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Seminar – Multi-pronged preventives to curb elder neglect : reconstructing social justice and harmony

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Group photo of guests, includes:

Mrs. Anna Mak Chow Suk-har, Deputy Director (Services) of Social Welfare Department (Centre), Prof. Alfred Chan Cheung-ming, Director of APIAS (Right 4), Ms. Au Yeung Po-chun, Chairwoman of Women Service Association (Left 4), Ms. Yip Fung-ye, Vice-chairwoman of Women Service Association (Left 1), Ms. Chow Yuk-hing, Committee Member of Women Service Association (Left 2), Ms. Anna Tang King-yung, Wan Chai District Councillor and Accredited Mediator (Right 3), Mr. Chan Kowk-ho, Assistant District Social Welfare Officer of Tsuen Wan and Kwai Tsing Districts (Right 2), Wallace Tsang Wai-hung, Director of Third Man Service and Crisis Intervention Service of Harmony House (Right 1), Representative of elder abuse victims, Mrs. Poon Siu-wah (Left 3).

Multi-pronged Preventives to Curb Elder Neglect: Reconstructing Social Justice and Harmony

There has been raising concerns towards elder abuse, which mainly focused on the physical and psychological damages inflicted onto the victims. However, to pay little attention to or to take lightly of elder neglect which usually marks the onset of elder abuse will only result in its escalation into more severe abusive behaviours if the situation continues. In order to prevent the situation from worsening, how should we understand the development of familial relationships? How can we early detect familial crises before they happen? How should we intervene at an earlier stage and help mediate the relationship between the abuser and the abused?

In response to the public outcry over the issue, the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Government commissioned APIAS to conduct a research on elder neglect in Hong Kong from a family perspective in April 2010. APIAS organised a Community Forum on Elder Neglect at Kwai Tsing Theatre on 29 March 2012 in an attempt to draw social attention towards elder neglect. The Seminar has successfully gathered prominent figures from the community and made constructive discussion over the issues.

Elder Neglect and Abuse Cases Rebound in Kwai Tsing District

"To live a peaceful late life" is regarded as a kind of blessing within the Chinese culture, yet many senior citizens cannot enjoy their late years due to various reasons. Even worse, there is a significant number of them fall victim to elder abuses and spend their remaining years in misery. In order to raise the public awareness towards elder neglect and elder abuse, APIAS has partnered with Women Service Association to co-organise the "Elder Neglect Seminar" as held in Kwai Tsing Theatre on 29th March, 2012. Through the sharing from experts in social gerontology, government representatives, frontline social workers as well as elderly carers, the problem of elder neglect is dissected from various perspectives.

One of the reasons of choosing Kwai Tsing District as the debut of our seminar series is that Kwai Tsing is one of the districts

with the most occurrence of elder abuse. Citing statistics from the Social Welfare Department, Mr. Kwok-ho Chan, Assistant District Social Welfare Officer of Tsuen Wan & Kwai Tsing Districts pointed out that the number of reported case of elder abuse in Hong Kong has dropped significantly from the peak of 647 in 2008 to 319 in 2010. However, the figure has risen to 368 in the previous year with an increase of 15.4%. Within the three years from 2009 to 2011, abuses upon elderly in Kwai Tsing District alone have contributed to 7.7%, 8.8% and 12.8% respectively of all cases of Hong Kong. In terms of the number of reported case, the District which ranked third in Hong Kong in 2009 has jumped to the top for 2010 and 2011. For two consecutive years Kwai Tsing have the most reported cases of elder abuse in Hong Kong, considering also the fact that there may be more undiscovered and unreported cases for whatever reasons, the wellbeing of the elderly in the area is worth worrying. In the same district, nearly four-fifth of all elder abuses are inflicted by family members and cases with partners of the elderly as abusers add up to 65% of the overall figure, of which it suggests that familial relationship is crucial to the physical and mental health of the aged. By tracing the changes in relationship amongst family members, we can then understand the factors leading to elder neglect and elder abuse.

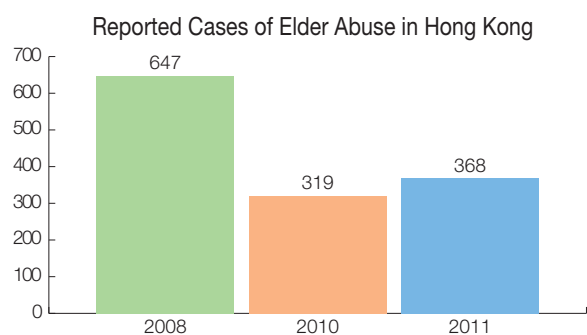


Figure 1: A rebound of elder abuse cases in HK is observed. (Data: SWD)



With luck, the district administrative body has noticed the seriousness of the situation. With the professional assistance from frontline social workers, cases known by the government are appropriately dealt with. They have also joined hands with District Elderly Community Centres and Neighbourhood Elderly Centres to actively contact and identify elders in need of services. Through community education programmes such as "Pilot Neighbourhood Active Ageing Project - Caring for Elders", not only a better understanding of elder abuse in the community can be fostered to promote a culture of elder-caring, it is also the wish of the pilot programme to discover and refer potential cases to relative units as soon as possible for further actions. By launching a series of communal campaign, elderly are educated the proper way to get along with their life partners while recreating the norms of elder respect, filial piety as well as neighbour care, such that a good atmosphere of elderly care can thus be advocated and the pressure of elder caregivers. In spite of multilateral inputs from the government, their effectiveness is still questionable.

