

Abstracts

Older Women

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M. J. Storey Gibson, *Older Women Around the World*, International Federation on Ageing in cooperation with the American Association of Retired Persons, Washington D.C., 1985, ISBN 0 910473 15 3

The report *Older Women Around the World* was produced as a background document for the 1985 UN World Conference on Women in Nairobi, held to review and appraise progress achieved during the UN Decade for Women. This report builds on an earlier document produced by the International Federation on Ageing,¹ and provides a useful synthesis of a wide range of material from throughout the world. Following an initial chapter which sets in global perspective the demographic picture of women in later life, the report covers six main areas of women's experience: living arrangements, family life, educational status, employment status, income status and health status. In each of these sections material is presented in relation to developing and developed nations.

As expected from such broad overview material, some sections are more comprehensive than others and illustrate the need for basic data collection especially in the developing nations. Nevertheless the report manages to combine data from international statistical sources (UN, WHO) with findings from national studies. An example of the diversity of material can be seen in the section on family life. In developing countries older women still maintain an important role in child care, thus enabling younger women to continue with agricultural work or other labour. However, this is not universal and older women maintain an important role in agricultural life in many countries. Gibson shows, with examples from Mediterranean and African countries, that as women age they may attain increased status within the family, being freer of male control. However, an improved status within the family does not compensate for the dependency which many women still suffer in terms of their economic situation, and for older women in developing countries the forces of rural out-migration and urbanisation, and their effects on family life, can lead to changes in traditional family roles and

increasing isolation for many women who often lose the physical support of younger family members.

Material from developed nations also stresses the importance of family life for older women, with the author commenting on the myth that the 'family does not care'. However, she does describe some interesting variations in the roles of older women within the family. Using examples of research from eastern European countries she demonstrates the continuing child care role of grandmothers and then contrasts this with the more commonly found roles of caring for a dependent spouse or an elderly parent seen in many developed nations. She also comments on the importance of siblings as supporters of women without children. The section on family life provides just one example of the use of a wealth of international material. Of equal interest is the section on income status, which contains a very useful insight into how the variation in social security and pensions systems affects women's lives, and that on health, which not only looks at physical and mental health but also service provision.

The report ends with a series of recommendations which it was hoped would be debated at the Nairobi conference and taken on board by individual governments. There are a number of general recommendations covering: income maintenance; the needs of women living alone; discrimination in social security systems; health needs; pensions; re-entry into employment and the importance of data collection. These issues are followed by points specific to either developing or developed nations. For example, those in developing nations are urged to look at: the training of older women in new agricultural techniques; access to land ownership, land tenure and credit; pension coverage for female workers in agriculture and domestic work; and expanded literacy programmes. In contrast, for developed nations more attention is given to: co-ordinated community and institutional care to meet the long-term care needs of women; supportive services for those caring for others; and preventive health programmes and income maintenance, especially for homemakers, widows and divorced women. The report ends with a useful resource list of agencies involved with older women's issues and a bibliography.

L. Barker, *The Situation of Older Women in Europe*. Report of a Eurolink-Age Seminar held in Luxembourg, May 1985. Eurolink-Age, Mitcham, Surrey.

As Gibson's report ends the Eurolink-Age report begins with a series of recommendations. This publication brings together material from a three-day seminar held in Luxembourg in May 1985 to look at the

position of older women in Europe. During the seminar an invited group of experts from the EEC countries participated in a series of workshops covering the following topics: women and income, *e.g.* income through the life-cycle, social security, occupational pensions, and taxation and the law; women and health, *e.g.* discrimination within health, mental health, and impact on the social services; older women and family related roles, *e.g.* carers; migrant women; attitudes, culture and religion; images of older women and related attitudes; employment and economic status; preparation for retirement; women and the voluntary sector; and use of the EEC Social Fund.

The report outlines the main points made at each workshop and draws out ten policy recommendations which could be developed within a number of EEC institutions. Several recommendations focus attention on the discrimination built into fiscal policies in many member countries by outdated assumptions concerning the role of older women as members of an 'orthodox family structure'. Thus attention is paid to the importance of assessing people as individuals for purposes of income, taxation and social security; equalising pension ages for men and women; and awarding tax and benefit credits to women for time spent out of the labour market caring for other dependents whether children or elderly relatives. Other recommendations look at issues such as health care and retirement planning, and also highlight the need to tap the pool of expertise which older women possess. The suggestion is made that money from the European Social Fund should be made available both to encourage women to use their skills and to retrain in order to use new technology.

As well as the report of the seminar, the publication includes a series of background papers written by participants describing the circumstances of older women in a number of EEC countries: Britain, Belgium, Italy, W. Germany, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Greece and Ireland. These papers cover a wide range of issues including health status, health care, income maintenance and family life.

Charlotte Nusberg, 'Pension and long-term care policies for mid-life and older women, a perspective from the United States and Canada' *Ageing International*, 13, 5 (1986), 9-17.

