Conference Report

International Longevity Centre Global Alliance Conference ‘Human Rights in an Ageing World’

16th October 2007, London

Longevity and the growth of ageing societies is changing the global demographic. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights will itself be 60 next year, and in this conference the International Longevity Centre (ILC) explores what changes are needed to uphold the rights of older people in an ageing world.

In the keynote address, Why do we need Human Rights in an Ageing World, Baroness Sally Greenwood (Chief Executive, ILC-UK), outlined concerns that older people are still not experiencing equality of opportunity, access, health and social care compared to other groups facing discrimination based on race, gender, disability or sexuality. There is a sense of ‘age blindness’, a feeling that discrimination based on age is still not featuring highly on the human rights agenda.

The conference welcomed the launch of the ILC report: Human Rights in an Ageing World, Perspectives from around the World [1] which coincided with the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights and the recent creation of Equalities Minister. The hope is that under this new policy we will have the opportunity to attend to all aspects of discrimination at all levels of our society. Maximising the potential of older people by securing better access and more opportunities to contribute, could change negative perceptions. Older people would be valued rather than perceived as a burden.

The second session, Practical Perspectives on Using Human Rights for Older People, had speeches by Katie Ghose (Director, British Institute of Human Rights), Sylvia Beales (Policy Manager, HelpAge International), Karen Monaghan (Human Rights Lawyer, Matrix Chambers) and Monica Ferreira (President, ILC-South Africa). The speakers took a wider look at the issue with examples of human rights abuses occurring to older people in the United Kingdom and the serious degradation faced by some older people in developing countries.

Again, emphasis was not only given to the importance of policy change but also to enforcing policy that already exists. By empowering older people to realise their human rights as enshrined in the Human Rights Act (HRA), issues such as dignity, the right to family life and autonomy could be put at the centre of their care planning. The HRA could be used to effect change, whether it is to encourage British care home managers to positively promote the dignity of older residents, or to force international authorities to act when older people are marginalised or denied even their most basic rights, such as reported by HelpAge International.

In the next session, Robert Butler (Chief Executive, ILC-USA), Francis Butler (VP, British Institute of Human Rights), Alex Kalache (Director, WHO Ageing and the Lifecourse Programme), Shigeo Morioka (President, ILC-Japan) and Suzanne Wait (Director of Research, ILC-UK) lead a discussion on Older People as a Protected Class: Desirable or Feasible in Theory and Practice.

Older people are already a legally protected class, and we have shown that as a society we do seem to need laws to tell us how to treat people so that our elders are not discriminated against. Such as the European Union (EU) directive which protects the employment rights of elderly people. Further, legislative reforms such as bringing privately run care homes under the scope of the HRA, or putting a duty on public authorities to increase opportunities for older people would improve older people’s rights even more. Such law reforms would further reinforce the idea that older people are a separate group who require particular protection, but this protection is needed and if achieved would benefit all levels of society.

In New Opportunities and Risks of Age Discrimination and Inequality, Ian Pearson (BT Futurologist) painted a very different picture of the needs of older people. After the morning session where we learnt about elderly women being denied pensions and health care in Bangladesh, it was difficult to hear about virtual realities where users could take the form of super models described as a human right. Some more practical applications of technology were given by Leonie Vlachos (Manager of Digital Inclusion, Age Concern) and Monica Ferreira (President, ILC-South Africa). The speakers took a wider look at the issue with examples of human rights abuses occurring to older people in the United Kingdom and the serious degradation faced by some older people in developing countries.

Again, emphasis was not only given to the importance of policy change but also to enforcing policy that already exists. By empowering older people to realise their human rights as enshrined in the Human Rights Act (HRA), issues such as dignity, the right to family life and autonomy could be put at the centre of their care planning. The HRA could be used to effect change, whether it is to encourage British care home managers to positively promote the dignity of older residents, or to force international authorities to act when older people are marginalised or denied even their most basic rights, such as reported by HelpAge International.

In the next session, Robert Butler (Chief Executive, ILC-USA), Francis Butler (VP, British Institute of Human Rights), Alex Kalache (Director, WHO Ageing and the Lifecourse Programme), Shigeo Morioka (President, ILC-Japan) and Suzanne Wait (Director of Research, ILC-UK) lead a discussion on Older People as a Protected Class: Desirable or Feasible in Theory and Practice.

Older people are already a legally protected class, and we have shown that as a society we do seem to need laws to tell us how to treat people so that our elders are not discriminated against. Such as the European Union (EU) directive which protects the employment rights of elderly people. Further, legislative reforms such as bringing privately run care homes under the scope of the HRA, or putting a duty on public authorities to increase opportunities for older people would improve older people’s rights even more. Such law reforms would further reinforce the idea that older people are a separate group who require particular protection, but this protection is needed and if achieved would benefit all levels of society.

In New Opportunities and Risks of Age Discrimination and Inequality, Ian Pearson (BT Futurologist) painted a very different picture of the needs of older people. After the morning session where we learnt about elderly women being denied pensions and health care in Bangladesh, it was difficult to hear about virtual realities where users could take the form of super models described as a human right. Some more practical applications of technology were given by Leonie Vlachos (Manager of Digital Inclusion, Age Concern) and Monica Ferreira (President, ILC-South Africa). The speakers took a wider look at the issue with examples of human rights abuses occurring to older people in the United Kingdom and the serious degradation faced by some older people in developing countries.

Again, emphasis was not only given to the importance of policy change but also to enforcing policy that already exists. By empowering older people to realise their human rights as enshrined in the Human Rights Act (HRA), issues such as dignity, the right to family life and autonomy could be put at the centre of their care planning. The HRA could be used to effect change, whether it is to encourage British care home managers to positively promote the dignity of older residents, or to force international authorities to act when older people are marginalised or denied even their most basic rights, such as reported by HelpAge International.
facing older people, such as access and delivery of care, we could embed good practice in public authorities to relieve the pressures of providing all levels of care.

Older people could be central to creating a culture of care and human rights. By meeting the needs and maximising the potential of older people, different groups will benefit and better relations will be built between the generations.

KATY LADBROOK
Editorial coordinator for Age and Ageing
Email: office@ageingmedicine.com

doi:10.1093/ageing/afn001