Ms. Po-chun Au-yeung, Chairwoman of the Women Service Association, pointed out that even though the social status of women nowadays has been proliferated, but they are still being stereotyped as family caregivers and such an image is deeply rooted within the society. Apart from taking care of their families, women are expected to work in order to supplement family expenses. While the society encourages women to seek employment, not much effort have been seen to ensure a more even distribution of housework amongst family members, and as a result women with jobs have to bear double burdens. If they failed to channel their pressures, emotional problems may arise and they may become abusers for some extreme cases. According to Mr. Wallace Wai-hung Tsang, Director of Third Man Service and Crisis Intervention Service, Harmony House, quoting a survey conducted by the Harmony House, there has been an increasing trend in the number of female abuser. Furthermore, under the current circumstance where inequality between men and women still exists, more female are found amongst the low-income and less-educated group. Lacking financial means, they are more vulnerable towards elder neglect and elder abuse.

Changes in social and familial structures challenged traditional values of filial piety

How did structural changes in family lead to elder neglects or elder abuses? Prof. Alfred Cheung-ming Chan, Director of APIAS, attempted to dissect the problem from the aspect of social gerontology. As mentioned before, elder abuses in Hong Kong have become more salient in recent years. Those abused are mostly female with an age range from 60 to 64, who usually become the victim of their partners, children or in-laws. There are also cases where the abuser are the elders' carers, housemaids or neighbours. In 2002, Social Welfare Department has

established Working Group on Elder Abuse which received 110 cases within 18 months but wherein 80 of them refused neither assistance nor intervention. This has shown that Hong Kong is entangled by the traditional Chinese way of thinking which is to keep face by preventing scandals within one family from leaking out, that they think by being submissive and evasive any matter will fade out eventually. As a result, since many older persons chose tolerance over seeking help, the officially announced number of elder abuse cases is only the tip of an iceberg and the situation is not optimistic.

Within the framework of traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism is a deep-rooted ideology. Having "filial piety" as social norm, behaviours of elder respect and caring are considered as meeting moral standards. The old society had also endowed the aged with values of wisdom and authority, that they were feared and respected by the younger generations. Thus they can become the head of household while earning a high social status. However, as western culture particularly individualism transfuses into the border, traditional Chinese values are diluted and now exert limited influence over the people. The inheritance of traditions has been cut off, that concepts of elder care and respect are gradually disseminating. Without the moral constraints, cases of elder abuse have become more frequently seen.

As technology advanced, life has been made easier and more independent as its being increasingly personalized. Communication tools have been developing at an amazing speed, the distances between people especially the young and the old are increasingly broadened by this "digital abyss". When the generation of Baby Boom now enters old age, in addition to the fact that senior citizens are having a longer life expectancy due to medical advancements, the elderly population hiked continuously which heightened the demands for long term care services. The structural change of society, where extended families are replaced by nuclear families resulting the low fertility rate and high dependency ratio, has increased the burden of carers. If they cannot "depressurize", there is an opportunity that their anger will be vented against the elderly, such that conflicts, neglects and even abuses will be inflicted. Responsively, Prof. Chan considered that by the strengthening of social integrity and family function as well as the enhancement of social, economic, politic and cultural environment through multilateral cooperation, will better the development of familial relationship and improve a family's capacity and resilience in times of adversities.

Insufficient inter-institutional coordination increases pressure of frontline social workers

In the forum, a social worker addressed a phenomenon that most elderly victims of domestic violence usually seek help from outsiders. The tragedies are exposed by their neighbours or friends who cannot stand to see them suffering and report the cases to respective organisations for assistance. Yet, no matter they have been suffering from neglects, or mental and physical abuses, the victims always find it difficult to seek help and solve the problem adequately. When a social worker received a similar case as mentioned which involved a certain degree of violence that they cannot handle, they will in turn request the intervention from the police. However many elderly cannot or wish not to report the cases, that they end up unresolved. And in many occasions, the police refuse to take up cases of domestic violence as they defended that they cannot meddle with family matters, of which such cases will be rebounded to social workers. There was even once a case that a policeman admitted frankly to a social worker who accompanied a client to seek help that he did not possess the experience and knowledge to handle this





kind of cases. To turn down clients or to shed the responsibility of handling familial conflicts totally onto frontline social workers not only aggravate their pressures, but is also unhelpful towards the resolving of problems, that such situation is unfair to both the clients and the social workers. The current circumstance gives an impression that governmental departments only tend to their own business, which stir up the questions that whether the division of labour in tackling elder neglect or elder abuse is adequate, and whether the trainings for frontline personnel are sufficient. Consequently, there has been voices suggesting that we should give a higher priority to help elderly solve their problems afoot than to discuss over the division of labour.

