

# Voices of Older Women from Developing Countries

By Helen Lowenberger

*“The power of not having power permitted us to organize ... since we were crazy old women, nothing would happen to us, and indeed that’s how it was.”*

— Elsa (Grandmother of Plaza De Mayo, Argentina)

*“In my country most older women don’t have any power, not like the old men; they are respected because they have earned money .”*

— Gracielo (Mexico)

*“Let me second what Olga has said, based on the experience of her labor union — that older women dare what younger women do not, because the latter have more to lose .”*

— Elena (Mexico)

*“We need to educate our daughters about the kind of empowerment we seek, not the power to get ahead of the men, but the power to create, to build ...”*

— Olga (Uruguay)

*“I want to speak of the Mexican culture. Most older women don’t have social security; they live on hand-outs from their families .”*

— Elena (Mexico)

*“This is clear, very clear, the lack of consultation ...”*

— Julia (Dominican Republic)

*“Let me tell you, I’m a feminist and the ‘personal is political’ ... because everything is connected.”*

— Eva (Ghana)

*“The adult woman must take on the responsibility for her old age and believe that the best thing that can happen to her is to attain old age ... We must work to demystify images of old age: the venerable grandmother, the cane, the meekness, the sweetness, the lies .”*

— Maria (Mexico)

*“Even though Olga says they haven’t made much progress, still they have succeeded in making a nuisance of themselves, and that is something .”*

— Elena (Mexico)

*“How do we reconcile ideas arising out of ancient cultures with the modern situation? For example, in Buddhist culture, old people are accustomed to withdrawing into solitude .”*

— Daw (Myanmar/Burma)

*“Before coming here I had no idea that there were other people who were also worried about older women. Now I know I am not alone .”<sup>1</sup>*

— Yenny (Colombia)

**A**s we listen to these voices of older women from developing countries, our knowledge that "Sisterhood is Global"<sup>2</sup> is reinforced by the awareness that so is the sisterhood of older women. Barbara Macdonald has said that "reports on aging populations worldwide suggest that ageism is as widespread as the patriarchal family and that it is about women."<sup>3</sup> These voices also demonstrate that just as older women in the developed countries are working together to seek empowerment, so are those in the developing nations.

Like us they express concern over the economic situation of older women, over the stereotypes which abound, and of the arbitrariness of decisions as to whether women's work counts at all in our societies. Like us, they are defining themselves and their roles in their own situations.

We are all aware, however, that these women are living in different social and economic conditions than older women in Canada. It would seem that one of our first responses to these voices would be to acquaint ourselves with the present situation of older women in developing countries. So many countries are involved that care must be taken not to ignore the many differences between societies.

It is interesting that researchers met the same difficulties that older women found when they had to delve into general research material and uncover any references to older women:

*Many of the older studies were carried out by male social scientists, and they often defined ahead of time that what women did was not important. ...To give us an idea of the relative paucity of contemporary inquiry, searches for journal articles in the Index to Social Sciences and Humanities and the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature for the past five years yielded NOT A SINGLE TITLE on older women in cross-cultural perspective.<sup>4</sup>*

At the same time there is sufficient evidence available to give us some idea of the present lives of older women in a cross-cultural perspective, and also to consider the future.

The following is a short summary of that research:

1. The demographic changes which result in increases in older populations are taking about 1/4 of the time that they have taken in western industrialized nations.

2. The demographic forecast is now based on the year 2020. By that time, it is predicted that female gains in life expectancy will mean that women will form the majority of all older populations in 22 countries in the developing world.

3. There will be a large increase in the number of widows.

4. Sixty-one percent of the world's population of 75+ women will be in today's developing nations.

5. The growth rates predicted for women of 55+ will be 3 times as high in underdeveloped countries as in developed nations.

6. There is a great deal of evidence to show that most pre-industrial societies had places for older women, but the assumption of empowerment depended to a large extent on the individual.

Further, there were many roles for older women in pastoral, nomadic, hunting and gathering groups, but these began to deteriorate in settled agrarian cultures. It is discouraging to consider our own experiences in moving from an agrarian society to an industrialized one, and to think about those effects on older women in these nations. Most older women are supported by the traditional system, but that system is changing with the processes of 'economic restructuring,' changes in the agricultural patterns, and urbanization.

It is easy to become discouraged at the magnitude of enlarging our own vision to include that of women in the developing countries, but taking action will bring only joy and hope for all the older women in the world, today and tomorrow.

<sup>1</sup>Women's Initiative, A.A.R.P., *Empowering Older Women: Cross-Cultural Views. A Guide for Discussion and Training*. American Association of Retired Persons (Washington, DC: Publication Division, 1990), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup>*Sisterhood is Global*, ed. Robin Morgan (Penguin, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>Barbara Macdonald, "Politics of Aging: I Am Not Your Mother," *Ms.* (July/August, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>*Empowering Older Women*, pp. 14, 15.

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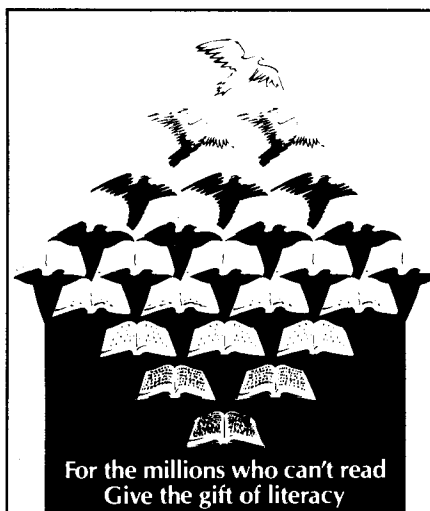
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\* Southam Literacy Survey 1987.