

Hilde Rosenmayr

DO ELDERLY WOMEN HAVE SPECIAL CONCERNS?

The problem area of older women, although relevant for a majority of all women (do to general higher life-expectancy), might have appeared a discussion about a minority group at the Nairobi Forum 85. The general topic about the access of women to equality, education, employment and development could have concentrated into deploring older women as the most disadvantaged group, and, above that, in identifying them as personalized obstacles for the development of younger women.

None of these possible fears turned out to come true. The plenary with the motto: "Older Women Speak Out and Attest To A Fulfilled Life", presented old women who had set new trends for themselves and for others by managing novel careers with professional, cultural and personal success at various levels, combining the best of traditional femininity with a commanding outlook on the necessities of their changing worlds.

A large group of elderly women from all over the world, among them professional social workers as well as women feeling the responsibility for other women, discussed women's problems of the second half of the life-span during five mornings out of the seven working days of the Forum. Apart from the plenary there were four main topics:

- the key role of the women of fifty,
- the economics of aging,
- family and community support,
- aging women in the Third world.

The first workshop on *the importance of the threshold of age fifty* in women's lives enjoyed the contribution of Betty Friedan, whose lifelong journey through feminism has led her to a point of assessing women's importance for the human community after her biological role of child-bearing and -nurturing is finished. According to Betty Friedan it is

not by turning away from this attitude of nurturing that a woman of fifty may best continue her destiny, but by asserting this very core of her vitality in a larger context towards new solidarities. Used to live through many anguishes, middle-aged women now have to break through the "old-age mystique" and clarify for themselves and for others the real size of dangers like menopausal discomforts or threats like e.g. Alzheimer's disease. Higher longevity of women, up to now an unsolved enigma, may very well have to do with the way women live: middle age is a challenge to become one's true self and to found new adult relationships not based on blood ties or sexual ties, where caretaking of others may be continued on a broader and truer level with a new attunement to life, and mutual recognition and sharing of new values in persons.

It seemed like an illustration of Betty Friedan's ideas from different parts of the globe, when other women reported on processes of the formation of elderly women's groups for various purposes. Ignition for such activities has to be derived from the accumulated expertise and knowledge of previous years, provided there is a willingness to put them into practise for the improvement of concretely observed situations of women in middle-age. The readiness for change in women's lives, frequently hidden, has to be dug out; paradoxically, a linkage to old structures is of immense value whenever this is possible. Recognition of one's own aging is a necessary factor for growth at this stage of life, provided this does not separate us from other women's aging. Then the question: what did the poorest of them miss during their previous years? will be a good starting point for meaningful and continuing activities, which will multiply slowly but certainly.

Family planning for the whole life-span was asked for, not just in the sense of regulation of numbers and spacing of children, and not just for rights and responsibilities within the family; also the area of linkage, where family and larger community are at interplay, has to be considered, thereby also including incomplete families and singles.

The *economics of aging*, an area of considerable - and twofold - disadvantage for women, was largely discussed. In both developed and developing countries earning money is difficult for elderly women. Also volunteer work, which frequently is considered a kind of meaningful activity for old women, needs training and a certain amount of

professionalization.

In developed countries many economic difficulties arise from women's non-participation in old age provisions and retirement plans which are mostly tailored by husbands according to their own needs and considering women's (widows', divorcees') needs to a minor degree.

In developing countries income-generating projects are crucial sources of maintenance for the rising numbers of elderly women, who very frequently have no other support, as maintenance by their children becomes less and less reliable. Pilot projects have shown good results, particularly when women can produce traditional products, like poultry, eggs, honey, seedlings, vegetables, objects of handicraft etc. Unlimited copying, however, should be discontinued. Moreover, solid income is to be expected only if women are given additional opportunities like access to capital of their own and a better understanding and managing of marketing processes. Impulses have to be ever renewed in this area according to the environmental and larger economic context. Here international organizations, working together with government bodies, can make important contributions by providing financial help for better tools, and, even more so, by assistance in the evaluation of the concrete situation.