Assistant District Social Welfare Officer of Tsuen Wan & Kwai Tsing Districts Mr. Kwok-ho Chan responded to such doubts by clarifying that the Government has been providing designate guidelines to respective departments for their dealing with incidents of domestic violence, of which such guidelines will be reviewed regularly. In the future, relative trainings provided to the police, social workers and medical professionals will be strengthened. Prof. Alfred Cheung-ming Chan agreed that resolving elder abuses would be the front burner, but he was against the over-flexibility in resolving cases as it would hamper the legitimacy and the functionality of the government institutions. Rather, he suggested that the government should rationalise the procedures in dealing with domestic violence, while providing each departments with a more definite and detailed division of labour and orientation, such that a case can be attended to adequately at different stages as it develops. Certainly, frontline civil servants should pay attention to their service provision to see if they are subjected to senses and reasons. Institutionalisation should also be user-oriented, such that problems can be dealt with swiftly and elastically.

User-oriented approach to familial conflicts: Mediation as a better solution to cope with sensibility, rationality and legality

With a British legal background of Common Law, its spirit requires it to be absolute to ensure the fairness in every judgement. Yet, this tool has shown difficulties in many occasions dealing with the entangled family relationships. The longer the interaction and the closer the relation between men, the easier they have conflicts and confrontations. If every familial conflict regardless of their seriousness is put up to the court, the legal system will be overloaded. But if they are not taken care of, they will be like snowballs rolling and result in family tragedies. Moreover, resolving misunderstanding or disagreement between family members in court will only further aggravate the contradiction between them such that their already fragmented relationships will be irredeemable, and in many cases the elderly victims will lose their familial support. The Western legal system realised its own disadvantage and acknowledge the importance of establishing a more user-oriented system, hence mediation was introduced as a binding but yet milder solution outside the court.

Wan Chai District Councillor Ms. Anna Tang, who is also an Accredited Mediator, has researched into the systems of

mediation. She suggested that mediation is a long tradition in China, and it can be one of the effective solutions to alleviate the tensions of elder neglect or elder abuse. As there is already Family Mediation and Parent-child Mediation established in Hong Kong, Tang proposed that cases of elder neglect and elder abuse can also be dealt with mediation. Mediation not only respects the traditional Chinese value of "harmony" and "to keep family's scandal quiet", it can also solve different levels of conflicts inflicted by misunderstanding, laziness or resentment through the social norm of filial piety from a sentimental perspective. As mentioned previously, as family conflicts are many but professional mediators are scarce, it is impossible for them to handle all cases. In order to have more manpower to intervene and to extinguish conflicts at an earlier stage, it is important to recruit and train mediators at the community level. Ms. Tang also pointed out that the mediation system is not referring only to the mediation process, but also the cooperation amongst different social sectors in discovering, identifying, intervening, and pursuing the case. To reach a satisfactory solution, the system also requires the setting up of a communication mechanism to provide timely assistance to recessive victims of domestic violence, the monitoring and assisting in the implementation of reconciliation agreement, and the streaming of cases unresolvable by mediation to corresponding institutions or organisations to follow up.

The prevention of elderly neglect requires cross-section cooperation in society

Parent-teacher association members of secondary and primary schools had expressed their concerns in the seminar over the lack of an elderly-respecting culture in society, where they criticised that the current civil education and family education have missed out the moral teaching to youngsters. Without the regulation of filial piety, not to mention the sharing of the responsibility of elder care between families and the Government, cases of elder neglect and elder abuse will continue to rise in number. As Kwai Chung District was one of the epicentres of elder abuses, that they urged the Women Service Association serving the district to intensify their frontline works with regard to this aspect. The Chairwoman Ms. Po-chun Au Yeung while promising to continue serve actively the household in Kwai Chung, she also explained that their Association has always helped in the prevention and intervention of domestic violence, and has assisted in the remediation of broken family relationships. They will also actively cooperate with the regional government institution to reduce the occurrence of elder abuse. Prof. Alfred Chan has also pledged to exert his influence in the community through research and education.

In dealing with elder abuses, APIAS has for long devoted in identifying the crux of problems, providing trainings for organisations and frontline workers, and evaluating current policies and services and hence providing suggestions for enhancement, where a multi-pronged strategy is adopted to provide targeting solutions from the perspectives of social and organisational structure, that a harmonious and caring society can thus be built.