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Research - From Sweet to Soul : Understanding Elder Neglect through the lens of Familial Development

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From Sweet to Sour :

Understanding Elder Neglect through the lens of Familial Development



Social neglect of "elder neglect"

Technological advancement encourages communication and exchanges between the East and the West which break the barriers dissecting the two cultures. Traditional Chinese values such as "elder respect" and "elder care" have undergone transformation throughout the process of cultural transfusion, and in many cases "individualism" prevails.

In modern Hong Kong, incidents of elder abuse have been reported quite often, and it has evoked social concerns when an increasing trend is observed. However, elder neglect is often difficult to detect and since there is no clear definition and measurement in what could amount to "elder neglect", there is a general lack of attention paid towards this phenomenon.



"Elder neglect" is an un-precautioned transitional process in which the loving bond between family members declines and develops into a dangerous and abusive relationship. It is of our utmost interest to investigate into the reasons and factors leading to elder neglect as well as its transformation into elder abuse, such that preventive strategies can be suggested prior to the event of any familial tragedy.

In response to the griming situation of elderly wellbeing, the Family Council and Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong SAR Government have commissioned APIAS to undertake an explanatory study of neglect among elderly in Hong Kong from a family perspective in April 2010.

One city, two modes of marriage

Interviews have revealed that there are generally two modes of marriage in Hong Kong — "ordinary marriage" between mainlanders who come to Hong Kong as immigrants or refugees, or between Hong Kongers in 1940s to 1970s; and "cross-border marriage" as a product of the 1980s and the 1990s, with Hong Kong male residents marrying mainland female residents, where many of such marriages involved significant age differences — which reflect the cultural and personal factors leading to elder neglects.

The differences between Hong Kong and the Mainland in terms of culture, society and economy lead to misunderstanding and fanciful thoughts, such as: Hong Kong male is rich, knowledgeable and polite, while female from the Mainland is gentle, submissive and



obedient. The matching of these needs between Hong Kong male and Mainland female has encouraged marriages across the border.

Both husband and wife lived in harmony at the beginning when they were separated by the border where they only met occasionally. Yet after their reunion in Hong Kong, they found great gaps between their expectations and the reality, and dissatisfaction and frustration overhauled the wife.

At first the wife, still unfamiliar to her new surroundings, would submit to the situation as she has not developed her own socio-economic independence. However, when the husband loses his working ability along with his financial means, exacerbated by his age and deteriorating health, the economic crisis most often becomes the direct trigger to the breaking up of familial relationships, leading to elder neglect and even elder abuse.

As in "ordinary marriage", the couples usually married late at an average of 30 years old. They got married normally because of pressures from family and peers or for economic reasons, such that there is usually a lack of love between the couples.

Due to various social and political circumstances, many parents and their children experienced a life stage living apart. The lack of communication between family members often leads to cold and alienated relationships, and the subservient tradition of the quiet women paved way for many wives to become submissive towards the maltreatment of their husbands.

The mother when loses her financial means after the passing of her husband, often depends on her children for financial and daily support further leads to familial conflicts. Children, having grown up in a "functional" family where a family member's value is evaluated upon his or her contribution. The aged mother is often abandoned, neglected or even abused as she loses her "functionality" within the family.

Swift actions, less tragedies

It is identified that elderly experiencing neglect or abuse usually have limited financial means and live on Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA). However, health crisis does not necessarily contribute to the burdening of elderly's family members, but can become an opportunity for strengthening family cohesion.

To do this, APIAS suggests adopting policies with a public health approach, which focuses on early prevention through education and detection, timely intervention on relationship enhancement and network building, and rehabilitation upon intervention through mediation and counseling.

As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. Awareness of the seriousness of elder neglect must be raised while swift actions must be taken by the Government, the community and individuals in tackling the occurrence of elder neglect.

APIAS, in collaboration with Women Service Association, organized a Community Forum on Elder Neglect at Kwai Tsing Theatre on 29 March 2012 in an attempt to draw social attention and to stimulate discussions on the seriousness of elder neglect. The forum invited experts in social gerontology, frontline social workers, family caregivers as well as abusers to enable a more inclusive understanding on the occurrence of elder neglect and to develop community networks as a preventative measure against further elder abuse.