In a similar way to the EuroLink-Age publication, this article reports on a two-day meeting of experts from the US and Canada brought together in order to discuss 'their nation's successes and failures in meeting the needs of women in later life'. The main aims of the meeting were to look at income security and long-term care as two fundamental

aspects of women's lives; to identify similarities and differences that exist between the two countries and to learn from these experiences. As Nusberg states, 'the link between poverty and poor health is a close one and any assessment of income adequacy in old age must take into account the availability of universally accessible long-term care services'.

The article outlines the main forms of income maintenance in both countries and then goes on to look in more detail at how the publicly-supported retirement income systems discriminate against women. One of the main differences between the countries is that in Canada a non-contributory Old Age Security (OAS) pension is universal, and although pension entitlement is still low, women are treated in this way as individuals rather than dependents. However, in terms of the adequacy of income maintenance, both systems prove deficient with the poverty rate for older women being about twice that of older men in both the US and Canada.

Experts from both countries reported on the familiar pattern of women's erratic labour force participation, lower wages, low participation in private pension schemes, inadequate survivor and disability protection and reliance on means-tested income supplements. In looking to the future, the changing nature of women's role within the family and the workforce becomes central, and the message from the meeting was the need for adequacy and equity within income support systems, taking on board issues surrounding divorce, homemaker credits and the portability of private pensions. It is interesting to note here that in Canada, as of 1987, 'pension credits earned during the course of a marriage or common-law relationship will be divided equally between two persons upon divorce on a mandatory basis, and will be available on application in the event of separation of one year, or the termination of a common law arrangement'. Finally, it was the consensus of the expert group that in future publicly supported rather than private pensions would remain the major source of income support for older women.

As with income, the debate on long-term care began with definitions. Here long term care was defined as, 'the range of services provided over a sustained period of time in either a community or institutional setting that helps individuals compensate for functional impairments'. Whilst a concern about adequate services for the frail elderly is common to both countries, their approaches to long-term care are entirely different reflecting underlying philosophies concerning state responsibility. The basis of the Canadian system is a range of publicly funded services organised and delivered within the provinces. Financing is shared with

the central Federal Government, which also has a responsibility for minimum standards and national co-ordination. The system is based on need rather than means and no user charges are made for health services. However, other forms of institutional care require residents to contribute from their pensions. The Canadian experts reported that whilst their system provides an infrastructure for the development of services, variation in the amount and type of care provided exists between provinces. Thus some provinces still rely heavily on institutional care whilst others have developed a wide range of services to suit individual needs, such as Manitoba's province-wide Continuing Care Program.

Whilst the financing of long-term care in the US is also shared between federal and state levels, publicly funded and organised services are largely provided for the poor with the majority of services being provided in response to the ability to pay. The Medicare and Medicaid health insurance programmes have fostered a reliance on institutional forms of long-term care and the range and availability of home care services vary between states and in most cases are extremely limited. Only in recent years has there been an attempt to extend Medicaid funding for the provision of home care services to those on low incomes.

Finally the implications of differing forms of service delivery on the lives of older women, many of whom fall into the low income category, were discussed. Participants from both countries commented on the need for easier access to long-term care systems, the importance of greater co-ordination and integration of all services, and the danger of over-medicalisation of long-term care. Whilst the Canadian system was seen to be providing more choice for more people, difficulties exist in both countries in providing cost-effective services and in coping with the shortage of trained personnel needed to run and manage such services. In their concluding discussions, the experts agreed that more long-term care services will be required in the future and that changes in family structure and patterns of volunteering may result in greater public sector involvement in the financing, organisation and provision of services.

COMMENT

In recent years we have begun to see an increasing number of publications concerning the lives of older women particularly from western developed nations. However, whilst some research and analysis is becoming increasingly sophisticated there is still a need for basic

descriptive data detailing the situation of older women which allow for wider cross-cultural comparison and policy formulation. The abstracts all refer to texts which were either written as background documents for an international conference or were produced as a result of such meetings and provide important comparative data on a wide range of issues from both developed and developing countries. It is apparent from the material that despite cultural differences discrimination against older women, particularly in the fields of income support, employment, health care and education, is a worldwide phenomenon. Reports such as these help set the agenda for changes in policy at local, national and international levels. They also provide an invaluable source of basic information which can be used to unite those with an interest both in ageing and in women's issues.

NOTE

- 1 Sheila Peace, *An International Perspective on the Status of Older Women*, International Federation of Aging, Washington D.C., 1981.

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Graham D. Rowles, 'The geography of ageing and the aged: towards an integrated perspective'. *Progress in Human Geography*, 10 (1986), 511-540.

Over 150 items, most published in the early 1980s, are cited in this review of mainly North American and British work with some attention to French and Australian studies. Rowles argues that geographical studies in the field of gerontology have been passing through an information accumulation phase that precedes the emergence of a dominant paradigm, and his purpose in the review is to attempt a synthesis between studies of the spatial and place-related aspects of individuals' ageing experiences and those which feature the aggregated outcomes of population ageing processes on particular localities.

The first section deals with the 'Geographical experience of the ageing individual', and reviews diverse studies of activity patterns, mobility, perceptions of the environment, emotional attachments to place and the meaning of home. While Rowles believes that our understandings of activity spaces are becoming more refined, he argues that there is a need for greater recognition of the diversity of elderly populations. He