DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 802 CE 060 278

AUTHOR Chaney, Elsa M., Ed.
TITLE Empowering Older Women: Cross-Cultural Views. A Guide for Discussion and Training.
INSTITUTION American Association of Retired Persons, Washington, D.C.; International Federation on Ageing, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 69p.; Includes selections from the "Empowerment" Workshops at the Conference on Coping with Social Change: Programs That Work (Acapulco, Mexico, June 1989) and the Conference of the Association of Women in Development (Washington, DC, November 1989). For proceedings and selected papers from the first conference, see CE 050 277-279. This module is one of a series of publications sponsored by the Global Link for Midlife and Older Women (GLOW), an informal, international, network of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consciousness Raising; *Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Background; Cultural Context; Cultural Differences; Cultural Influences; Demography; *Developed Nations; *Developing Nations; *Females; Feminism; Foreign Countries; Life Style; Middle Aged Adults; *Older Adults; Public Policy; Rural Urban Differences; Sex Fairness; Sex Role; Sex Stereotypes; Womens Education; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This awareness-raising module on women at midlife and older ages in cross-cultural perspective is intended for discussion groups, workshops, and college courses on women's lives in different societies. Based on empowerment workshops in Acapulco, Mexico, and the District of Columbia, in which women from a wide range of social classes and occupations participated, the publication has three parts: (1) a paper, "Empowerment of Older Women: Evidence from Historical and Contemporary Sources," written as a background document for the workshops by Elsa M. Chaney; (2) transcripts of the two discussions at the workshops; and (3) a study guide designed for discussion groups and workshops aimed at a general audience, as well as for groups that wish to go more deeply into the demographic aspects of aging populations. The study guide contains outlines for three discussion sessions. Session I provides background information on empowerment of older women. Session II covers some of the main points in the Chaney article on older women's empowerment in cross-cultural perspective. Session III is based on the "conversations" at the workshops among 13 empowered older women from 10 countries. Excerpts from "Aging in the Third World" (Kevin Kinsella), with extensive statistical data, are provided in support of session I. A list of resource organizations concludes the publication. (KC)

American Association
of Retired Persons
and
International
Federation on Ageing

Empowering Older Women:

Cross-Cultural Views

A Guide for Discussion and Training

Empowering Older Women:

Cross-Cultural Views

A Guide for Discussion and Training

with
Selection from the "Empowerment" Workshops
at the
Conference on Coping with Social Change: Programs that Work
Acapulco, Mexico – June 1989
and the
Conference of the Association of Women in Development
Washington, DC – November 1989

Edited by Elsa M. Chaney

A publication of the Women's Initiative
of the American Association of Retired Persons
in cooperation with the
International Federation on Ageing

Table of Contents

Cover photo: Courtesy of Simone de Nave

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are presented for information, debate and discussion, and do not necessarily represent formal policies of the American Association of Retired Persons.

Preface

This publication is intended as an education, training, and awareness-raising module on women at midlife and older ages in cross-cultural perspective. It is designed for discussion groups and workshops on women's lives in different societies; in Latin American and Women's Studies programs at both the graduate and undergraduate level in colleges and universities; and as an information source for persons interested in the topic.

The module is one of a series of occasional publications sponsored by the Global Link for Midlife and Older Women (GLOW), an international network of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. The activities of the Global Link are funded by the Women's Initiative of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and are conducted in partnership with the International Federation on Ageing (IFA). Both organizations have headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Since 1987, AARP's Women's Initiative has collaborated with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in focusing attention on the situation of women at midlife and older ages in Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1988, AARP and PAHO jointly organized the first Consulting Group Meeting, at which experts from fourteen countries reported on research concerning the health, psychosocial, and economic problems that frequently increase in number and seriousness as women grow older. This meeting resulted in two publications, *Midlife and Older Women in Latin America and the Caribbean*, available from PAHO, and the shorter *Midlife and Older Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Status Report*, available from AARP. These publications are available in both English and Spanish.

A conference was held in Acapulco, Mexico, in 1989 as one of the precongresses to the XIVth World Congress of Gerontology. The Acapulco conference, entitled "Coping with Social Change: Programs that Work," highlighted programs and initiatives undertaken primarily by the nongovernmental sector, that address the needs of older women.

As part of the Mexico conference and also at a workshop sponsored by the AARP Women's Initiative at the 1989 Conference of the Association of Women in Development (Washington, D.C.), older women of achievement in different cultures spoke out in an alternative format to scholarly papers and reports. Their presentation took the form of "conversations" on various topics related to growing older in different societies. Participating were women from a wide range of social classes and occupations: an ambassador, a senator, a household worker and union organizer, Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, several retired UN organization officials, and others.

This publication presents the fruits of the empowerment workshops in Acapulco and Washington. There are three parts:

1. A paper on older women in cross-cultural perspective, written as a background document for the workshops convened by Elsa M. Chaney
2. Transcripts of the two "conversations"
3. A study guide designed for discussion groups and workshops aimed at a general audience, as well as for groups that wish to go more deeply into the demographic aspects of aging populations, including use as a module in college and university courses.

A number of persons were involved in this project, without whose help this publication would not have been possible. For their consistent support, coordination, and planning, I would like to thank Charlotte Nusberg, secretary general of the IFA, and Irene Hoskins, co-coordinator of GLOW. Elsa M. Chaney was the originator of the idea to focus on the empowerment of women at older ages; she wrote the background paper on the empowerment of older women and convened the two conversations on empowerment. Her enthusiasm, scholarship, and guidance, as well as her involvement at the grassroots level, with women's issues in Latin America and the Caribbean were instrumental in the successful completion of this project.

I also would like to express special appreciation to the participants in the two conversations on empowerment, many of whom traveled thousands of miles to be part of this pioneering effort to explore the dimensions of women's access to power at older ages in a cross-cultural perspective. Finally, thanks go to the consultant for the Mexico conference, Lee Sennott-Miller; the co-convener of the Washington, D.C., conversation, Virginia Hazzard; and the transcribers of the two conversations: Edward Garcia for the Mexico conference, and Catherine Lundoff for the Washington meeting.

Elizabeth K. Mullen
Director
AARP Women's Initiative

Empowerment of Older Women: Evidence from Historical and Contemporary Sources

*Elsa M. Chaney, Ph.D.**

Introduction

Neither in popular commentary nor in scholarly research does the situation of women at midlife and older ages in Latin America and the Caribbean present much basis for optimism. Despite talk of the ripening and the wisdom that maturity brings, psychologists note the disengagement and withdrawal of the older person from active life (McArdle and Yeracaris, 1981: 308). We now have a category of the "oldest old" to express this idea, distinguishing those who have passed a borderline into infirmity and dependency from the "young elderly." In the industrialized West, and in the Third World, a youth culture or *juvenilizaçao* is pushed through the mass media, as Garcia Castro (1988:24) notes; she adds that "there is little or no concern in government planning, or even in sociological and feminist literature in Latin America about the elderly, who are the silent minority in a continent where the youth predominates."

Without attempting to minimize the very real problems that face older women, can we envision other scenarios? Do the lives of the older persons improve or deteriorate depending on the epoch in which they live; on the structure of their situation, that is, whether they live in the developing or developed world, or whether they are urban or rural residents? Does their status vary according to whether their culture is pastoral, nomadic, peasant, artisan, or modern/technological? How do the particular family structures and kinship systems influence the fate of older people? And above all, because this is our specific interest, how do older women fare compared with younger women and older men in all of these situations?

In this presentation, I hope to address these issues, emphasizing the sociocultural aspects of older women's situation and potential for action.

The historical period and place of our birth, as well as our natal culture, are factors over which we have no control. But must older persons accept the structure of their situation? Short of migrating, what can they do to change their lives? How much do personal creativity and initiative count in mitigating the negative aspects or improving the positive aspects of life situations? Can people at midlife and older ages join together with others in organized efforts to improve their prospects in the years left to them? And, above all, what are older women doing in terms of their own individual initiative, and also in collaboration with others, that could have positive repercussions for themselves and their societies?

Evidence from the works of ethnography, anthropology, history, sociology, and psychology supports the following propositions

1. Almost all preindustrial societies, past and present, were (or are) structured so that persons of older ages, including women, could (or can) acquire prestige, authority, and material contributions to their well-being. Brown (1982:143) points to the "amazing unanimity" in the findings that women's lives improve with the onset of middle age. Among the Tutsi and Hutu (Burundi), for example, the changes in social status for women, from child and adolescent to wife and mother, then to mother-in-law and grandmother, constitute a progression toward independence, power, and the other attributes of superiority (Albert 1971:189). Writing of the preindustrial city, Sjoberg (1960:170) concludes that women in traditional rural society "have had greater freedom and less differentiation by sex than those in town."
2. As will be evident, not all older people in such cultures uniformly acquire the same degree of prestige and power simply by growing older; therefore, empowerment must depend to some extent on personal initiative.
3. Opportunities to gain empowerment at older ages tend to diminish with modernization and development (Cowgill and Holmes 1972:310-13; Osako 1982; Palmore and Manton 1974:205-06; Silverman 1987:330-32).

*Elsa M. Chaney is Chair, Women and International Development Program, University of Iowa, U.S.A.

