

Women's Careers after 40 and 50 – Budapest, 20 November 2010

Beijing and beyond: A personal and professional journey

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Check against delivery

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, it is a great pleasure to be here today, 17 years after my first and only visit to Budapest. Then, I was embarking on a journey of discovery, of personal and professional development and fulfilment which has taken me from a vibrant, diverse, although deprived, community of South East London, to involvement in policy making at European and international level. Even though we work at international level, we live our lives locally and for *OWN Europe* it is always important to remain rooted in the community from which we come. At our meeting of the *Older Women's Network, Lewisham* last Wednesday my colleagues asked me to bring you their greetings for a successful conference.

It is difficult to condense 17 years into 15 minutes. So I can only reflect on some of the milestones during that journey.

Start of the journey

The first, of course, is why start on the journey at all? In 1990, I moved from managing a social work team in a local hospital to the Chief Executives' policy team as Equalities Officer for Older People in the London Borough of Lewisham. I found myself working with committed politicians and active, engaged older people, keen to ensure that local services met their needs as well as the needs of the whole community. We were not just talking about health and social care, but also about street lighting, the state of the pavements, refuse collection, leisure services, education, local employment opportunities, and housing. However, I noticed right from the beginning, that it was almost all men round the discussion table, although the majority of older people in Lewisham were women.

In my interview for the job I had mentioned the European Year of Older People in 1993 and the importance of sharing the innovative practice in Lewisham across member states. In taking this forward, it was agreed that a project giving the direct voice to older women about their issues would strengthen their voice

locally. as well as explore the differences in their lives compared with that of older men.

Little did I know, when I rang Eamon McInerney at the European Commission late in the afternoon in December 1990, that that morning he had been reading research stating explicitly that the issues and challenges for policy makers of an ageing population were those of older women. In the afternoon he attended a meeting of the Commission's advisory group of European older people's organisations whose representatives were all men. So when I rang saying I wanted to propose a project *with and for* older women, he was full of encouragement. Indeed, we had the budget agreement in three months from application.

Older people are not homogeneous

But why older women? What are our issues – are they really that different?

Someone once characterised the differences in ageing between men and women as *'men fall off their perch, while women linger with chronic conditions'*. Certainly the figures show this: for example, in the United Kingdom (UK), women still outlive men by over 7 years. We know that older women are poorer than older men. Child care and other caring responsibilities means labour force participation is less than men, duly reflected in pension entitlement. Not all women marry or remain married, and single older women are amongst the poorest poor.

Age discrimination in employment is still common: women and men over 50 are seen as a liability, even when we know they are often better, more reliable workers. Access to training and development after 50 is also very variable.

There is still considerable job segregation in the UK, with women more often represented in lower paid and part time jobs. In research to challenge the gender pay gap, the UK Equal Opportunities Commission showed that a single, never married woman, doing a job of the same status as a man would earn £250,000 less over her lifetime. For a married woman with children it would be double that.

We also know that if you are black or from an ethnic minority or are disabled, the discrimination experienced will doubly impact on your life.

Access to health and social care is also an issue. During one of our project visits to Ireland, we heard an example from someone who having broken her ankle was not offered follow up physiotherapy, yet the young woman next to her in the clinic was. As a former journalist for Irish radio there was no way she was going to let that pass and insisted on treatment.

As well as the challenges of differences of language, political processes and culture, we were able to share our experiences across all of these issues and make recommendations for policy development and change to improve our situation. We know that evidence from our work influenced the development of the older age section of the 1994 EU white paper on social policy. We also had a lot of fun together and have made firm friendships which last to this day.

At the end of our project in March 1993, we were invited to run a workshop on older women's issues at the Copenhagen and Malmö Conference of the European Federation for the Welfare of the Elderly (known as EURAG). There a Finnish lawyer mentioned the importance of older women's issues being reflected at the 4th World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in 1995. I came home determined to do this, but had no idea how to make it happen. Imagine my surprise – and delight – when the following week I read a small notice in a European journal on ageing advertising a workshop in Budapest run by the American Association of Retired Persons. This was to prepare for the 4th World Conference on Women.

Understanding how the UN system worked, developing our project into a formal network, seeking UN accreditation for Beijing, influencing the official process towards the World Conference, networking and making new alliances is a story for another day. Suffice to say my colleague, Irene Hoskins, (Chair of the Geneva NGO Committee for the United Nations Committee on the Status of Women, (CSW)) was involved at the very heart of arrangements, so I could not have had a better mentor.

At Beijing, the NGO community had an older women's tent for the first time at a UN conference. There we met older women from Japan, China, Australia, Latin America, North America and Africa. More friendships were established which have become the bedrock on which we have built our future work. We lobbied the government delegates for language to reflect older women's issues and had the magic words 'women of all ages' enshrined in the text. Everything in there was about us, too.

Disappointingly, not much changed over the subsequent years despite the active lobbying of country missions to the UN in New York by members of the NGO CSW *Sub Committee on Older Women* known to all as SCOW.

Older women still remained invisible in regional and UN discussions. We found that we had to repeatedly spell out to governments, officials in the relevant UN departments and other NGOs, just exactly what taking a gender and life course perspective in policy making means. That is, to recognise that, although we have much in common with men and younger women, there are critical areas in our

lives where our experiences are different. It is the cause of these differential impacts that need addressing so women can be free from discrimination in later life, and services developed to address the current discrimination experienced by today's older women.

