

# Never-Married Women, Eighty Years and Over: The Life Experience

by Mary Frances O'Brien

## Introduction

Only in the past few years have never-married persons become a focus of research. As single persons they have been included with widowed, separated and divorced, and as they emerge as a group in research studies, gender and age factors have often not been controlled. As more interest has been generated on the subject of older never marrieds, and particularly on never married older women, we are finding more (but still limited) information on gender differences (Braito & Anderson, 1984). However, there is very little existing knowledge regarding the actual life experiences of never married older women. Are they subject to some of the common stereotypes of old age, in addition to those associated with being never married? Questions of how they have coped with singlehood over a lifetime, how they have handled life changes — and in particular the aging process — have not been examined or addressed. In order to explore these questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 never-married women, 80 years and over who were living in Prince Edward Island in community settings and who were recommended as having a positive attitude toward life. Prince Edward Island is unique among Canadian provinces in that it has the highest proportion of elderly — 12.5% compared to the national figure of 10% — and the highest proportion of never married among women over 75 — 15% compared to 11% for Canada as a whole (Statistics Canada, 1981). The purpose of this study was to identify personal, social and economic factors, both past and present, which may influence never married old women's ability to deal with everyday living and to the changes accompanying the aging process. Sec-

dary purposes included evaluating some common stereotypes about never marrieds and accessing specific needs this group may have which could impact on policy toward this growing population.

## Methodology

A qualitative approach was used in order to allow for participants' own understandings and interpretations of decision making processes, conflict and life events and some of the attitudes and assumptions which lie behind them. An initial questionnaire was administered to gather demographic data. During the following three or four interviews of an hour each, open-ended questions were asked each interviewee in which various phases of the older women's lives were reviewed. Transcripts of the open-ended interviews were examined and the following categories were selected for data analysis: reflections and views on childhood; family and community relationships; career development and work life; self-perceptions as a person and as a single woman; problems and satisfactions experienced; adjustments to life-changes and the experience of aging.

## Study Findings

About half of the women who were interviewed were between 80 and 85 years of age and the remainder were between 86 and 90. The majority were living alone in their own houses and apartments in one of the two main urban centers on the Island. All but one had spent their childhood and early youth in Prince Edward Island and half had grown up in rural areas of the province. Most had come from large families and still maintained strong family ties. There was no particular pat-

tern in birth order. While health and mobility problems were common — about half required assistance with shopping and transportation — most of the women considered themselves better off than their age peers. Nearly all were satisfied with their friendships and with family relationships in general.

The women who participated in the present study came from a broad range of family backgrounds and living situations, yet the similarities in their perceptions of their formative years are more striking than the differences.

The general image of childhood as seen by the study participants is one of security, harmonious family life with a clear separation of parental roles, certainty and acceptance of rules and social norms and a strong sense of belonging to one's community. Perhaps the most frequent impression of childhood that was conveyed was one of being well taken care of by good parents, of a secure, harmonious, close family life:

*I had a really lovely childhood. My parents were marvellous. I always remember that sort of warmth and assurance that I got from my father and mother.*

Mothers were quite distinct and well-defined in the families of these women. The household was clearly the mother's domain. Several of the women expressed strong admiration and affection for their fathers. Participants differed somewhat on which parent was seen as the authority figure in the household. Some could clearly point to their mothers as the disciplinarian; others saw father as the boss. Relationships with brothers and sisters were usually described as harmonious, especially in the large, rural families.

There were some hints of sisterly conflict, for example "sister was mother's favourite" or "sister didn't share the housework," but all seemed to get along with brothers. None of the women expressed any strong feelings of discrimination against girls in the family; if it occurred, it was accepted or went unnoticed. It is interesting to note that some respondents perceived their brothers as more adventurous and independent than they and some noted that their brothers would occasionally resist parental authority, whereas they would not.

As is typical of never-married women, the women in this study were relatively well educated for their generation (Spreitzer and Riley, 1974). The majority had initially completed high school and more than half had some post secondary education; three of the latter group had Bachelor's degrees and two had Master's degrees:

*...School was a happy place for me, I liked it; I enjoyed it.*

*I loved it. I wanted to get an education, which I did.*

*I got through for a teacher.*

Some recalled the importance of good education to them and to their parents. In rural areas the mother was more often mentioned as the parent who encouraged education:

*Mother would have liked all of us to have gone to university. But dad, it didn't seem to matter to him one way or the other.*

University education was a rare thing for girls and the only degree-granting college on the Island did not accept women. Some of the women spoke of the rarity of anyone leaving the rural community to continue her education. They were often the only ones in their age group to do so and sometimes the only member of their family. Some continued their education during their working careers, sometimes taking time off from work, sometimes attending summer schools, until they reached their objectives.