4. Deterioration of older peoples' position in industrial societies may be a stage, and when societies reach a certain level, the situation can improve (Palmore and Manton 1974:208-10).[3]
5. Older women's status improves less than older men's; nevertheless, the women's position improves substantially over the life span and remains high throughout old age (Silverman 1987:330-32; Simmons 1960:81)
6. Organization may be an important key to empowerment of older persons, hastening the day when both preindustrial and newly industrial societies extend certain benefits to older persons. In the United States, we might add, a certain time lag appears in extending esteem and material support to older people.

Some Essential Definitions

Any attempt to define the life span in terms of "stages" is difficult. Erickson (1950) identified eight "ages of man." According to Falk, et al. (1981:20), age categories differ widely; Comanches (Native Americans) had 5 life stages; the Kikuyu of Kenya, 6 for males and 8 for females; the Andaman Islanders, 23 for men; and the Incas identified 10. The statistical sources I use define midlife quite arbitrarily as beginning at age 55, and older age as commencing at age 75. It is important to note, however, that old age is a cultural/social, rather than a chronological, concept (Keith and Kertzer 1984:20). Among many ethnographers, the convention has been to take the person's, or the major informant's, own view on whether a man or woman is old; people in preliterate cultures often do not know their age. Moreover, even though the developing world has more old-old as populations age, elder status still may be attained as early as 40 or 45 years in some cultures.

Sometimes people ascend to elder status through an event. For example, in cultures where residence is patrilocal and sons bring their new wives to the paternal home, women attain elder status as mothers-in-law when the first son marries. In the same way, fathers become elders when sons take over the family farm. Nowadays, however, with so many young people migrating from the rural areas after deciding that farming is a hard business in which they prefer not to become involved, persons 55 years old and over in some developing countries are still farming—far beyond the time when they would have continued an active role in agriculture in the past. This is the situation throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, where the average age of small farmers has risen to between 55 and 60 years in most countries. Thus, the acquiring of a resident daughter-in-law or the takeover of a farm by a son may be long delayed, and other criteria may mark the passing to elder status.

Empowerment also needs to be defined. Following an early attempt at examining the fate of the aging cross-culturally (Simmons 1945),[4] the following elements might be included in empowerment: access to food and other assets and resources and the increase in, or acquiring of, authority over others.[5] Silverman and Maxwell (1978:93) suggest that information confers power: "When old people know something that younger people consider relevant, the position of old people in the community is enhanced." For women, I suggest that the notion of empowerment means increased freedom to choose occupations, pastimes, and friends, not only because one is freed from the demands of raising children, but also freed from the formal taboos and informal strictures of traditional cultures that often surround women in their childbearing years.[6]

These considerations lead to several other definitions that I shall need to introduce here: the idea of "life span" or "life course" and the idea of status and roles. Many scholars of aging no longer employ the notion of rather rigid "stages" through which one arbitrarily passes at certain more or less fixed chronological ages. In cross-national research, in particular, employing stage concepts has proven awkward since (as we have seen) developing societies may or may not link various stages to fixed ages.[7] Rather, these scholars tell us, life needs to be seen as a flow, a continuity, with one stage overlapping and melding into the next. The life span notion accommodates very well the idea from developmental psychology that life is not a preordained progress from infancy to adult maturity, followed by inevitable decline, but rather, that beyond maturity are still years in which persons at midlife and older ages can go on developing their intellect, creativity, and productive capacity.

For women, this new approach to adulthood—as Giele (1982:1) so aptly puts it—questions "the notion that women, after undergoing the 'change of life' somehow wither as they slide into their later years." She documents the new theories (ibid.: chap.1) on human development that go well beyond childhood and adolescence to midlife and older ages. Other scholars concur; Brown (1982:147) and Benedek (1950:22) suggest a new developmental phase for older women, a time in later life that presents tremendous opportunities for learning.[8]

Women's Roles at Older Ages in the Life Course

In the anthropological and sociological literature, women and men at various points in their life course are reported as moving into new and different statuses. In preindustrial societies, midlife and elderly status typically opens up a series of roles generally reserved to those of advanced years, and these roles confer prestige. As Albert (1971:189) puts it, "the concept of *ubukuru* (superiority) as chronological seniority is relevant to social role according to age....The principle of increase of power with age is valid throughout the life-span of women. Nevertheless, superiority is not determined by chronological age, but by social role."[9]

Thus, the available roles for women appear to increase greatly with age. From the constricted role of daughter, in which her conduct is closely watched because her good name must be guarded against the day of her marriage, the woman assumes the perhaps even narrower wife and motherhood roles; after that, however, the woman progresses at midlife and older ages to a wide variety of attractive options. This is not to say that women in their childbearing years, if they also participate in economic production and have some control over resources, do not earn esteem. But their activities center on their domestic roles that take priority even when they are combined with agricultural production and perhaps some artisan work, horticulture, and/or market trading and commerce.

In contrast, at midlife women in these cultures can look forward to fulfilling roles endowed with much greater prestige and authority and to handing on to others the onerous parts of their domestic and farming activities. As Brown notes (1982:143),

> *The "forty-year-old jitters," the "empty-nest," and the "rolelessness" which have been ascribed to the middle-aged women in Western society do not apply. Overwhelmingly, the cross-cultural evidence indicates positive changes. Middle age brings fewer restrictions, the right to exert authority over certain kinsmen, and the opportunity for achievement and recognition beyond the household.*

First, in many cases the woman assumes authority over adult unmarried daughters; combined with the mother-in-law role, she begins to find substantial relief from the day-to-day workload as the younger women take on the heavier burdens in both house and field (Rubenstein and Johnsen 1982:138). Next, the older woman enters upon grandmotherhood and often takes on the socialization role of her sons' and daughters' children, but not always with the full burden of responsibility.[10] Weibel-Orlando (1990) documents the important role of Sioux grandmothers in the enculturation of young children, historically and to the present day, and she thinks that the same patterns prevail among the Muskogean language groups (Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws). She also documents the fictive grandmothering among indigenous American grandmothers in fostering and custodial care of children.

Other roles that the older woman may fulfill concurrently, or instead (particularly if she does not have children), are those of councillor in those societies where women elders also rule; shaman/*curandera* (curer)/midwife and other roles associated with childbirth and health care; mythkeeper or repository of the culture and history of the ethnic group; witch, who sometimes combines medical knowledge with broader powers of divination and control; master artisan, who knows the traditional stitchery, weaving, and basketry patterns and techniques handed down from ancient times; and administrator of the family food supply and other resources, and in some cases, of landed estates. Coles (1990) has an excellent resume of research showing how women in African societies enjoy increases in power and autonomy as they grow older, as well as a fascinating account of her own recent research on middle-aged and older Hausa (Nigeria) women.

Each of these roles encompasses a wide variety of activities, and when women reach elder status, they can of course fulfill more than one role—making the lives of women of more advanced years in preindustrial societies very rich indeed.[11]

In contrast, women who migrate to the urban areas of their own countries or across international boundaries[12] or who are caught inadvertently in the path of modernization of the rural sector, may find that activities associated with certain valued roles are no longer open to them. That is, agribusiness approaches may make smallholder farming unprofitable and change the basis of peasant life even if a woman does not move. In these cases, women may either leave their extended families to go to the towns or see younger members of their households leave to go to the cities or abroad.

Just as their sisters in developed societies, they must often "grandmother" from a distance. Cheap plastic manufactured goods take the place of handcrafted traditional articles of daily or decorative use, and older master artisans have no one to whom

they can pass on their skills. Their wise counsel and advice is no longer valued because it is the young who learn how to manipulate the information systems in the new technological setting—indeed, the young may need to translate and interpret the modern experience to the elders. In the rural peasant household, as Silverman and Maxwell (1983:53) note, the young know that they must learn from elders to survive. In the urban or modernized rural milieu, this is not the case.

Additionally, doctors and medical services—even if just at the local *posta médica* (medical clinic)—take on the women's midwifery and curing arts. Television, movies, and the fascination of the town itself blunt the younger generation's interest in indigenous lore. Modern political arrangements make no provision for peasant or herding women to share their knowledge and experience.

In sum, as Whyte (1978:173) found in his review of the status of women in 186 cultures of preindustrial societies, women in more complex cultures tend "to have less domestic authority and less independent solidarity with other women" (for example, when hunters and gatherers settle into intensive farming); he adds, however, that their informal influence and joint partnership with males may increase. (For another view, see Coles's [1990] account of urban Hausa women, who, despite rules of strict seclusion, exercise a great deal of power and control over both males and females among their kin networks, and through midwifery, trading, practice of herbal medicine, and property owning.)

Why Study Older Women in Traditional Societies?

This may be an appropriate place to pose a question: Why should we bother with this exercise on the roles of older women in preindustrial societies? Isn't exploring the status of midlife and older women in exotic cultures, even if these exist in the present day, a waste of time? Even though we might find accounts of these societies quaint and interesting, aren't they soon slated to disappear?

Not only is exploring the kinds of roles women at midlife and older ages fulfill in traditional societies instructive, but doing so appears mandatory. All of us, whether we come from the urban areas of developed or developing countries or regions where large-scale agriculture has displaced traditional smallholder systems, have a sense that many of the young today are perishing because they lack a center, an orientation to life, and a value system—essentials that were precisely what the old systems conferred. Naroll (1983:293-99) studied 128 societies and found that grandparents are the persons who take care of the moral education of the young in the majority of preindustrial cultures; in the 10 modern industrial societies in his sample, the role of grandparent has been weakened or is absent. Naroll's analysis concludes that the young in modern society lack a set of core values related to moral conduct precisely because the older members of the extended family no longer pass them on.

