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18 Sep 2018

Annual Shirin Fozdar Programme Lecture examines the benefits of ageing and the opportunities of a growing silver community



With the growing silver community becoming a national conversation topic in Singapore, it was timely to discuss the dividends of longevity. Themed 'A Celebration of Old Age', the Shirin Fozdar Annual Lecture organised by the Singapore Management University (SMU) Shirin Fozdar Programme (SFP), provided just the platform to do that. Taking place at SMU's Ngee Ann Kongsi Auditorium on 13 September 2018, the lecture drew an audience of about 120 students, advocates and members of the community.

In her welcome address, SFP Board Member, Ms Chan Ee Lin introduced Dr Kanwaljit Soin and thanked her for tackling a topic that was increasing in relevance to developed cities in Asia and around the world. Ms Chan stressed how the SFP Annual Lecture served as a platform to encourage dialogue on pertinent issues facing women and societies today. "The fundamental principles underlying our programmes is encapsulated by RICE - which stands for Resilience, Integration, Connectivity and Empowerment. SFP's mission is to continue to serve as a platform to connect students, advocates, policy-makers, businesses, institutions and the public to shape a resilient community and nurture integrated perspectives in women's development."



"Beautiful young people are accidents of nature, but beautiful old people are works of art," declared Dr Kanwaljit Soin, Orthopaedic & Hand Surgeon, Mt. Elizabeth Medical Centre, when she took the stage, quoting Eleanor Roosevelt. Dr Soin started her keynote address by giving a snapshot of the key statistics defining an ageing world: By 2020, 13 countries would have become super-aged, with 28% of their populations over the age of 65 years. Singapore would be joining this club in 2026; and the babies in long lived societies would have the chance to celebrate their 100th birthdays, and more. "Wrinkles and pimples will take equal billing," she commented.

According to Dr Soin, women on average outlive their male counterparts by two to eight years. This has been

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known as the "remission of ageing". There are only nine as many men as women living over the age of 80 years old and although women live longer, they have more illness and disability. Throughout their lifetimes, males and females play different roles, receive different rewards and experience different realities. Given the reality of women becoming "older earlier" and being often judged by their physical appearance rather than their accomplishments, Dr Soin called for gender strategies to be designed for women and ageing.

During her presentation, Dr Soin made reference to the findings of her recently published book, *Silver Shades of Grey: Memos for Successful Ageing in the 21st Century* (2018). In exploring the gender inequalities faced by women in their old age, Dr Soin highlighted an abysmal lack of sex disaggregated data and gender analysis. She advocated for gender mainstreaming and gender sensitivity as being necessary tools for research and policies on ageing. Accomplished in her field of expertise, Dr Soin's commitment towards furthering the dialogue on inclusive ageing was clearly evident to members of the audience.

"It is important to note that growing old is a relatively new phenomenon," commented Dr Soin. Illustrating the point with numbers, she shared that for over 90% of history, average life expectancy had not extended beyond 30-40 years. Life expectancy had been increasing by two and a half years every decade, and presently, life expectancy is increasing by four hours daily. In 2016, Singapore was ranked 3rd in the world for the longest average life expectancy and 2nd globally for the longest average healthy life expectancy.



"Longevity and health create wealth," said Dr Soin. She explained how people are likely to spend more on medical expenditure as they become more affluent, leading to increased investment in medical services. New and advanced medical technology would widen the options available in healthcare services. Dr Soin believed that healthcare innovation would be the economic driver of the 21st century, the way the creation of railroads drove global economic expansion in the past century.

Dr Soin highlighted how the development of the silver economy would deliver positive impact and become a key driver of economic growth. People above the age of 60 years typically held more than 50% of wealth in developed societies. In 2014, the silver economy had formed 8% of China's GDP and by 2050, it would comprise one third of the nation's GDP. In the European Union, the silver industry is likewise fast becoming a key driver of the national economy. Mirroring this trend, Singapore, which ranked third among fifteen Asia Pacific countries for its silver industry market potential, stands in good stead to leverage on its growing silver economy.