Mainstreaming gender and age

My next period of reflection relates and takes me back to my work in Lewisham from 2000. A more integrated approach to equality work (and reductions in staff) found me taking responsibility within the Council, not only for age, but gender and race issues as well. In addition, the concept of gender mainstreaming and carrying out equality impact assessments were being developed by national and EU equality bodies.

These concepts were not new, but in the UK we had an added impetus as our new equality legislation required public bodies to promote race, gender and disability equality and not simply take legal remedies if discrimination could be demonstrated. We learned that, by carrying out equality impact assessments across public policy, we could identify if a group was likely to be affected negatively by that policy, then consider what changes could be made to mitigate such an effect, or change the policy if it was found to be directly discriminatory.

To do this we were required to know and understand the local and national data on the area in question, for example, public housing; employment policies, we had to talk to local women and men about their experiences of our services and, using all of this information, make sure that what we wanted to do in our policy or service delivery helped to promote gender equality, as well as race and disability equality. In Lewisham, due to our politicians' commitment to older people, we also involved older people looking at age discrimination. This work ensured equality action plans being systematically integrated – that is, mainstreamed – into the annual business planning cycle of the Council. It became everyone's agenda – not just of specialists like myself.

Taking the learning from this action at local level and in collaboration with colleagues in SCOW, we made a proposal to the organisers of the 2005 International Federation on Ageing Congress held in Copenhagen. We wanted to carry out an equality impact assessment of the presentations at the Congress and were delighted when the organisers accepted. We asked participants to complete a short questionnaire about the sessions they attended – was the data used in presentations broken down by sex and age? Did the presenters acknowledge that the experiences of men and women might be different? Were any differential policy recommendations drawn out?

In looking at over 100 returns we found little gender analysis. Most of the academics at the conference did not seem to consider it important even to think about it! It is not surprising that policy makers do not consider gender issues when looking for evidence on which to base their policy development when research is not consistently considering these issues.

Taking that experience back to SCOW members in New York, my colleague, Judy Lear, Co-Chair of SCOW debated how their Committee could bring the issue to the notice of the UN system. It is this work that becomes my final reflection today.

Mainstreaming older age in the UN system

Some of you will know about the very important *UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women*, known by its acronym CEDAW. Every four years, governments that are signatories to the Convention are expected to report progress on their work to eliminate discrimination and promote equality for women. They do this to a committee of experts nominated by, but independent of, governments and drawn from countries across the world. NGOs play a key role in this process as they, too, are invited to provide the Committee with a Shadow Report, identifying where they think progress is still to be made, and suggest questions for the Committee to ask the Government when they are 'examined' on their report. At the end of their deliberations, the Committee will make recommendations for future action.

SCOW felt that this process could be used to good effect if they could interest Committee members in issues facing older women. They had been trying to do this via meetings with the country missions to the UN in New York, without much success: it was time for something different.

Each summer in New York when the CEDAW Committee is in session, the CSW NGO Committee hold a reception for the experts. In 2008 all the SCOW members attended with labels round their necks – *Ask me about older women* – it certainly caused some raised eyebrows but, more importantly, captured the interest of the Committee members – in particular Ferdous Ara Begum, the distinguished expert from Bangladesh. By November that year at their session in Geneva, she had sufficient interest from her colleagues to hold a lunchtime round table discussion on older women supported by the NGO community, including *HelpAge International* and the *Older Women's Network, Europe*.

Following further debate among her colleagues, at the end of the session, the Committee agreed to develop a General Recommendation on older women. This is a recognised process by which the Committee can draw the attention of States

parties to a particular issue. By looking at the articles of the Convention through the lens of an older woman, this General Recommendation would demonstrate how the Convention applies to them. Once such a Recommendation is passed, there is a strong expectation that States Parties' reports will include and address the issues highlighted as they apply in that country. If not, the government can expect questions to be asked.

I was at that first historic lunchtime meeting, acting as rapporteur.

The General Recommendation was the focus of OWN Europe's biennial meeting in Amsterdam the following year where we were delighted to welcome your president, Andrea Ferenczi. Andrea was able to give us valuable insights into issues of gender and age discrimination in employment from a Hungarian perspective. Working with the CEDAW Committee distinguished expert from the Netherlands, we were able to develop an action plan for the following year: to comment on drafts and bring examples of discrimination from across the region to the notice of the Committee.

I am delighted to announce that the General Recommendation on older women was adopted on 19th October this year. To have such an important document delivered in such a short time is unheard of in UN processes, and a sign of the commitment and hard work of the Committee and the support of the NGOs across the world.

We have managed to mainstream age into the Convention.

Conclusions

But the journey does not end here. Our job is to hold our governments to account for their responsibilities under the Convention for women of all ages. Indeed, the UK is due to report to the Committee next year, and I am working with NGOs across the gender and age sectors to present a shadow report on the situation of older women in the UK.

The work of OWN Europe will be to encourage NGOs across Europe to use the General Recommendation to influence not only their government reports but also the country shadow report.

So our journey will continue to be about those issues I raised earlier – issues that your organisation is addressing for women in Hungary. That is, ensuring that women have access to decent well-paid jobs, access to training and development in order to respond to technical developments and a rapidly changing economy. It is about closing the gender pay gap that impacts on the

value of our pensions and our ability to remain engaged citizens. Finally, it will be about ensuring access to affordable, reliable services to meet our needs in old age.

We are delighted that you have joined us in this next part of the journey.

Thank you.