At the same time, older people feel set aside before their time, since their status no longer opens up to them the wide variety of roles they were able to fulfill in rural areas. Older women not only can, but must, strive to recapture whatever can be salvaged of these roles; their contributions are unique and are needed precisely for implementing the alternative strategies of development that can preserve the rich heritage of traditional cultures. They not only can, but must, make linkages with the younger generation.

There is an additional reason why an exploration of the roles that older women fulfill in traditional societies can be valuable. If older women today carry out valued activities through which they gain prestige and authority, they provide evidence that other women at midlife and older ages also can do so. They demonstrate that neither sex nor age implies any inherent genetic inferiority. The achievements of midlife and older women show us that biology—whether determining our sex at birth or determining our age status in the inexorable march of the life span—is not destiny.

Finally, it is important to note that the world is far from being completely urbanized and industrialized. The majority of the world's peoples still live in rural areas and earn a living from agriculture.[13] Although proportions of the total populations residing in towns have increased dramatically in Latin America, the countryside is not emptying out. In all but a few countries, rural populations continue to grow, although population growth rates were not as high as urban rates in the period between the 1960 and 1970 and the 1970 and 1980 census rounds.[14]

Thus, substantial rural populations will be living in traditional lifestyles for quite some time to come. According to projections of Kinsella (1988:1), at present 58 percent of the people over age 55 live in the developing world (totaling 370 millions). By 2020, the proportion will increase to 72 percent, representing 1 billion persons. The Caribbean has the highest proportion of persons 55 years and over—12 percent—while in Latin America 9 percent of the population is in this age group (in Asia and

Africa, persons in the 55-years-and-older age group are 9 and 7 percent, respectively) (ibid.).

On the other hand, there is a marked tendency for more women to live in urban areas, and sex ratios by age show opposite patterns in rural and urban areas in almost all Latin American and Caribbean countries—an important demographic fact to keep in mind when planning for older people. That is, there is a marked excess of men in the rural areas that tends to increase in each succeeding age group, becoming noticeable in some countries among persons of working age (15 to 64 years of age) and much more marked by age 65 and over.

Conversely, in urban areas, there is an excess of women in each age group after 15 years, and these ratios become extremely low in some countries for women at midlife and older ages (55 years of age and over). For example, there are 140 men who are 55 years of age and over for every 100 women in that age group in the rural areas of Uruguay, while there are only 74 older men to each 100 women in the cities. Other countries show lesser, but still fairly substantial, differentials between the numbers of older women and older men in the rural and urban sectors. The increasing urbanization of older women makes redressing the loss of role they suffer in the urban setting very important.

Traditional Roles That Empower Older Women[15]

Perhaps the role mentioned most often in the literature on women's power and prestige at midlife and older ages is that of the **mother of adult children**. As Paulme (1971:14) puts it,

> *In all [African] societies...sons, whether princes or peasants, will always remain boys in the eyes of their mother, and it is the mother who carries on the management of the household after the father's death, who chooses the first wife...for her sons, and who has the most say in arranging the marriage of her daughters....The mother expects to be treated with respect by her children, and will not resign her position until the time arrives when her sons are themselves the fathers of families, and her vigour [is] now diminished with age.*

Paulme (ibid.) also mentions that, in terms of their treatment by sons and daughters, women in their later years become virtually indistinguishable from men in most of the African culture groups she studied. One African group, the Arunta, call older women "woman father" (Bart 1969:7).

An added note is the emphasis some authors put on the relations that mothers cultivate with their sons (and vice versa). In her study of 36 societies, Bart (1969) found that the loving care lavished on sons results in bonds between mothers and sons that often are stronger than those between sons and their wives. Gutmann (1982:151) found that the increased status of women is highly dependent on the success of their sons and how the mother has carried out her role of supporting and enhancing their ambitions. This relationship pays off in later life; as Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow note (1981:482) in the village they studied in Barbados, "Women tend to be the main recipients of the economic assistance that adult children, especially sons, are expected to and do give to their parents." The women themselves express this idea, they report, in comments such as "Never mind they humbug you in the early, they crown you in the late" (ibid.).

There is one fascinating exception to the dearth of material on mature adult females in the Caribbean region: a thesis by Durant-González (1976) on how the mothering role contributes to "big woman" status in Jamaica. She writes of the St. Mary district, but her observations are true for much of the rural area. Big woman status typically is attained when the woman has adult children, she says (ibid.:41), and is confirmed by her entry into the grandmother role.

> *The social age called "big woman" is a high status phase in the life cycle of women in St. Mary district. It means that a female has attained full adult status with all of the privileges and responsibilities that female adult status confers. Those women who are classified as "big woman" are nearing or have reached age fifty and beyond. The "big woman" is recognized as a person who is in a position of authority, power, control and responsibility over her yard (the household members)....*
>
> *In this district, "big woman" is related to being a successful mother—natural or adoptive. Proof of this lies in the relationship she has with her adult children which is symbolized through the care they give to her in the form of goods and services. Generally she is or has been successful in a traditional district occupation for women such as dressmaking, higglering (market selling), or shopkeeping (ibid.:39-40).*

Closely related to the same age status is the role of **mother-in-law.** The dominance of older women in this relationship appears well-nigh universal among preindustrial societies: deference is paid to the mother-in-law, and she is likely to be served in most cultures where sons bring their wives to the paternal household. Paulme (1971:11) mentions that among the Dogan, when the bride arrives at the house, the bridegroom's mother "sings a joyful song: 'I shall no longer fetch wood and fetch water; I shall no longer pound grain....'" In Kpelle society, according to Bledsoe (1980:115), mothers choose wives for their sons and thus gain control over the labor of daughters-in-law. And Hayes (writing of the Sudan, 1975:624) notes that the influence and authority of older women "closely resembles that of men because of their influence over daughters and daughters-in-law, and the great respect of their sons."

In their study of 35 peasant societies, Michaelson and Goldschmidt (1971:338-41) also comment on the authority women assume over daughters-in-law in patrilineal households; this is the only "official power," they say, but nevertheless women even in a patriarchal system can exert considerable unofficial power over sons. The influential mother-in-law figure is prominent in commentary on contemporary Indian life (Vatuk 1980:290 ff); Hiebert (1981:221,224). Srinivas (1977:230-31) also mentions the "increasing egalitarianism between husband and wife, as the woman matures into a mother and mother-in-law." Brown (1970:161) shows that the mother-in-law's authority in some cases extends to her daughters' husbands who, among the Iroquois, were expected to please their mothers-in-law; if the latter did not think the husbands made sufficient efforts to do so, they could terminate the marriage. Goodale (1971:52) also speaks of the duty of the son-in-law to serve his wife's mother among the Tiwi of Australia.

Perhaps the most important role of all open to older women is that of **grandmother.** Fifteen of the 30 cultures studied by Bart (1969:3) had institutionalized at least one grandmother role, including socialization and care of the grandchild. She suspects that powerful grandmother roles existed in more of these cultures, but male anthropologists missed the information because "their interests lay elsewhere." Grandmother roles were present in 12 of the 17 cultures where women's status improved; in the remaining 5, women's status improved, with no grandmother role(s) reported.

Often a younger women will send one or more of her children back to her village for her mother to raise, sometimes out of economic necessity, but at other times to provide support and assistance to the older woman. Sending children back to their grandmothers is common in societies where peasant women go to the city to work as domestic servants. In most cases they are not allowed to bring their own children to a live-in situation; thus their only recourse is to foster their children with their own mothers (Bunster and Chaney 1989:31-43).

Francis (1988:84) mentions Kerr's description of the grandmother in Jamaica who has great prestige. She has the right to be near her grandchildren and is consulted frequently about them; they often are sent to spend time with her. Francis comments that this role forges strong links between the generations and generally ensures some help for older persons in their later years (ibid.). Fry and Keith (1982:63) posit a "cross-age alliance between generations," particularly in societies with elaborate age organizations; adjacent generations, they say, tend to be more competitive, but the old can gain power from an alliance with youth. In Latin America, the powerful grandmother figure is almost mythic:

> *As a woman grows older, her prestige increases. Especially in the middle and upper classes, there are cases of veritable matriarchs who preside over the extended family with a certain degree of despotism. Some widows retain control and management of the family business or fortune.*

> *The respect and attentiveness accorded to older women by husbands and sons alike would astonish many a North American grandmother. Married sons and daughters long removed from the maternal roof would not dream of making a major decision in their own lives without consulting la mamá. Nor will a single major holiday, or the mother's birthday (or in Chile, saint's day), pass without all the sons and daughters coming, with their children, to greet the old mother (Chaney 1979:48).*

Aside from older mother and grandmother, women at midlife and older ages have a variety of other roles open. One of the most interesting might be called **keeper of the lineage.** Brown (1982:144) points to the role of older women—with knowledge of kin relations and marriage negotiations, as well as personal knowledge of prospective brides in sex-segregated societies—as the supreme power in deciding who is going to marry whom. Hamilton

(1970:19) provides evidence on the Australian Aborigines; Faithorn (1976:90) on the Kafe of New Guinea; and Mernissi (1975:71) on the Moroccan Muslim society (all cited in Brown 1982); and Lee (1985:29-33) on the !Kung Bushpeople.