Career options for young women, as perceived by the study participants, were very few in the early decades of the century. Apart from the limited options open to young women at the time, perhaps the most striking aspect of early career goals and choices was the influence of the family. A strong sense of obligation to the

family could result in educational and career goals being postponed for a number of years. One woman whose family could not afford to send her to university delayed her education until she was no longer needed at home. Another had postponed her early ambition of leaving P.E.I. to teach elsewhere in Canada until both her parents had died. Family ties and obligations remained strong throughout their working lives with nearly all of the women: two returned to the Island in mid-life because their families needed them.

Although some of the study participants spoke of goals they had set early in life, most of the women really had no strong career plans which they followed consistently. Career interests and ambitions seemed to evolve as they matured and were often quite circumstantial. What seemed to carry most of them through their careers was not ambition, but a desire to do well at what they were doing and to be helpful and useful to others. "I always enjoyed teaching, and I felt that I helped somebody in my work. That was rewarding." Their occupations included teachers, nurses, one self-employed business woman, a companion and a supervisor in a utility company. One woman stayed on the family farm all of her life and another had devoted most of her career to voluntary community work.

A final observation on career goals that emerges from the interviews is that plans were likely to remain tentative and short-term as long as marriages remained a possibility. Some women appeared to postpone career plans until their status as single women was established and accepted. As the women matured, new interests and ambitions often evolved.

However, work did become an important part of the women's lives, both as a source of income and as a means of achieving a positive self-identity. There was much evidence of a strong work commitment among the women. For one woman, teaching became "the love of my life...they couldn't pry me loose with a stick." It was also important to most of these women to know that they were doing their jobs well.

A woman who set up her own business in which she was very successful spoke frequently of her lifelong commitment to hard work:

*Oh, I always worked...my business was working...all my life...Today, I could make a fortune if I was 20 years younger and able to work. It makes me sick that I can't work.*

Some of the women showed a strong interest in advancement in their jobs or professions — another indication of strong work commitment. More than half of the working women attained positions of responsibility where they were supervising others or training other professionals.

Considering that most of the study participants achieved satisfaction in their working lives, it is interesting to note that many found their early work experiences very difficult and stressful. They resolved their difficulties with work in different ways: by a complete change of work, by advancement to a higher level in their professions or, in the case of a woman who found teaching difficult, by "sticking it out" and, after a few years, learning to love it.

Job changes were frequent for many of the women. A sense of adventure seems to have prompted others to change careers. Two went overseas during World War II — one as a nurse and another as a Red Cross worker. Another, who had taught school for several years, went to Western Canada to work in the hotel business.

A comment needs to be made on the importance of community work in the lives of many of the study participants: these women were community-minded for most of their lives, usually holding executive positions in voluntary organizations.

It has been suggested that the loss of work role is more problematic for never-married persons than for the married (Ward, 1979). The transition from career to retirement was a difficult one for most of these women. During this time they had experienced a deep sense of loss:

*I really didn't feel that I should retire. I felt that I had a lot to give...*

*I thought, 'What good am I? Nobody wants me, nobody needs me; I'm not working, I'm no good to anybody' I had that awful feeling...but I got over it.*

Typically, they substituted other activities and relationships for those lost with retirement. Some became more active in volunteer work and in community organizations in which they had previously participated. Others started a number of new things. By being 'joiners' they not only fulfilled their need to be useful to others but also met needs for social activity and status in the community.

In the present study, three aspects of the participants' lives as single women were explored: perceptions or recollections of

why they did not marry; difficulties experienced as a single woman; and feelings about discrimination as women in their work.

None of the women who were interviewed said that at any point in their lives they had made a conscious decision not to marry. Nor did marriage appear to be an important goal in any of their lives. Most had friendships with men and opportunities to marry, but seemed to be very hesitant about relinquishing their independence. Here are some of the attitudes:

*As a young teenager, I always believed in 'women's lib'...I wouldn't take the vow to obey that used to be in the marriage ceremony...*

And

*A lot of people just get married. But there was no point in me doing that; it would just be a burden on me to marry anyone I wasn't really in love with...I'm sort of like a plant. I want to grow in my own way....*

Other women mentioned not meeting the right person or that marriage was not one of their goals. One woman's comment that it was pretty hard for an independent woman to make marriage work sums up the attitudes of the majority. As mid-life approached, most of them were involved in their careers or in community work.

The question of difficulties as a single woman seemed to be almost an irrelevant one. If single life was a disadvantage, study participants were unaware of it. They were absorbed in their careers, in community activities, and enjoyed friendships with other single women. While no one found single life a difficult state, five of the women expressed regret at not having had children, but again, the difficulties and confinements of marriage were considered by some to be not enough of a trade-off for the joys of parenthood.

Most of the women interviewed had entered women's professions. This may be one reason why job discrimination was not an issue for most of them in their working careers. Their comments indicate, however, that they did not feel discrimination as women because few career options and lower pay for women were accepted as normal. Only two of the women said that they had ever been aware of receiving lower pay than men for similar work. It had not occurred to either of them to object to this.