When treating the question of *family or community support for elderly women* representatives of developing countries vehemently voiced their disgust in putting elders into old-age homes, what they believe to be the common practice in developed countries (which is an error: approximately 10 % of the elderly population live in old-age homes in the U.S.A.). They almost unanimously expressed the serious wish of developing countries to care for the elderly in the families; this, however, runs into growing difficulties. The reality of growing numbers of elderly, especially of women, surviving for a longer time, fewer children willing to stay with their parents, growing alienation of the young from traditional customs and expectations of the old, all this works toward situations, where it becomes harder and harder to reconcile value orientations with the tendencies for necessary development into a new economic order. The wish for such a reconciliation is very strong; however, new strategies have yet to be found to achieve it.

In all regions of the world the necessity was felt very strongly to consider devices to better enable families to care of their elders as almost nowhere we have the kind of parents we wish to have. For a growing length of time, a fast growing portion of aging women live in family situations which are not in accordance with their expectations and do not meet the full scope of their needs. In developing countries alienation from their children is frequently imminently linked with the threat of poverty and the impossibility of survival, as just about 10 % of women there can hope to receive pension payments. In developed countries, where survival is more or less generally guaranteed, new kinds of efforts are demanded from families which are willing to meet tending and caretaking needs for old and ailing parents; such attitudes of ongoing family cohesion also vis-à-vis long states of sickness, when practised, ask for planning and organising strategies, which in many families have to be learnt anew. Failures here are frequent, and such situations may affect individual development.

Situations of having to take care of old parents grow in number and duration; in most cases they have to be unequally shouldered by women of middle age. Due to growing acceptance of new standards of life and self-assurance this may mean a setback for many of them. Moreover, relationships between mothers and daughters have undergone many changes, which may contain as yet unresolved tensions rendering such situations even more difficult. In the workshops initiatives were presented to ease such situations by mediating between families and public services, like respite care, external services of institutions etc. It was stressed that also such services, although delivered on a voluntary basis, frequently by elderly women, need clear organization structures as well as an attitude of mutual trust.

For the workshop *Older Women in the Third World* speakers from various African and Asian countries had been invited. Again the conviction was expressed that at the core of their people's minds an attitude is firmly rooted that elders are to be venerated, as they have access to knowledge and powers denied to persons of younger age. Even if governments do not list care of the old as an important priority, organizations have to do it; also women's groups in villages should try to integrate elderly women into their activities, trying to make use of their traditional knowledge and to combine it with modern techniques, thereby tying together young girls'

education in certain fields with the broader outlook on life older women may have gained. On the other hand it was recognized that many learning processes for both young and older women will be necessary.

The conviction was expressed that developing societies must hold to their values, among which veneration and respect of the old has to be an outstanding one. Women from so-called developing countries think very highly of their own responsibilities as educators of other women. Applied to intergenerational relations, this was pronounced as follows: It is our responsibility as women to educate our children to take care of their elders and to respect their opinions; this responsibility becomes the more urgent, as it will be harder and harder for them to do so. On the other hand, we must not teach them respect for their elders on the sole expectation that we shall profit from it ourselves. Rather we must see that continuous options remain open for our later years, and go on influencing attitudes through our own behaviour, what eventually will lead younger persons to follow voluntarily.

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FARMERS AND RURAL SOCIETIES IN UNCERTAIN FOOD PRODUCTION SYSTEM*)

Introduction

The idea of the Congress, the change and uncertainty, aptly expresses the basic *Leitmotiv* of the development process and adjustment of the world agriculture. Changes leading to "breaking" of equilibrium in technical, economic and social relations of production factors, aiming at new equilibrium conditions, allow to study and determine the driving forces of the changes, i.e. the development or regression of agriculture. Getting to know the causative powers of changes, breaking of old, and searching for new equilibrium conditions determine the content of the concept of agricultural dynamics, which is, in my opinion, the essential category, without which all programming of agriculture will be a voluntaristic activity, unlinked with the realities of life. The uncertainty, interpreted as "not being dependent on", that is to say, situation, conditions independent of the agricultural producer, is undoubtedly, a factor of changes in farming, it "feeds" those changes. It means that specified changes in agricultural management are a protection from the menace brought by the category of uncertainty. On the other hand, the dynamics and development, while introducing agriculture in new areas, in new technical-economic and social conditions, confront it with new uncertainties, new threats.

Thus, we state that changes and uncertainty are categories closely linked with agricultural management. You cannot get to know their functioning mechanism if you consider them apart, and not in a mutual causal-effective nexus.

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