Women also play the leading role in initiation rites for girls (Brown 1982:145; Richards 1956). They also know the history, lore, and oral literature of their cultures. For Jamaica, as Francis (1988:85) notes, the African population transferred there as slaves brought not only songs, stories, games, and dances, but the Kumina religion; these all passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, with "the old people of the village being the recognized guardians and transmitters." After several generations during which such traditions were depreciated, she says, Jamaicans began exploring their roots and recuperating their heritage in the 1940s with the first stirrings toward independence. Both women and men have gained pride and self-esteem through their importance in the research related to this effort.

Religion and ritual are fields that older women often dominate in preindustrial cultures. In her chapter on "The Holy Women among My Grandmothers," Beverly Hungry Wolf (1982:31-41) documents how Siksika (Native American) women elders take charge of the most important religious event of their people, the Sun Dance. Indigenous women among most of the Middle Atlantic coastal Algonkian peoples were powerful shamans (Grumet 1980:54). Amoss (1981:227) reports how old women and men maintain their prestige through their control of scarce information about traditional ritual practices; in these cases, she says, change allowed people to reestablish themselves in useful roles.

The most important religious system in Zinacantn, the *cargos* or religious/civil offices, depend equally on the role of women and men (Mathews 1985), as do the religious activities of women in Oaxaca (Chiñas 1973:71) and among the Mazahuas (indigenous peoples) of Mexico (Iwanska 1966:178-179). Among the Tiwi of Australia, ethnographers had completely missed the important role of women in religious ritual because they had decided without investigation that only men were eligible and thus did not investigate women's part (Goodale 1971:xxii). The literature on religious/ritual and older women is vast, and this sampling gives only a few examples.

Other reports document older women's empowerment through attainment of such roles as midwife and healer; administrator of household resources, lands, and other property; traders and businesswomen, and masters of traditional skills.

Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of older women's empowerment is their role in **decision making and leadership.** As with religion and ritual, examples abound; the few given here by no means include all that are mentioned in the literature. Etienne and Leacock (1980) is an especially good source documenting the queens and female chiefs who led groups of American indigenous peoples at the village and tribal level in the Powhatan Confederacy near Jamestown, in the Chesapeake Bay region, as well as among the Wampanoag in Massachusetts Bay colony; in addition, many women leaders were married to men who were not part of the leadership structure, demonstrating that women could acquire authority in their own right.

Gough (1975:71) says that women take part in councils in many hunting societies (in contrast to agrarian states, where "male dominance grew with settled agriculture" [ibid.: 75]). Among the Mundurucú (Murphy and Murphy 1974), old women exercise decision-making powers that otherwise are reserved to men. Smock (1977:197) reports that as women grow older, their views are often taken into account among the Ga and Ewe peoples of Ghana, and sometimes Akan women serve as chiefs. Lebeuf's chapter in Paulme (1971) documents a great many other instances on women's participation in political organizations.

One of the most interesting instances of female political power conferred on older women is the role of Omu in Igbo riverine and western groups of Nigeria, which has been studied by Okonjo (1983:219):

> *The Omu has been styled "queen" of the village... since her role in society closely parallels that of the king, but the Omu is neither the king's wife nor his relative. She is simply the "female counterpart of the king" in his role as father of the community....As the official mother of her society, the Omu...has responsibility for the affairs of the women of the community....She selects her own counsellors just as the king does, and with identical titles, and reigns from a throne just as he does.*

Freedom of Action for Older Women and Prospects for Organization

What runs through all the accounts of wider roles for women as they reach midlife and elder status is the increased freedom of action they enjoy. As noted by Brown (1982:144), in many cultures women become much less subject to male authority and may engage in a variety of activities not permitted younger women. Nor do they need to exhibit the same degree of deference to males or hold to the same rules of modesty in dress and action. They may ignore some language taboos and begin to speak freely and with authority (Murphy and Murphy 1974:105-06). They may also travel from home much more freely than younger women. All this means that older women potentially have more possibility to challenge men in the councils, engage in commerce and trade beyond the boundaries of their villages, and collaborate in organizational activities.

As Keith and Kertzer (1984:28) observe, as the man grows older the woman's power relative to his increases. Gutmann (1975:181) notes what he calls "cross-over effect," that is, as women age, they become more autonomous, aggressive, and instrumental, while men become more passive, expressive, and dependent. Concurring in these observations are, among others, Dwyer (1978:234); Raybeck writing of Malay society (1980); Griffen (1977:51-52); Kerns on Black Carib women of the Caribbean (1983:66,74), and Bledsoe (1980:117).

Older women have more fun, too; in one Malay village, they may go to the coffee shops where younger women never venture (Raybeck 1980:15). Pomo indigenous women smoke with the men and go to the men's sweat houses (Loeb 1926:160,188). Older women can drink excessively on ceremonial occasions and may engage in aggressive, even indecorous behavior (mentioned by several sources, including McArdle and Yeracaris [1981:315] and Gutmann [1982:151;1985:206]). The Sokolovskys (1982:122) note that older persons are excused from communal work groups and most public ritual sponsorships; they add that

> *[t]here is a notable lessening of social constraints on the behavior of older women, and they are allowed greater latitude in social interaction especially with male age peers. By the time a woman is 60, she may be seen casually chatting with a group of men or guzzling a beer at a public festival, things forbidden to younger women (ibid.).*

What are the prospects that older women's greater freedoms and their participation in political decision making will enable them to organize for enhancing the positive aspects of their role in preindustrial societies and to restore that role where it has deteriorated?

The prognosis for such organization is uncertain. We do have examples of both women and men organizing at the community, national, and even international levels. However, as Keith and Kertzer (1984:47) report, aside from some analysis of age sets in certain African societies, little cross-cultural work has been done on pressure groups organized by older persons. In preindustrial societies, as they point out, kinship groups tend to be strong and more cohesive than age-based groups. Moreover, societies with a "critical mass" of persons aged over 50 have, until very recent times, been few. This means that, as a group, persons at midlife and older ages, whether women or men, were not in a position to exert much political influence (ibid.:48).

As the same authors point out elsewhere (ibid:33), age cohorts cannot be assumed to be homogeneous; a central issue is the extent to which "people conceive of themselves as sharing a common identity with others of approximately the same age, and the extent to which their behavior reflects such age solidarity." Other statuses—kin, class, race, sex, religion—can cut across age and may be more important (depending on the issue) in forging bonds of solidarity. One key factor impeding collaboration between older and younger women may be the practice, as Foner (1984:91) points out, that "old women are sometimes active agents in upholding and reinforcing social practices that help to keep young women subordinate to men." This exercise, for example, has looked at mothers-in-law and not considered the often miserable existences of daughters-in-law. A word of caution also needs to be inserted in this picture of increasing independence for the mature adult woman. In many societies, she now is the caregiver for those who are even older: "It is a social fact that the caregivers to most of the world's elderly are women" (Rubenstein and Johnsen 1982:137).

Conclusions

The explanations behind the many examples given here of the empowerment of older women in preindustrial societies are numerous and vary with disciplines and researchers. Although risky to do so, I shall conclude with some short answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. These answers reflect at least some consensus in the literature, although there is no unanimity.

Do the lives of older people improve depending on the epoch in which they live? It would appear that we overromanticize the position of the elderly in past times; in some societies and on some indices, their lives did improve, and in other societies and on other indices, they did not.

Are the lives of older persons better or worse, depending on whether they live in the developing or developed world? Most authors consulted give strong evidence of a deterioration in the lives of midlife and older women in industrial, modern societies (but there are dissidents, and Foner [1984] makes a strong case for some improvement in the latter). Nevertheless, compared with younger women, midlife and older women do appear to fare much better in preindustrial societies—although in only a very few instances do their prestige and power equal that of the older males.

Does elder status vary according to culture? The overwhelming evidence is that the position of older people, particularly women, is better in pastoral, nomadic, and hunting and gathering groups and begins to deteriorate in settled agrarian cultures—the more complex the culture, the worse the situation of women at midlife and older age.

What about family structure and kinship systems? Where there are extended family systems and patrilocal residence, women's situation at midlife and older age tends to improve; in nuclear family systems and matrilocal residence (where the husband takes up residence with his wife's people), the evidence for improvement is quite mixed. Women in matrilocal societies can have a great deal of influence at various ages, at least informally, through some control over which men get into the positions of power and authority, although matrilocality does not imply (and never has) the existence of matriarchy.

Finally, the sources appear to agree to a large extent on the question of personal creativity and initiative. Simmons (1945:82) thinks that older persons themselves play a large role in assuring their own improved status.

> *[The] activities of the aged themselves have exercised an important influence upon their security [which he defines as food sharing, property rights, and social prestige]. Their roles have hardly ever been passive. Their security has been more often an achievement than an endowment—an activity in which favorable opportunities have been matched with active personal accomplishment. Evidence of this is found in the fact that individual achievements in security have varied immensely under similar social and cultural conditions, and even within the same society.*

Moreover, he says elsewhere (ibid.:51) that respect for old age has, as a rule, been accorded to persons on the basis of the personal assets they possessed

> *They might be respected for their extensive knowledge, seasoned experience, expert skill, power to work magic, exercise of priestly functions, control of property rights, or manipulation of family prerogatives. They might be highly regarded for their skill in games, dances, songs, and storytelling. They might even receive consideration for their faithful performance of camp or household chores.*

Thus, the evidence seems to suggest that we must indeed work for the kinds of societies that will open up increased opportunities for older people, but that they gain prestige and authority through the exercise of their own creativity and initiative, principally in the service of the community.

