

Helping Singaporean women age with optimism

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In 2014, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) asked 1,500 Singaporean residents aged 21 years and above to rate their satisfaction levels at three different life stages — five years ago, at present, and five years into the future. Respondents had been asked to use a scale of 1 to 5, with “1” being “very dissatisfied” and “5” being “very satisfied”. This year, we did some further analysis on these life-satisfaction findings.

We found that younger and older respondents displayed higher life satisfaction levels for all life stages in general than those who were middle-aged, defined as individuals between the ages of 40 and 60. Those in late middle-age, between the ages of 50 and 59, had the lowest life satisfaction levels.

This pattern is consistent with findings from similar surveys conducted in other developed countries. Life satisfaction levels of youths generally start out high due to their more optimistic outlook, but decreases and bottoms out in middle-age due to the stresses of work and familial commitments. Thankfully, these levels rise again after age 60 as people become satisfied with the goals they have achieved, or accept their life as it is.

Upon closer examination, however, we observed that when it came to perceptions of future well-being (or how satisfied respondents felt they would be five years later), local men and women had different patterns.

As expected, men in their 60s and above were more satisfied than those in middle-age. But this was not the case for women in their 60s and above, where their perceptions of future well-being were even lower than those in middle age, and men of the same age. Older women thus seemed to be more pessimistic of their future well-being. What could possibly account for this?

Four broad areas largely affect life satisfaction: Family and social contact, job and daily activities, income, and health. Older women today may be concerned about their lack of adequate retirement savings.

The 2015 Singapore Labour Force Survey by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) indicated that the majority of women aged 60 years and above continue to work in lower-income jobs that pay less than S\$2,000 per month.

Less-educated older women generally command lower salaries than men and younger women with similar or lower qualifications. This imbalance was reflected in the Government’s Central Provident Fund (CPF) annual report last year, where the average CPF account balance for older women aged 60 and above was about S\$20,000 less than that of their male counterparts.

This could also be due to the fact that many older women today were homemakers in their younger days. Even if they did work, it was in part-time or casual jobs. This is a problem specific to the baby boomer generation of Singaporeans and indeed, young Singaporean women are now better educated, entering the workforce at a younger age and thus in a better position to save for retirement.

Our survey data confirmed this view as our sample of older women aged 60 and above are lower educated and earn less than younger women and men in general.

Older women may also be concerned about their roles as caregivers. They are expected to fulfil traditional gender roles in Asian culture, which means being the main caregivers for grandchildren or elderly and ill members of the family.

According to the Ministry of Social and Family Development's Survey on Informal Caregiving done in 2012, caregivers of the elderly with disabilities are disproportionately female, middle-aged and older.

Research by the Children's Society in 2011 found that the main caregivers of young children aged below 18 months are grandmothers, more so than mothers themselves, probably because many women now continue working after having children.

Any form of caregiving can be demanding and stressful. This could have an adverse impact on subjective well-being. Instead of enjoying their retirement, middle-aged and older women may be saddled with caregiving duties.

Helping Caregivers

The Government's financial aid programmes, such as ElderShield and the Silver Support Scheme, are helping to address the healthcare costs and other financial concerns of senior citizens, including women. The Silver Caregivers Cooperative Limited aims to provide caregivers with the social and community support that is often missing from their lives, and this should be encouraged.

But there are still vulnerable older women — such as those who are single, or those who have been housewives their whole life and have no savings for their old age — who will need eldercare services and financial assistance.

As recommended by the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) ahead of the Singapore Budget 2015 discussion, perhaps it is time for the Singapore Government to look into providing more subsidies and support for caregiving of the elderly, young children, and persons with disabilities.

For instance, the Government could consider giving matching grants to stay-at-home caregivers if their next-of-kin tops up their CPF accounts. More subsidies could be set aside for caregivers who sign up for skills redevelopment programmes, and a more generous Workfare allowance can be allocated to elderly female employees in low-paying jobs.

These subsidies and grants should be seen as a public good as women and caregivers are often not recognised for their sacrifices in homemaking and taking care of others. The cost of these could come from the income tax rises announced last year for those in the top five per cent, which was done to fund more social spending.

There could also be more programmes organised within communities that cater specifically to promoting the well-being of older women.

For example, in an experimental study on women aged between 65 and 80 published last year, Portuguese researchers found that participating in creative dance over a six-month period resulted in the women being physically fitter, healthier, and more satisfied with life.

The British historian and politician Lord Acton once said: “To be able to look back upon one’s past life with satisfaction is to live twice.”

Indeed, studies have shown the many benefits of feeling satisfied with one’s life, including reduced risk of death and greater resilience. Thus, as Singapore grapples with the policy implications of a rapidly ageing population, it would be useful to provide residents — particularly older women — with a wide range of options to promote healthy living and a sense of optimism in their twilight years.

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