
Reaching Out to Europe's Older Minorities

by Harry Mertens and Helena Scott

There is a rapidly growing number of older people among minority groups in Europe who were born or grew up in different parts of the world with different cultural and religious traditions. For the most part, these people came to Europe for three main reasons: A large percentage emigrated as a result of a colonial past—they came from Pakistan and India to the United Kingdom, from Indonesia and Surinam to the Netherlands, from Algeria to France and from Zaire to Belgium. The second largest group came for economic reasons from the relatively poorer countries of southern Europe like Spain, Greece, Portugal and Turkey, as well as North Africa and the northern territories of Hong Kong to live and work in different European countries such as Germany, Denmark and France. The third group includes people displaced by war and political repression. For example, refugee groups of Iranians live in Sweden, Vietnamese boat people live in Denmark and Ugandan Asians live in the United Kingdom.

As there are no exact data relating to older minorities, it is possible only to estimate numbers from existing statistics about immigrants from developing countries now living legally in the European Community. In 1991, they constituted 2.5% of the European Community's population (8,175,000 persons), but there are obviously large differences between member states. For example, immigrants represent 0.4% of Spain's population while the percentage in Germany is 5.2%.

What is certain is that older minorities are facing a future of uncertainty; uncertainty about old age and who will care for them; and uncertainty about whether to stay in Europe or to go back to their home country. For the majority, the latter is an unrealistic alternative because their sons and daughters have been born or have settled in the adopted country.

Older minorities are concerned about their apparent lack of status and respect within the family, especially in relationship to their children. They are aware that, even though their children were born and raised in a different country, they had hoped that the younger generation would be able to hold on to the traditional values of family life. Consequently, older people often

find themselves caught between two worlds and value systems or, as one older Turkish man said "they have fallen between two chairs."

The First Steps Forward

The first European conference convened by EURAG (European Association for the Welfare of the Elderly) in 1987 and the *Age in Exile* conference held in 1988, both in the Netherlands, were considered influential in raising the profile of older minorities but, in relative terms, there has been little in the way of consistent progress within different European countries or in Europe generally since then. That this situation is changing slowly is shown by the marked increase in information about these groups and in explanations of why minority ethnic older people do not seem to use services to the same extent as other older people. Alison Norman who proposed an explanation for this when she said 'Black and minority ethnic older people are not merely in double jeopardy by reason of age and discrimination but in triple jeopardy, at risk because they are old, because of the physical conditions under which they live and because services are not accessible to them.'¹

Participation in Care and Welfare Services

It is generally accepted that older minorities are under represented among users of existing care and welfare services across Europe. In part, this can be explained by the fact that they appear to know very little, if anything at all, about the services and facilities available to them. Conversely, mainstream services are not evaluated in terms of the needs of minorities because they do not receive referrals from these groups, hence, a proverbial vicious circle perpetuates itself.

This may be explained in part by the significant difference between the educational level of the average Dutch older person and a minority older person. More than 90% of older Turks and 55% of older Moroccans have never completed their elementary education.

Although people from former Dutch Guyana and Moluccans have higher educational levels, they are also well below the level of Dutch people: 0 - 3% for older minorities as compared to 63% for Dutch people.

For those older minorities who attempt a second chance at education, the results are equally disappointing. For example, in comparison to the 20% of Dutch people over age 50 who pursue further education, only 8% of minority older people do so.

The Scottish Experience

In 1991, *Age Concern Scotland*, a national voluntary organization working towards improving the quality of life for all older people, selected *Growing Old in Multicultural Scotland*, as its developmental theme for the year. It did so out of genuine concern to learn about the needs of older minorities in Scotland, who are not represented as significant users within the statutory, voluntary and private sectors of social and community care, housing, health and education.

Stimulating discussion and debate at national, regional and local levels about social policy and service provision to older minorities was the primary strategy for focusing attention on this hitherto neglected population. The first seminar *Opportunities for All: Access to Services for Older People from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups*, looked at the broad implications of equal opportunities-policies and the 1976 Race Relations Act within identified mainstream public and voluntary services. Specifically, attention was drawn to the lack of consultation with minority groups and associations and, in particular, with older people in these groups over such crucial issues as identifying ethnic identity, outreach strategies, professional training, funding and resources.