Notes

1. For another view on the correlation between preindustrial, small-scale societies and high status and beneficial treatment for older people, see Sokolovsky (1983:5).
2. A shift from a predominantly agrarian society could account for a decline in the status of the aged in several ways. As Palmore and Manton (1974:205) put it, "The shift from agriculture reduces the aged's power to control through controlling land; the aged are often less able to compete with younger persons in technological and nonagricultural occupations; the moving from farm to city tends to weaken the influence of the aged; and the changing technology, social structure, and cultural values that result from this shift tend to make the aged 'old fashioned and obsolete.'"
3. Newly industrialized societies have so many demands on their resources: for education, infrastructure, transport, communications, and so on, that funds for the aged tend to be a low priority. However, in later stages of development, more resources may be available. For an alternative view on the position of the aged in preindustrial and developed societies, see Foner (1984).

4. Simmons wrote the pioneer work on the aged in cross-cultural perspective in 1945. Subsequent studies caution that his sample was defective and his cases not strictly comparable. Nevertheless, he speculates on conditions under which the aged gain prestige, and his insights continue to be quoted (and some of them confirmed). Moreover, his is one of the first and most thorough examples of gender analysis in that he carefully reports, considers, and analyzes the data on women.
5. I have a reason for the distinction between "increase in" and "acquiring of" power, since studies show that women often have very little indeed of the elements of empowerment until the magic moment of achieving elder status. For them, empowerment sometimes is abrupt. For example, when a son marries, his mother achieves the status of mother-in-law, and this may be the first time she has had authority or power over another adult. In contrast, since they have always enjoyed some authority over others even if just in the extended family, elder status for men most often means an increase in power, access to the choicest food and other goods in the household, and so on.

   For men, the life span appears to proceed much more smoothly from infancy and childhood to adolescence and young manhood, then to maturity and old age, than for women. Women's life span may be characterized by discontinuities and sharp transitions: the birth of a first son affirms with great suddenness the woman's new status in the family; at the death of a husband, women at once acquire widowhood status that tends to be more permanent than for men.
6. In this essay, following Brown (1982:143), I have avoided tying midlife to menopause, since many activities and roles do not appear to be strictly related to physical change. For a discussion of how preindustrial societies define older age, see McArdle and Yeracaris (1981:313-14).
7. Age grades are roughly chronological intervals; age sets are "corporate groups composed of persons belonging to the same age grades" (Bohannon 1963:149). Several African and at least one Brazilian ethnic group have "age sets" (see Mayberry-Lewis [1984] for the Brazilian case and Keith and Kertzer [1984] for a resume of the formal African age systems). Falk, et al. (1981:18) report that age sets are quite rare; in a study of 547 cultures from Murdock's World Ethnographic Survey by A.D. Coult and R.W. Habenstein (1965:27), only 23 ethnic groups were found to have age sets.
8. Elder (1950: 167) was one of the pioneers in conceptualizing aging from a life span perspective; this approach views human development, socialization, and adaptation as lifelong processes within an interage framework, recognizing many types of development beyond youth and monitoring societal change through shifting patterns of different generations and cohorts. A good discussion of life span theories in different disciplines is the introduction to Keith and Kertzer (1984).
9. Albert is writing specifically of the Tutsi and Hutu of Burundi; however, many studies mention that in preindustrial societies, age is a cultural/social concept rather than a chronological one.
10. An exception to this may be the Caribbean, where sociologists write of the "grandmother syndrome," that is, the custom of the grandmother taking her children's children to raise when the parents migrate to the city or abroad. In my own recent study of Jamaica and St. Lucia (national samples of 2,050 rural households in the former country and 1,000 in the latter), I found that grandparents or grandmothers (many more of the latter) were caring for their grandchildren—with the middle generation absent—in 28 and 25 percent, respectively, of all households in the samples.
11. Sokolovsky (1990:2), however, documents that close social ties of older people with their families among several ethnic groups in the United States may enhance rather than reduce feelings of stress.
12. For a bibliography of the growing literature on women in migration, see Chaney (1984:chap.1).
13. As Kinsella (1988:25) notes, despite a worldwide trend away from employment in agriculture, "jobs in this sector remain of paramount importance in developing countries...and existing information shows that older workers are heavily concentrated in agricultural jobs.
14. Negative growth for the rural areas was registered between 1960 and 1970 in three countries (Colombia, Chile, and Cuba) and between 1970 and 1980 in Brazil (Chaney 1984:15; Kinsella 1988: tables 4 and 5, 36-37). Some areas are better at retaining their populations; for example, Fox (1975:6-7) notes the surprising ability of the rural sector in Mexico to retain great numbers of people, particularly in the hundreds of large villages with viable agricultural systems.
15. Perhaps the best way to explore the empowerment of older women in preindustrial

societies would be to study a representative sample of several cultures in a selection of countries to see how older women are faring. Such research projects need to be a number one priority on our research agenda. Strangely, I can find virtually no studies designed specifically to study women at midlife and older ages in any society, much less in cross-cultural perspective, with the exception of Brown and Kerns's book, *In Her Prime* (1985), a collection of articles by 17 contributors, most based on original research. Brown's article in *Current Anthropology* (1982) still is a pioneering effort.

Nevertheless, substantial information on older women can be gleaned from studies on women, particularly by anthropologists and sociologists, or on different societies, some of which do include information on older persons. Several approaches to this literature, which is gigantic, are possible. One could divide the monographs and articles by region and review systematically all that the studies have recorded information about the lives of older women. For our purposes here, this review would pose a difficulty because of the relative neglect of older women in Latin America and the Caribbean in these studies (Silverman 1987:333). One could also choose significant themes and attempt to sift out the information in the various accounts.

I have chosen a third approach, that is, to look at the activities of powerful older women in the different roles they achieve in later life. Two words of caution: My search could not be exhaustive, since mining all the monographs would take months. Moreover, some research I reviewed was carried out years ago and life may have changed drastically in some of the cultures depicted. Nevertheless, these accounts also serve our purpose, which is to show that a wide range of powerful roles was (and to a great extent, still is) available to older women in preindustrial settings.

Not all the ethnographies treat the theme of older women in the detail and depth it deserves. Many of the earlier studies were carried out by male social scientists, and they often defined ahead of time that what women did (for example, in ritual, rule, economic activity) was not important. Therefore, they often either did not interview the women themselves, taking the men's word on the range of women's activities; or they did not mention women at all outside their roles in the family; or they ignored older women. Still there is enough in some of the accounts to give us an idea of the position of women at midlife and older ages in a wide range of cultures. 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 perpective.

References

Albert, Ethel M. 1971. Women of Burundi: A Study of Social Values. In *Women of Tropical Africa*, Denise Paulme, ed., H. M. Wright, trans., 179-215. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Amoss, Pamela T. 1981. Coast Salish Elders. In *Other Ways of Growing Old: Anthropological Perspectives*, Patricia T. Amoss and Stevan Harell, eds., 227-48. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bart, Pauline. 1969. Why Women's Status Changes.. In *Middle Age: The Turns of the Social Ferris Wheel.* Sociological Symposium 3 (Fall):1-18.

Benedek, Therese. 1950. Climacterium: A Developmental Phase. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 19:1-27.

Bledsoe, Caroline H. 1980. Women and Marriage. In *Kpelle Society.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bohannon, Paul. 1963. *Social Anthropology*. Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Brown, Judith K. 1970. Economic Organization and the Position of Women Among the Iroquois. *Ethnohistory* 17:151-67.

_____. 1982. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Middle-aged Women. *Current Anthropology* 23 (April): 143-56.

_____, and Virginia Kerns, eds. 1985. In *Her Prime: A New View of Middle-aged Women*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Bunster, Ximena, and Elsa M. Chaney. 1989. *Sellers and Servants: Working Women in Lima, Peru.* Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/ Greenwood Publishing Group.

Chaney, Elsa M. 1979. *Supermadre: Women in Politics in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Published in Spanish by Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1983.

_____. 1984. Women of the World: Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Commerce: Bureau of the Census; and U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Women in Development.

Chiñas, Beverly L. 1973. The *Isthmus Zapotec: Women's Roles in Cultural Context*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Coles, Catherine. 1990. The Older Woman in Hausa Society: Power and Authority in Urban Nigeria. In *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, Jay Sokolovsky, ed., 57-81. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Coult, A. D., and R. W. Habenstein. 1965. *Cross-Tabulations of Murdock's World Ethnographic Survey*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.

Cowgill, Donald O., and Lowell D. Holmes. 1972. *Aging and Modernization*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Durant-González, Victoria. 1976. *Role and Status of Rural Jamaican Women: Higglering and Mothering*. Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley.

Dwyer, Daisy Hilse. 1978. Ideologies of Sexual Inequality and Strategies for Change in Male-Female Relations. *American Ethnologist* 5:227-40.

Elder, G. H., Jr. 1950. Age Differentiation and the Life Course. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 1:165-90.

Erickson, Erik H. 1950. *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Etienne, Mona, and Eleanor Leacock, eds. 1980. *Women and Colonization: An Anthropological Perspective*. Westport, CT: Praeger Special Studies/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Faithorn, Elizabeth. 1976. Women as Persons: Aspects of Female Life and Male-Female Relations among the Kafe. In *Man and Woman in the New Guinea Highlands*, Paula Brown and Georgeda Buchbinder, eds., 86-95. Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, Special Publication 8.

