

Determining a set of recommendations to increase older women's civic engagement in Canada first needs to rest on the foundation of older women's rights to participate or not to participate, if they choose. Values and societal worth based on productive or successful aging themes are not rights-based. Removing barriers to access and meeting the needs of a diversity of individuals so that they may exercise their right to participate is an approach based in equity.

Situated in an equity-based lens several recommendations can be made. These will be addressed at the policy level as well as the organization level. Previous research has examined barriers to civic engagement for seniors as a whole, and more recent research action agendas are calling for attention to be paid to gendered ageism (1), but there is very little that considers the impacts at the intersection of gender, disability, race, sexual identity, and immigration status.

Most published work focuses on formal volunteering, which is an opportunity to focus “on the strengths that person has to offer as opposed to her needs” (2).

Policy Level Recommendations

Access to opportunities can be broadly conceptualized as a function of resources. Income, transportation, built environment, and cultural safety are all components that can impact accessibility. Barriers that have been identified as impacting the health and wellbeing of older women are also evident in hindering civic engagement opportunities. Complex interrelationships between one's personal circumstances and ability to participate in activities to improve one's health and wellbeing must be addressed at several levels (3). Previous work has identified that older women are disproportionately impacted by economic insecurity including inadequate pensions, lack of financial support for caregiving activities, exclusion and discrimination in paid labour over their life course (e.g., lack of gender parity in wages, interrupted working due to caregiving leading to reduced pensions), ongoing unpaid caregiving, and inadequate affordable housing, food insecurity, alongside the impacts of financial abuse (4–9). Older women are impacted by violence and face increased vulnerability to abuse and neglect (10–13). Women with disabilities, immigrant women with language barriers, and women with poor health are especially vulnerable due to their dependence upon others for assistance (e.g., caregiving, sponsorship agreements, translation services) (14,15). Transportation

Acknowledgements

CRIA-W-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on the Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

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Published by: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA-W-ICREF), 250 City Centre Avenue, Suite 807 Ottawa, ON K1R 6K7

ISBN: 978-1-77483-037-6

options and neighbourhood infrastructure can also act as barriers. Lack of affordable and accessible public transportation and well-maintained public spaces such as sidewalks, especially for those with mobility issues, as well as availability of places to convene are important contributors to older women's ability to participate (16,17). Responding to the complex interplay of ageist, sexist, and other domains of discrimination is the foundation upon which further recommendations can be applied to enhance opportunities for older women's civic engagement.

Organizational Level Recommendations

Social connectivity is desired by seniors (3,18). Recommendations in the literature have focused on the particular motivations, facilitators, and barriers of the baby boomer generation and engagement in formal volunteering (19). Current work to engage older women in civic engagement will need to consider the diversity of older women which recognizes an individual's multiple social locations and how these social locations interact to impact access and equity. Recommendations therefore need to be taken with a caution to ensure that actions focus on inclusion of a variety of voices, or there is a risk that those who already experience a disadvantage will continue to face exclusion. For organizations this means not simply focusing on whether older women participate or not, but why certain groups in one's community are not participating (20). Analysis describes patterns of engagement of formal volunteering in older age as a continuation of a practice that began earlier in one's life (19). However, women, and especially women with marginalized identities, have been systematically excluded from opportunities for civic engagement and therefore a transition to more time volunteering in later life is not a predictable pattern. Organizations will need to creatively respond to these historical realities in order to engage older women.

Organizations themselves must evaluate their capacity to work with older adults. The administrative work associated with engagement, training, scheduling, and retainment can be considerable and resources will need to be dedicated to ensure the inclusion of older women is meaningful and not tokenistic. The recent development and initial piloting of Organizational Competency Scale or other work assessing institutional capacity for older adult civic engagement may be a promising start for various agencies to consider when evaluating their current programming and identifying areas for development (21–23). Most research in the area of older adults' civic engagement has focused on participation in formal volunteering or social participation and may not be appropriate for other civic engagement activities such as voting. Organizational recommendations have been selected that focus on modifiable factors, rather than overarching systemic barriers and are grouped into several broad themes, which are described below.

Sustainably supporting organizational change requires investment for core funding of organizations such as non-profit seniors' centres among other groups. Organizations reliant on project-based funding and fundraising are subjected to an onerous cycle of applying, reporting, and renewing short-term funding, drawing under-resourced staff from the foundational mission of the organization's work (24). Much funding and donations focus on a particular program or service, yet supporting older women's civic engagement needs broad support and implementation across all of an organization's activities. Project-based funding can also drive mission drift; whereby the priorities and interests of funders and donors forms the basis of an organization's work; not necessarily its foundational tenets. Without the ability to invest in operations to drive organizational change, non-profits are hampered in their ability to meaningfully engage in long-term shifts in practice and engagement with under-represented groups including older women.