The next seminar provided an introduction to transcultural health issues in health promotion and education and in primary health care—*i.e.*, the diagnosis and treatment of illness within the context of a need for a common language. Understanding religions and cultural practice in caring for sick older people especially those suffering from dementia was considered to be of tantamount importance.

The first national conference, *Growing Old in Multicultural Scotland: An Agenda for Action*, which was held in April, 1992, brought together representatives from different minority groups and organizations, policy makers, managers and service providers in mainstream, voluntary and private sectors of social work, health and education.

This conference and the theme year, in general, were unique in Scotland because older minorities had not been publicly profiled before. And seldom had any challenge been so clearly directed towards these service providers about their lack of interest or concern in ensuring that their services were culturally sensitive and appropriate and that older minorities had adequate access to them.

In some cases, this challenge led to specific developments. For example, one system of day care adopted from mainstream service provision that seems to be increasingly popular with older minorities is the traditional lunch and day center. Although few in number, these centers provide a valuable social opportunity, reflecting common interests arising from a shared knowledge of the country of origin, circumstance of arrival, language, culture and religion.

Some positive steps have been taken by mainstream voluntary organizations in different cities to develop appropriate services in partnership with minority ethnic groups and organizations. And in some cases, funding has been made available for feasibility studies.

Within the statutory field, there are encouraging signs that the new *Care in the Community* legislation (April 1992), has prompted some local authorities to find out from minority groups what kinds of services are required, how these services should be administered and how to recruit bilingual, trained staff able to serve as a bridge between the carers of minority older people and public social welfare, health and housing departments.

Age Concern Scotland's philosophy is that older people are entitled to self-determination and self-advocacy within a framework of mutual support. Recognizing the importance of this and given that there is no single organization to represent older minorities in Scotland, *Workers' Forums for Black and Minority Ethnic Older People* have been established. Made up of workers and volunteers who are themselves members of minority groups and engaged with minority older people these Forums serve as a central referral point for mainstream services. Through training and education, forum members are able to develop skills in working with older members of minority groups and in teaching them self-empowerment skills.

The Dutch Experience

Until relatively recently, there had been little thought given to the position of older minorities in Dutch society as it was assumed that immigrants would

eventually return to their home country, or that they would have adapted to such an extent that there would be no need for special attention. However, experience shows that this is not the case and that, in fact not only do the majority grow old in the Netherlands but their adaption is proving to be difficult for them.

Such experiences are not limited to Third World immigrants, Dutch people who emigrated to Australia after World War II continued to feel a need for a familiar social and cultural environment reminiscent of their earlier years in the Netherlands and subsequently failed to achieve integration within Australian society.

There are 40,000 members of minority groups age 55-plus in the Netherlands. In comparison to the total number of older people this is a relatively small population, but this figure will more than double by 1995 to 95,000. It is this increase that prompted the *Nederlands Instituut vor Zorg en Welzijn*, (NIZW) (Netherlands Institute of Care and Welfare) to set up a separate program designed specifically to reach this population. The cornerstone of this effort is information and education.

First used with older Turks living in a small village in the east of Holland, the information and education materials are designed for six weekly three-hour sessions.

The first session involves informing people that there is to be an information project which necessitates close cooperation with minority groups themselves. In this meeting, which includes young and old, a video of older Turks living in the Netherlands is shown.

The second session is intended for older minorities themselves and provides an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other. Using photographs to describe the difficulties in their living environment, older people choose the subjects they think are important. On the basis of their choice a discussion follows. Afterwards a video of Dutch older people who emigrated to Australia *Growing Old Far Away From Home* is shown. By acting as a mirror, it provides the stimulus for discussing personal feelings with others having similar experiences; feelings they may find difficult to express to their own children.

In the third session, information is provided about the way in which Dutch people take care of their elderly as there is a general stereotype that Dutch people do not care for their parents but, rather, put them into homes. Using the examples of older people's homes, which are important facilities but in which less than 6% of older people live, the participants develop an interest in learning about care of older people. This also provide a springboard for discussing elder care in



Two women taking part in the NIZW's outreach program.