Commenting on how ageing is a multifaceted phenomenon, Dr Soin encouraged all to view global ageing as a trend for the future. She said, "All older people are different – they are like all other older people in some respects, like some other older people in a few respects and yet like no other person." In light of research that has shown that brain cells could live for a hundred years or longer, and that new neurons could form in old brain, Dr Soin highlighted that intelligence among the old does not inevitably decline. On the contrary, people could get smarter and more creative as they grew older.

Brimming with wit, Dr Soin remarked that people tended to be happier and more contented in old age. She cited key points from David Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald's research on the U-shaped Happiness Curve to support this point and to demonstrate that psychological well-being is U-shaped through life: anger declines throughout life; sadness rises a little in midlife then falls; there is less conflict later in life and people are better at controlling their emotions.



During a lively Q&A moderated by Professor Lily Kong, SMU Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences, Dr Soin underscored the need for governments to reform attitudes towards healthcare

Social Sciences, Dr Soin underscored the need for governments to renounce attitudes towards healthcare resources – to regard it as an investment rather than an expenditure. She noted the correlations between life expectancy, arbitrary retirement age and pensions, emphasising the importance of extinguishing ageism and creating a social construct without physiological basis. According to Dr Soin, social policies needed to evolve with increasing life expectancies. For example, abolishing the retirement age could even help a country's productivity.

In his closing remarks, SMU President Arnoud De Meyer SMU thanked Dr Soin for her dynamism and sometimes provocative remarks. Prof De Meyer quipped that as a 65-year-old, he viewed ageing with much optimism and was heartened to know that he had gained four extra hours in life expectancy.

He commented that individuals and organisations are increasingly grappling with issues such as rising healthcare costs, labour and productivity. As a knowledge institution generating rigorous research that addresses Asian issues of global relevance, SMU was well-placed to contribute to the discussions on growing silver populations in developed nations. Case in point, Prof De Meyer cited SMU's Centre for Research on the Economics of Ageing (CREA), which uses data from the Singapore Life Panel to conduct research on Singapore's ageing population.

Prof De Meyer added that SMU is developing industry-ready graduates who are well-versed in healthcare administration, in view of the growing demand for healthcare services by Singapore's ageing population. He said, "It was announced last month that SMU, in partnership with SingHealth, is introducing a new second major in Health Economics and Management starting in January 2019. Undergraduates will be trained in areas that are of increasing importance in the healthcare sector, such as Health Systems and Policy, Applied Analytics in Healthcare Management and Medical Sociology. Beyond the classroom setting, students will undergo internships at SingHealth's healthcare institutions, and the opportunity to gain real-world, hands-on experience. First-of-its-kind in Singapore, this new programme aims to nurture a pipeline of local graduates who are equipped with the knowledge and skills to tackle the nation's future healthcare challenges."

Prof De Meyer thanked Ms Claire Chiang, SFP Chairperson, for her vision and leadership as chairperson of the SFP at SMU. He said, "The Shirin Fozdar Programme, over the past nine years, has made an indelible impact on our faculty, and staff, as well as the community through its active outreach programmes over the years. Credit goes to Claire, who has been an unerring trailblazer, tirelessly charting a path towards sustainability and gender diversity. With Claire's advice and support, the Programme has remained true to the spirit of Shirin Fozdar – a tremendous woman and humanist who believed in service to others. Through its activities, the Programme has played a meaningful role as a platform to connect the community in meaningful dialogue."

In the final quarter of the year, SFP will be hosting two conferences, in partnership with the Centre for Liveable Cities and the Society Against Family Violence, as well as a networking evening at SMU. Stay tuned for more updates.

[Featured photo: (L-R) SMU President Prof Arnoud De Meyer; keynote speaker Dr Kanwaljit Soin; SMU Provost and Lee Kong Chian Chair Professor of Social Sciences Prof Lily Kong; and SFP Board Member Ms Chan Ee Lin, at the Shirin Fozdar Annual Lecture held at SMU.]

Last updated on 18 Sep 2018.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Blockchain: Embarking on the Journey
Jul 10, 2019, 9am

The Future of Work - Protecting Yourself Against Cyber Attacks (Intake 2)
Jul 10, 2019, 9am

SMU MBA Information Session (Singapore)
Jul 10, 2019, 7pm

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