Falk, Gerhard, Ursula Falk, and George V. Tonashevich. 1981. *Aging in America and Other Cultures*. Saratoga, CA: Century Twenty-One Publishers.

Foner, Nancy. 1984. *Ages in Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Inequality between Old and Young*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Fox, Robert W. 1975. *Urban Population Growth Trends in Latin America*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.

Francis, Sybil E. 1988. Roles, Programs and Projects for the Elderly in the Caribbean Which Combat Loneliness and Isolation. *Danish Medical Bulletin*, Special Supplement Series no.6 (Oct.):83-86.

Fry, Christine L., and Jennie Keith. 1982. The Life Course as a Cultural Unit. In *Aging from Birth to Death: Sociotemporal Perspectives*, M. W. Riley, R. S. Abeles, and M. P. Teitelbaum, eds., vol. 2, 51-70. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Garcia Castro, Mary. 1988. Female Heads of Household, Racism and Ageism in Brazil. In *Women's Life in Latin America*, Jolanda M. Koller-Tejeiro Vidal, ed. Munich: Institut fur Soziologie der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universita, forthcoming.

Giele, Janet Zollinger. 1982. *Women in the Middle Years: Current Knowledge and Directions for Research and Policy*. New York: Wiley Interscience.

Goodale, Jane C. 1971. *Tiwi Wives: A Study of Women of Melville Island, North Australia*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.

Gough, Kathleen. 1975. The Origin of the Family. In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna B. Reiter, ed., 51-109. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Griffen, Joyce. 1977. A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Behavioral Changes at Menopause. *Social Science Journal* 14(2):49-55.

Grumet, Robert Steven. 1980. Sunksquaws, Shamans and Tradewomen: Middle Atlantic Coastal Algonkina Women during the 17th and 18th Centuries. In *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives*, Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., 43-62. Westport, CT: Praeger Special Studies/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Gutmann, D. L. 1975. Parenthood: A Key to the Comparative Study of the Life Cycle. In *Lifespan Developmental Psychology: Normative Life Cycles*, Nancy Datan and Leon Ginsburg, eds, 167-84. New York: Academic Press.

_____. 1982. Comments on J.K. Brown's Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Middle-aged Women. *Current Anthropology* 23 (April):151.

_____. 1985. Beyond Nurture: Developmental Perspectives on the Vital Older Woman. In *In Her Prime: A New View of Middle-Aged Women,* Judith K. Brown and Virginia Kerns, eds., 198-211. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Hamilton, Annette. 1970. The Role of Women in Aboriginal Marriage Arrangements. In *Women's Role in Aboriginal Society*. Australian Aboriginal Studies, Fay Gale, ed., 17-20. Canberra: Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies, Social Anthropology Series 36.

Hayes, Rose Oldfield. 1975. Female Genital Mutilation, Fertility Control, Women's Roles, and Patrilineage in Modern Sudan: A Functional Analysis. *American Ethnologist* 2:617-33.

Hiebert, Paul G. 1981. Old Age in a South Indian Village. In *Other Ways of Growing Old: Anthropological Perspectives*, Pamela T. Amoss and Stevan Harrell, eds., 211-26. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hungry Wolf, Beverly. 1982. *Ways of My Grandmothers*. New York: Quill.

Iwanska, Alicia. 1966. Division of Labor among Men and Women in a Mazahua Village of Central Mexico. *Sociologus* 16(2):173-86.

Keith, Jennie and David I. Kertzer. 1984. Introduction. In *Age and Anthropological Theory*, Kertzer and Keith, eds., 19-61. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Kerns, Virginia. 1983. *Women and the Ancestors: Black Carib Kinship and Ritual*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Kinsella, Kevin. 1988. *Aging in the Third World*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Lebeuf, Annie, M.D. 1971. The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies. In *Women of Tropical Africa,* Denise Paulme, ed., 93-119. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Lee, Richard B. 1985. Work, Sexuality and Aging Among !Kung Women. In *In Her Prime: A New View of Middle-Aged Women*, Judith K. Brown and Virginia Kerns, eds., 23-36. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Loeb, Edwin Meyer. 1926. *Pomo Folkways*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

McArdle, Joan L., and Constantine Yeracaris. 1981. Respect for the Elderly in Preindustrial Societies As Related to Their Activity. *Behavior Science Research* 16(3-4):307-39.

Mathews, Holly F. 1985. "We Are Mayordomo": A Reinterpretation of Women's Roles in the Mexico Cargo System. *American Ethnologist* 12 (May):285-301.

Mayberry-Lewis, D. 1984. Age and Kinship: A Structural View. In *Age and Anthropological Theory*, David I. Kertzer and Jennie Keith, eds, 123-40. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Mernissi, Fatima. 1975. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company.

Michaelson, Evalyn Jacobson, and Walter Goldschmidt. 1971. Female Roles and Male Dominance among Peasants. *Southwestern Journal of Gerontology* 27(4):330-52.

Murphy, Yolanda, and Robert F. Murphy. 1974. *Women of the Forest*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Naroll, Raoul. 1983. *The Moral Order: An Introduction to the Human Situation*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Okonjo, Kamene. 1983. Sex Roles in Nigerian Politics. In *Female and Male in West Africa,* Christine Oppong, ed., 211-22. London: Allen and Unwin.

Osako, Masako. 1982. Increase of Elderly Poor in Developing Nations—the Implications of Dependency Theory and Modernization Theory for the Aging of the World Population. In *Aging and the Aged in the Third World*, Part I, Jay Sokolovsky, guest ed., 85-113. Williamsburg, VA: Studies in Third World Societies, Publication no. 22.

Palmore, Erdman B., and Kenneth Manton. 1974. Modernization and Status of the Aged: International Correlations. *Journal of Gerontology* 21(2):205-10.

Paulme, Denise. 1971. *Women of Tropical Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Raybeck, Douglas. 1980. The Ideal and the Real: The Status of Women in Kelantan Malay Society. *Women and Politics* 1(4):7-22.

Richards, Audrey. 1956. *Chisungu: A Girls' Initiation Ceremony among the Bemba of Northern Rhodesia*. New York: Grove Press.

Rubenstein, Robert L., and Pauline T. Johnsen. 1982. Toward a Comparative Perspective on Filial

Response to Aging Populations. In *Aging and the Aged in the Third World*, Part I, Jay Sokolovsky, guest ed., 115-71. Williamsburg, VA: Studies in Third World Societies, Publication no. 22.

Sennott-Miller, Lee. 1989. *Midlife and Older Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Status Report*. Washington, DC: American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Also available in Spanish as Las mujeres de edad mediana y avanzada en América Latina y el Caribe: Informe sobre la situación actual.

Silverman, Philip. 1987. *The Elderly as Modern Pioneers*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

_____, and Robert J. Maxwell. 1978. How Do I Respect Thee? Let Me Count the Ways: Deference Towards Elderly Men and Women. *Behavior Science Research* 13(2):91-108.

_____, and Robert J. Maxwell. 1983. The Significance of Information and Power in the Comparative Study of the Aged. In *Growing Old in Different Societies: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Jay Sokolovsky, ed., 43-55. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Simmons, Leo W. 1945. *The Role of the Aged in Primitive Societies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

_____. 1960. Aging in Preindustrial Societies. In *Handbook of Social Gerontology*, C. Tibbits, ed., 62-91. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Sjoberg, Gideon. 1960. *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.

Smock, Audrey Chapman. 1977. The Impact of Modernization on Women's Position in the Family in Ghana. In *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View*, Alice Schlegal, ed., 194-214. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sokolovsky, Jay. 1983. Background to Comparative Sociocultural Gerontology. In *Growing Old in Different Societies: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, Jay Sokolovsky, ed., 1-8. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

_____. 1990. The *Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

_____, and Joan Sokolovsky. 1982. Familial and Public Contexts for Aging: Growing Old in a Rapidly Changing Mexican Village. In *Aging and the Aged in the Third World: Part II: Regional and Ethnographic Perspectives*, Jay Sokolovsky, ed., 114-44. Williamsburg, VA: Studies in Third World Societies, Publication no. 23.

Srinivas, M. N. 1977. *The Changing Position of Indian Women*. Man 12:221-38.

Sutton, Constance, and Susan Makiesky-Barrow. 1981. Social Inequality and Sexual Status in Barbados. In *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, Filomina Chioma Steady, ed., 469-98. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company.

Vatuk, Sylvia. 1980. The Aging Woman in India: Self-Perceptions and Changing Roles. In *Women in Contemporary India and Southeast Asia*, 2d rev, ed., A. de Souza, ed., 287-309. Delhi: Manohar.

Weibel-Orlando, Joan. 1990. Grandparenting Styles: Native American Perspectives. In *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, Jay Sokolovsky, ed., 109-125. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey/Greenwood Publishing Group.

Whyte, Martin King. 1978. *The Status of Women in Preindustrial Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cross-Cultural Views on Older Women and Empowerment, Conversations In Acapulco and Washington, DC

The Women's Initiative of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), in cooperation with the International Federation on Ageing (IFA) sponsored two panels on the empowerment of older women. The first was at a two-day precongress on women at midlife and older ages, preceding the XIV World Congress of Gerontology in June 1989 at Acapulco, Mexico; the second was a workshop during the conference of the Association of Women in Development (AWID) in November 1989 in Washington, DC

Each panel featured a conversation among a select group of midlife and older women who had achieved empowerment in their own societies. Because the participants in the conversations addressed each other on a first name basis, this style has been kept in the transcriptions. Identification of the participants follows.

