are flexible enough to attract older women to be involved*
 - Developing an appropriate culture within the organisation including through policy and procedures which support this;
 - Understanding of what older women can bring to the organisation and how to use the skills of different older women;
 - More effective marketing and communication strategies for attracting older women to participate and how to communicate to older women that they are valued and that their skills are wanted and needed.

- *Addressing ACT wide access issues, such as:*
 - Skill development and training– put resources into developing the skills of women that is appropriate to their individual needs and learning styles;
 - Development of gender specific approaches across ACT services; and
 - Better public transport options, including more flexible use of community buses for transport for volunteers.

- *Consider opportunities within the ACT for alternative means of involving older women in consultations and decision making* – and which would facilitate better involvement of those older women who situation does not allow them to participate in face to face opportunities.