Confronting Ageism Withing the Organization

Ageism may take on a variety of forms both through explicit practices (e.g., having age-defined limits to groups or roles) or through passive exclusion (e.g., lack of representation in media materials). These practices communicate an organization's viewpoint on their intended audience as well as whose voices they are aiming to represent. Creation of more inclusive spaces requires a review of how older women are represented and spoken about in your organization. Are there opportunities to use age-positive descriptions and images? (25,26). When older women are involved are the roles and tasks they are assigned suitable to their strengths? Assumptions about older women's skills and ability to learn new skills may mean they are only offered less-skilled work such as hospitality-orientated tasks (e.g., serving coffee, acting as greeters). In examining what motivated volunteers, acknowledgment and recognition of the work of volunteers were identified (Table 1) (22, 27–29). Adopting a strengths-based approach can help to identify or develop skills and talents and work to combat ageist assumptions while also providing opportunities for personal growth (29). Finally, organizations can examine ways to involve older women who are not living in community (e.g., long-term care homes). Assumptions about disengagement, frailty, and physical and mental capabilities can exclude those who may desire to participate (30–33).

Aligning Priorities

Priority gaps refer to the gap between the goals and concerns of a volunteer with the goals and concerns of an organization. Organizations using volunteers may have a specific function as providing front-line service to the community. Or organizations may need volunteers to maintain the organization itself (e.g., fundraising or administrative activities). Organizational capacity to manage volunteers is essential and thoughtful

consideration of matching appropriate volunteers to needed organizational activities is key to a successful partnership. Community-service organizations may be overwhelmed with the burden of day-to-day work and “think in terms of simple tasks that can be done without much planning or supervision, rather than in terms of the missions they are trying to accomplish and how to use volunteers to achieve it” (34). Literature examining motivations for formal volunteering note that volunteers are looking for opportunities for social connections, flexibility, access to training and personal development, and participation in meaningful activities (19,27,29,35,36). Across global contexts, research into older adults’ motivations for volunteering call for opportunities ranging from short-term, episodic time commitments, flexible tasks that make use of one’s existing skills and capabilities, a diversity of roles, as well as an opportunity to learn or enhance skills, and connect with a greater mission or purpose. Aligning the priorities between formal volunteers and organizations will require moving beyond volunteering as unpaid labour.

Publicizing Requests

Best practices identify that personal invitation and direct calls for older adult volunteers are the key recruitment strategies (29,37), and may be particularly important for individuals who have not previously volunteered.

Identify Organizational Capacity

International agencies, such as the United Nations (38) recommends prioritizing older women’s right to participate in civic and social life and calls for support to be made to organizations focus on older women. Meaningful engagement however calls for resources and support to help program staff to design, manage, organize, and lead coordinated efforts that support both an organization’s goals as well as responding to the motivations of volunteers. Retention and training of support staff to oversee these activities will need to be funded and supported in turn. Balancing an organization’s capacity to tailor formal volunteer opportunities against funding and logistical constraints will depend upon the contextual mission and aims of individual organizations. More recent literature has identified tools and factors for assessing organizational capacity and competency for older adult civic engagement recruitment and retainment. One approach in identifying program characteristics is briefly outlined Table 1 below and features six organizational dimensions related to successful recruitment and retainment in formal volunteer programs: role flexibility; incentive; skill development; role recognition; accommodation; and integration (39).

Table 1: Six organizational dimensions related to successful recruitment and retention

Dimensions	Items
Role flexibility	Working only during particular times
	Varying the amount of volunteer time
	Setting their own schedules
	Having an interest in some responsibilities of the position
	Performing some responsibilities of the position
	Desiring a higher autonomy than specified for the position
	Desiring more supervision than specified for the position
	Changing their responsibilities to create a better “fit”
Incentive	Providing reimbursement for stipend
	Providing reimbursement for gas
	Providing reimbursement for meals
	Providing reimbursement for parking/transportation costs
	Providing reimbursement for material supplies
Skill development	Offering group/team work training
	Offering opportunities for learning
	Developing leadership
	Offering computer/technology training
Role recognition	Showing formal appreciation through letters/communications
	Publishing volunteer profiles in newsletters
	Acknowledging volunteers in public media outlets
	Sponsoring recognition events within the program
	Observing National Volunteer Week and the like
Accommodation	Physical environment changes
	Making volunteer work possible from another location
	Dividing/sharing volunteer responsibilities with others
	Providing assistive devices to get the work done
	Changing assignment to better match current ability
Integration	Attending at staff meetings
	Presenting to the board committees
	Serving as organization’s official representative
	Representing the organization to the media
	Participating in organizational planning/decision-making
	Supervising other volunteers
	Providing formal feedback for quality improvement

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