Acapulco:

Ambassador Julia Tavares de Alvarez
Alternate Representative to the United Nations,
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

María Cristina Arteaga
Véjez en México, Educación y Acción (VEMEA),
MEXICO

Senator Juana Castro de Zegarra
Senator and Treasurer of the Senate,
PERU

Olga García Rodríguez
Union of Household Workers,
URUGUAY

Elsa Pabón de Aguilar
Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo,
ARGENTINA

Gloria L.N. Scott
Women's Affairs Officer (retired),
The World Bank,
JAMAICA

Elena Urrútia
Director, Women's Studies Program,
El Colegio de México,
MEXICO

Washington:

Daw Aye
UN Advisor (retired), Economic and Social Council for Asia and the Pacifi (ESCAP),
MYANMAR (Burma)

Eva Naa Borkor Forson
Vice President, UN African Mothers Association,
GHANA

Virginia Hazzard
Representative at the UN, American Association of Retired Persons,
USA

Graciela Hierro
Professor, Faculty of Philosophy
Universidad Autónoma de México, and member of Véjez en México, Educación y Acción (VEMEA),
MEXICO

Yenny del Carmen Hurtado
Treasurer, National Union of Household Workers,
COLOMBIA

Louise M. Spivack
Spokesperson, Women's Initiative of the American Association of Retired Persons,
USA

Discussion Leader:

Elsa M. Chaney
Chair, Women in International Development
University of Iowa,
USA

Conversation in Acapulco, Mexico
June 17, 1989

The Nature of Power

The conversation opened with an attempt to define the nature of power and to decide if women, and particularly older women, had access to power.

Elsa C.: **How would the panel define "power" and "empowerment"? And can women at midlife and older ages achieve empowerment?**

Elena: How can we talk about "empowerment" of mature or older women when we women have never had any power? It seems to me a bit of a fallacy to suggest empowerment at a mature age, when we have never had power at any age.

Gloria: I think a lot of women have power, but don't recognize that it *is* power. We could control the situation in which we live much more than we do, but because we have been conditioned to serve the needs of others, we consider them first, and we completely ignore what we can do.

Elena: There is a big gap between the desire to achieve things and the reality of attaining them. The distance is enormous because these marvelous goals can be reached only through power, and only those who have power and authority can implement the policies we all aim to achieve.

This kind of power has always been in the hands of men; women have never had it. What we have instead is the long period of human history in which women have been at the margin, sharing the lives of those who hold power . . . Thus we have the famous "vicarious power" that does not really belong to oneself. If a woman is the wife of the president of the republic, she participates in power, but it is a vicarious power and not the kind of power her husband has.

Elsa P.: The power of the Abuelas [grandmothers] of Plaza de Mayo is a little difficult to define. It is a power that we did not seek, and it was our lack of power that permitted us to become empowered because the society thought we were harmless women without any intelligence, and therefore no threat . . . Our power emerged from forming a group of desperate persons looking for their sons and daughters, their grandchildren.

Olga: I believe there is only *one* power. All the rest could be influence. I influence my children; a teacher influences students; I influence my husband; friends influence each other. But this is not power. Power is the ability to accomplish something that one would like to do. All the rest is just talk.

Gloria: It seems to me that there are many aspects to power. It is not any one thing, but a number of interrelated things. We cannot have influence without economic power, political power.

Elsa P.: I believe that there is something called moral power, in contrast to the power of a Pinochet [recent military dictator in Chile]. It is a kind of power that doesn't have a reply. When we in Argentina were forced to go in search for our relatives, this "power of having no power" served as a kind of power. We were able to accomplish things, we were able to march, we were able to travel outside the country to ask for help, something we didn't have in Argentina.

From that time on we began to have power: a power that we didn't seek, that we didn't plan, that we didn't even dream of, and because of all this, we were into something altogether distinct. To see women almost without education, without resources, without any kind of preparation, shoulder to shoulder with women of the highest educational level, that also was paradoxical. Thus, for me, it is very difficult to think that there is only one kind of power.

María C.: It seems to me that women have always had power, but a power that hasn't been directed toward gaining any specific objective. We have always had power. What kind of power? Although we may not have been politically empowered, we have always had a very potent power, economic power, but we haven't known how to use it.

Instead, we have chosen the comfortable life, and many of us have opted for the venerable armchair. But this doesn't mean that we have been without power. I don't believe that it's a question of discovering what power we have, but of *directing* our power toward objectives that will lead our causes to triumph.

Elena: In my own university and in a government bureaucracy where I worked, and in Mexico in general, there is a pyramid of power. In the smallest part at the apex, there are only men; in the center part, men and women, and at the wide bottom of the pyramid, only women.

Gloria: I also have to challenge the claim that women have always had economic power . . . Without economic power, political power or any other power is useless.

Olga: How are we going to acquire power as older women when women are not even represented in the congresses and parliaments in many countries?

Juana: Olga is right! The way for women to acquire power is through public office. One has to have political power, I agree, to realize all the things we always talk about in every event we organize.

Gloria: I would also like to point out that it doesn't matter how many women we get into positions of authority such as senators and legislators and so on. Unless you have a group of grassroots women who are pushing for them and stuffing envelopes for them as they have done for male candidates all along, these women in authority are not going to be able to do very much.

Intergenerational Alliances

The conversation then turned toward the question of the significance for older women of the power younger women recently have been gaining, and possible alliances across age groups among women.

Elsa C.: **I want to insert a question at this point: Do older women need to make links with younger women? On the one hand, I am impressed by what Elsa Pabón and Olga have been telling me—that both their organizations, the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and the Union of Household Workers in Uruguay, were initiated by older women, acting alone and without resources. On the other hand, don't women of all ages need to work together?**

Julia: I think that power of older women is very similar to power of younger women, and I don't think we should fragment the notion of women's power. Younger women and older women have the same kind of problems, and we need to look to the recent past to see how, at the international level, young women have been able to improve their condition.

As we focus on the empowerment of older women, I believe that we should study how younger women have gained power, and we should ask ourselves if older women could continue in the same pattern as younger women. I don't think older women will acquire power in a distinct way. And I think it is through unity and organization that power is gained.

Olga: It is true that in Uruguay, older women were central to the founding of the household workers' union. That was because younger women didn't have the courage—because of their lack of knowledge about their constitutional rights. We, the more mature, the older women, saw that we could gain something even in the midst of the dictatorship. We still had some power to fight for our rights as workers, just the same as the rest of Uruguayan workers.

But I also want to say that our power is limited because we are not yet even recognized as workers—they say that all we do is help the lady of the house get dressed! That is false, a thing of the past. That was in the epoch of slavery.

Elena: 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, while the former have less. I don't want to minimize their efforts in any way, nor their successes, but they perhaps had little to lose.

Olga: That is for sure, they would lose everything, the young ones, at the moment of joining a labor union. They would be fired. And the majority of household

workers in our countries are single mothers with their children depending on them.

But the older worker—the worker who has been at it for 15 or 20 years in the same house—she knows the law, and the law is behind her. It is the young girl who is brought from the country to work in a house, knowing no one, who is going to have to put up with every kind of gross behavior, even rape. She is not going to tell her *patrona* that she belongs to a union.

Elsa P.: I haven't ever done any political studies, and what I want to say is very simple. It seems to me that what we need is an interchange between younger and older women to change the structures of a society that has made it seem as if the theme is very, very timely. What we want to happen some day is an interchange of youth and energy, experience and age, so that a distinctive society emerges, permitting all of us to go forward together: men, women, youth, and elders, each contributing what is particularly theirs—a general sharing.

It seems to me the only way to bring about this new society is through a profound change in its foundations, in the whole thinking of the society, and not just in one sector. Another aspect is that older women are few in relation to the total populations of our countries, and this makes it possible for us to speak out. The societal structures are very closed, socially and mentally; however, they are very fearful of hearing the things we are saying.

Julia: I think that we also need to convince the younger women that we, their older sisters, also are fighting for the future of the young who will someday be old. We should not go around reinventing the wheel; I think we can and should benefit from the experience of younger women, studying how they are bettering their situation, and then emulate the process. We should not search for some *other* way for women to become empowered. We have to learn from what younger women are doing, and they have to learn from us.

Strategies for Action

The conversation then turned toward the practical: what should be done to empower older women, and how they might use their empowerment.

Elsa C.: **Elsa Pabón's comment reminds me of something very interesting that Julia was saying earlier today when were were preparing our panel: that is, we talk a great deal about women and development, but we don't bring older women into it at all. Would you care to speak to that question, Julia?**

Julia: Yes, indeed! It seems to me that we should not be talking about older women in general, but about how we can incorporate them into the development process. I don't think we can presume that in our Third World societies we're ever going to have full social services for older people. Unless we allow older persons to work, unless we incorporate them into the development process, I don't see any solution to their problems. We need to empower them, to teach them—it is a process of education.

Juana: I think if we could change the question a bit, we would get a better answer. What my friend Julia says makes a lot of sense. So I would frame the question: For what ends do we seek the moral empowerment of women of mature age? Because of our desire to fight for the creation of benefits for older persons who do not have them, isn't that concretely what we are seeking? We want to create benefits for the elderly, to reorient them psychologically, physically, in every sense. To do this, we are going to have to fight politically for social justice, but up to now we have not had such a struggle directed toward persons of the third age.