While most of the women were not aware of any discrimination against them-

selves as women, some had mixed feelings about the feminist movement, but were hopeful for change:

*Eventually women can be independent and men can be independent and still admire each other. I think women should be treated equally but I don't believe in being militant about it. It's understanding that brings people together.*

Some insight was gained into personalities and life attitudes of the study participants when they were asked what motivating forces guided them and how they handled difficult times. Most of the interviewees felt that they had, in their lives, let nature take its course. As one woman put it, "I went along with life." Some of the group were clearly risk-takers, making moves and job changes which must have required courage. Others were fighters; they had pulled themselves through difficult periods through sheer determination.

Other interviewees clearly saw themselves as "doers" who had played an active role in shaping their lives and the lives of others. The women in this group seemed to have an inner determination to do well at their jobs, to achieve, and to bring about change where they saw change was needed. This determination may have been a strong motivating force which guided their lives. For the study participants as a whole, life motivation and the inner strength to deal with difficulties was perceived as coming mainly from the values instilled by their parents and families or from their religious beliefs. And finally, one woman's philosophy on dealing with failure:

*A failure is difficult. You have to adjust to that and you can't win every time, you know. Somebody else is going to win sometimes and you have to adjust to that. If you have a few aspects of your life that you're successful in, you're lucky.*

The need to be useful and to help others came out in some of their expressed hopes for the future. For one woman, this wish took precedence over any thoughts of disability or dependency:

*I hope that I can be of some use in the world. And that I can have a little bit of influence in alleviating the terrific amount of suffering that there is in the world today. Those are the only things that really matter, to make life better for*

*other people.*

The limitations of advancing age were usually accepted realistically. Looking back with regret did not appear to be a preoccupation with these women. While some conceded that they would do a few things differently if they had their lives to live over, it was not something they spent a lot of time worrying about.

While the literature suggests that some older unmarrieds rely primarily on community supports (Kivett and Learner, 1980), one important finding that emerges from the interviews and from the impressions of the interviewees is that most of the women had strong support networks of family and friends. All respondents had at least one important friend. Some had compensated for losses of age peers by making friends with younger women. The majority mentioned nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters as being important in their lives. Restrictions on physical mobility were dealt with by accepting more help from family and friends. Their strong sense of connection and belonging to the Island seemed to offer a certain kind of security in their old age.

## Conclusions

Much available research about never-married persons suggests the following: that never marrieds of both genders have had poor family relationships (Spreitzer & Riley, 1974); their inadequacies stereotype them as losers (Stein, 1976); older never marrieds constitute a special social type in that they have been life long loners and live more isolated lives (Gubrium, 1976); they have difficulty living in a world where marriage is the norm (Edwards and Hoover, 1974); and in old age they have more problematic lives and are less happy than married persons due to lack of family ties and intimate relationships (Ward, 1979).

Admittedly, participants in this study represent a select group probably accounting for high levels of reported life. However, none of the above generalizations describe the women in this study. These women were able to substitute available satisfactions for losses incurred and ask for help when help was needed. In some of the women a conscious suppression of problems and a control of negative feelings could be seen. These can be considered realistic, positive and rational ways of adjusting to age-related changes (Butler and Lewis, 1982). And as future cohorts of never married women

are studied, researchers need to keep in mind the diversity that exists within this group. As Rubinstein (1987) reminds us, cultural traditions, family orientations, personalities and personal ambitions, sexual preferences, and even demographic factors affect all elderly persons, regardless of marital status.

One of the greatest needs that never-married women have is for more formal supports in later life. Although nearly all of the women had accepted some increasing dependence on others in their current lives, it is unlikely that family and friends could be relied upon for help in the event that more caregiving was needed in the future. As is true elsewhere, such support would not likely be forthcoming (Johnson & Catalano, 1981). Even though family traditions and ties in Prince Edward Island are considered to be strong and are still governed by such basic values as family obligation and family loyalty, these and other values are in a state of transition. More than 7% of PEI's elderly live in government manors or private nursing homes (P.E.I. Department of Health and Social Services, 1981). Most of these persons are never married, widowed or divorced (Statistics Canada, Minister of Supply and Services, 1981).

Perhaps more important is the attitude of the women themselves. Only one woman in this study mentioned the alternative of moving in with relatives which had been offered to her if she could no longer live on her own. Her reasons for

rejecting this offer reflects the feelings of many older persons — she wished to maintain her independence which she valued so highly. Independent living was necessary for these women to maintain their psychological integrity. For women who have remained single, the maintenance of personal dignity and positive self-image in their later years consists in retaining the kind of control over their life-decisions which they have developed and cherished over a lifetime.

*I would like to thank Frances Piercey and Olive Bryanton for their assistance with interviews and data analysis.*

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## LILIANE WELCH

### Word Flesh

Morning writing in the spring light —  
crazy, that a pen  
should say, "I love you!"  
to a white page,  
dreaming because the day is long  
the house a quiet void  
and the desk hot with sun  
that a line of letters  
should flip their skirts  
to flash slender legs on the empty street,  
"Be-my-bride."

Ink takes off its clothes,  
paper glows.  
On the mind's shelf  
jars of honey  
hardening to crystals of thought,  
icons of word flesh  
on a breached pale wall.