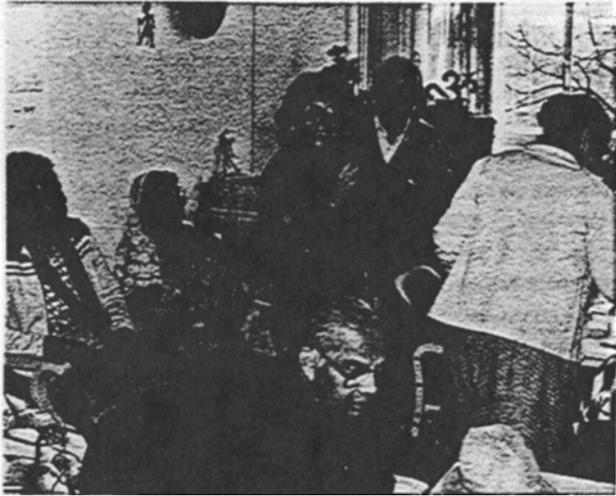
their own home country; this too, is illustrated by a video.

In the fourth session, slides show the available care services and housing options in their own locality emphasizing those people who can benefit from these services and, in the fifth session, field trips are organized to enable older people to see for themselves the different social welfare and housing services and what they have to offer. The sixth and final session concentrates on the field trips and uses this session to summarize key points arising from previous discussions.

The training materials include a trainer's guide. By the beginning of next year, NIZW also will have completed material for Moroccan, Spanish, Suriname and Moluccan older people.

In addition to education and information, the program concentrates on three other kinds of activity: research, program development and skills development. Using surveys, it has gathered data about initiatives focusing on minority older people across the Netherlands, including those aimed at improving the skills of service providers working with ethnic minorities. Eighty-four such projects have been identified. This research will be extended to other European countries and eventually collated into a European publication. Another research project involves analyzing the methods used in working with younger members of ethnic minorities—such as employment projects for young Moluccans and parenting programs for Moroccan women—to determine how these methods might be used with the older generation.

At the end of this year, nine mainstream organizations will have been selected—in close cooperation with organizations serving ethnic minorities—for a project to consider new ways of



Information sessions of the NIZW attract a variety of participants.

developing services for the older minorities. Some ideas include teaching caregivers the language of their new clients as well as about their culture, and training long-term unemployed minority persons as advisers for minority elders.

Another ongoing project is a study of self-help organizations within the Spanish, Italian, Greek and Portuguese groups on how they might best provide information to their older members.

European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations, 1993

Following up on its national program, Age Concern Scotland initiated a European-based project, *Ageing in Multicultural Europe* which, as an official part of the European Year of Older People 1993, is looking at the situation of minority older people within a number of European countries. For example, information has been drawn from France, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark about national and local research into the needs of specific minority groups. Reports of projects and initiatives intended to develop services specifically for these older people either separately or as part of the mainstream range of services are also in the collection. In addition, networks have been established with professionals in these countries, as well as in Norway and Sweden. Through the exchange of information, it has been possible to plan a Scottish-European Symposium to mark the end of the European Year.

This Symposium is designed to illustrate good practice across a wide range of settings and within

different European countries and to identify where in Europe older minorities might find a legitimate voice to represent their needs in the broadest sense and at the highest level of political influence.

Although the European Year of Older People 1993 has not generated a great deal of activity on behalf of older minorities, there have been a number of conferences held in different cities and towns.

A European conference organized by the *Innere Mission Munchen* on the subject of older minorities living in Germany and older Germans living in different countries has recently been held. A conference is planned by the *Hans-Weinberger Akademie* of Bavaria to address the needs of older minorities in the Nuremberg region of Germany.

The Nordic countries were invited to a conference in Copenhagen to look at similar issues, and, in the Netherlands, two conferences will be taking place. Of these the conference in Eindhoven is particularly important because older minorities will be attending, thus having an opportunity to share and compare their life experiences with their peers in other countries. These and other European initiatives should stimulate discussion and positive action long after the closure of European Year of Older People 1993.

Conclusion

Evidence shows there is good reason to be optimistic about future work among older minorities either by individual countries or through collective European action. It is important to ensure that older minorities are included in any strategic planning of services or are represented in campaign efforts on behalf of all older people. Europe is a multicultural, multi-ethnic continent and our care and welfare policies must reflect this diversity now and in the future through decisive action to create equal opportunities for all.



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context of improved services. He has also done research on older people in urban renewal areas.



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Scotland initiative in 1991/1992, Growing Old in Multicultural Scotland. She is herself of Polish descent and actively involved with the postwar generation of Polish people in Scotland. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh in relation to aging and ethnicity.

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