Maria C.: I agree with the senator, who has been able to acquire one kind of power, political power, and I think this is an example of what one can accomplish. But to talk about "moral empowerment" implicitly covers many other crucial kinds of power. Indeed, we do have moral power, and what we have lacked is knowledge, information, and the courage to recognize our opportunities and to set out for a specific, defined objective: our development and our improved economic

condition.

But in order to take advantage of these opportunities, we have to be informed. To exercise power, we have to know in what power consists.

Elsa P.: For us, the main thing was that we united with one aim. Keeping the objective of rescuing a child meant leaving aside everything else: money, culture, position in society. The *señora* who is economically well off, who has good friends and high status, is not on the same plane as a housewife who does not know if she is going to have anything to eat tomorrow.

But our objective is solely to rescue children. Thus, each one came forward to take up whatever post she could—the one who was very brilliant, the presidency; another who was not so smart, another post; and another kitchen work—but everyone is working for the same objective: to rescue children.

Gloria: I would like to call attention to the fact that only when we were able in national and international encounters to demonstrate to decision makers that what happened to women was significant for national development were they really prepared to seriously discuss integrating women more fully into development.

I think the same thing has to be done with older women. We need to demonstrate the importance of what older women do for national development. To do this, we need more action research and more information about what older women do, and how they are supporting their societies. Once we can demonstrate this to planners and decision makers, we will be taken seriously.

Julia: I just want to reaffirm what Gloria has pointed out, that it is extremely important when we begin to talk about the potential and the problems of older women that we have data and indicators, because without these, without the possibility of quantifying, we will not be able to convince politicians and change policies.

On this point, I want to particularly underscore that AARP, PAHO (Pan American Health Organization), and INSTRAW (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) were instrumental in creating the first data bank on older women in Latin America and the Caribbean. I think that we must continue to create and enlarge such data resources. Until we have indicators that quantify the situation of the older woman, we will not understand her potential nor solve her problems.

Educating Our Daughters

As part of the action strategy, "educating our daughters" also was emphasized.

Elsa C.: **Could we go back to our discussion of the linkages between older and younger women? Is it really automatic that when one becomes older, one is able to gain power? Or do the young need to get training and experience if they are going to do more than sit and stare at the walls when they are older?**

Elsa P.: My idea is that we have to educate our daughters, our young women. We have to teach them what nobody ever taught us, but what we have been learning now in a more open society where we can move forward (and the proof is that we are all here at this conference), even within a masculine power system.

I believe that this is our work—in some way to educate our daughters and become their accomplices to go on changing patterns, so that in 20 or 30 years when they enter another life stage, things will be different.

Olga: I, too, believe that everything is based on education and organization. When a little girl is born, she is dressed all in pink, she is not allowed to play at this or that, while the boy runs out on the street, is trained in power and force, and has different kinds of toys. I think that from childhood one has to educate the female and also inculcate respect for old age.

We also 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. This power to achieve is what we women lack. Beginning with their school days we must educate women on how to become empowered, and how to grow old with power.

Gloria: As you say, Olga, we have a power that we have not spoken much about, and that is the power to teach our children, especially our girl children. You said that they should be taught in school, but I don't think that's enough. If we really are to learn how to use power effectively, we need to start very early to orient our children toward thinking that they will get old, and to ensure that they retain whatever norms exist in their cultures for protecting older people.

The point has been made that nobody taught us. But that does not mean that we should not try to teach our daughters.

Winning Power

Next the conversation turned to the question of intermediaries, and to what extent they should be involved in the empowerment of older women—and to what extent older women had to win power for themselves.

Elsa C.: **To end our conversation, could we talk about organization? Who has the responsibility for organizing older persons?**

Olga: It is the old people who must organize themselves. In my country, 160,000 older women and men are organized, and nobody tells them what to do except themselves. When it is a case of visiting this minister [of government] or that, or even of going to see the president of the republic, it is they who must go. There are no intermediaries.

In the case of Juana, she is somewhat unique, because she can gain a "space" in the parliament to help older people organize . . .

Elena: Yes, Juana, you have one form of power. You can propose laws, and that is an important kind of power. And I admire your preoccupation with unity and cooperation, and I would not want for one minute to diminish your personal achievements. But there isn't any doubt that the fact that you are now in the Senate is because many women in these past years, in Peru and in Latin America and throughout the world, have been demanding a share in power.

Juana: Of course.

Elena: Yes, thanks to this, now distinguished women such as you have succeeded in arriving in the Senate, and I think that is the result of the unity of many, many women. And the same with the household workers of Uruguay. Even though Olga says they haven't made much progress, still they have succeeded in making a nuisance of themselves, and that is something. The same with the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo . . .

Juana: There is little concern in the Parliament [of Peru] for the third age, and I did not have the faintest idea what to do at first. But in my foundation [Peruvian Support Foundation of the Third Age], we had several good academics, and we started the foundation with a number of persons to defend and support the elderly, and we were helped by the ideas of the World Assembly on Aging of Vienna, and of Israel, and of what we have been learning in our work with PAHO . . .

Elsa P.: That is just what I was going to say, that from here on, we can begin opening the way, telling about what we have heard, trying to make others understand. It is as María Cristina said before, there is a kind of dividing line. On the one side are those for whom nothing much can be done except to see that they suffer a little less, but on the other side, we can plant ideas among young people to change social structures.

It seems to me that women need to begin to "live" a little earlier! Some women don't begin their "serious" lives until their children begin marrying. They have studied, worked, married, had children, and they stay glued to their adolescent children, and even to their young adult sons and daughters. Recently, these women have begun to think a little about themselves, and about society. I think that women should not wait to begin until they become old. Well, if we could begin "living" from early school days, marvelous! But my idea is that we must move forward into all the small spaces ceded to us, and get ourselves on the road toward a different future, from here to 10, 15, or 20 years. There needs to be greater consciousness among older persons that they can *enjoy* their mature years, their old age.

Juana: I don't know how this would strike you, but—just as there are gentlemen's agreements, here, we should talk about a "pacta de damas," no?—suppose that we, that I, would make a commitment to take along with me to every meeting an advisor who is a woman of mature age, so that she would gradually gain access. In the same way Olga, as she attends the affairs of her union could take along another, older colleague and team up with her in the work. Eventually she might even take your place. In this way, each of us could widen our aim, and say to more women that they should have this experience in debate, in how to think, and the like.

Elena: The way we are organizing in Mexico, we emphasize in the organization VEMEA [Vejez en México, Educación y Acción, Old Age in Mexico, Education and Action], that we must listen to what older persons are saying, that it is they who must meet and organize themselves. But at the same time, we in VEMEA, many of whom are not yet old, are organizing and working and giving support to the elderly—because we are on the threshold of old age ourselves.

Olga: This is not contradictory, it is complementary. I believe that older people by themselves will not think of many possibilities, but if someone comes to support them, and says, "Look, you can get together to ask that they give you medical service here, or you can achieve this or that if you act together," why then, I think this is the formula we are seeking.

Julia: This is very clear, *very* clear, the lack of consultation. There is a ridiculous example of a project to raise rabbits for food in a place where the rabbit is a sacred animal. In the same way, we cannot go and say to the elderly, "We are here to help you in what we think you need." That is very bad. But we must unite the efforts of those who can do something, who have interest, who are mobilizing themselves, who are prepared to deal with persons such as the aged who need to organize, being aware in every moment that there must be dialogue, no?

Juana: Why don't we all agree that each of us in her own country looks for women who have some power—at the municipal level, at the level of social welfare, at the parliamentary level, and that we will invite one, two, three persons to a future meeting such as this. I think that would be a good strategy.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude the conversation, the floor was ceded to María Cristina Arteaga *for the last comments.*

Leaving aside for now the political aspect that, unfortunately, weighs so heavily on each of our countries—and in spite of the fact that we women often are mere spectators, and that we are not able to do anything at the political level—as an older woman, I would say that this is my primary strategy: to get up my courage to work today to the extent that I am able for my own space. And when I have located my space, the first "cell" so to speak, I will work to widen it.

Where? I don't know. Perhaps in my family, my block, my neighborhood, among my friends, my club, wherever I can. When we talk about personal strategies we always think we are supposed to begin with something very large that will enable us to gain everything in the world—change laws, accomplish wonders. But my principal strategy would be that each one would begin with herself. Then, when one has achieved the moral energy, the moral power to do and to speak out, one should try to extend it to other fields.

That would be my proposal for a beginning strategy: as an older woman, as a citizen, as a mother, as a wife, in whatever field I find myself, even as a prisoner, in whatever circumstance. My first strategy is I. When I have acquired a worthy place, then I will have power, then I will be able to reach out to others. Unless I first do for myself, I will not be able to do anything for the rest. Well, I could help out in a hospital, but we are talking about power, about development, about making an impact on the world. I will not be able to do anything for anyone if I don't first do it for me.

Conversation in Washington, DC
November 17, 1989

Cultural Meanings of Aging

The conversation opened with a discussion of different cultural views on older age and modes of behavior considered proper for women who have attained elder status.

Elsa C.: **We asked Daw Aye to open our discussion because in our preparatory meeting she had several questions on the meaning of empowerment and growing older in different cultures.**

Daw Aye: My first question is how do we reconcile ideas arising out of ancient cultures with the modern situation? For example, in predominantly Buddhist cultures, elderly people are accustomed to withdrawing into solitude and to annihilating their worldly desires. Yet the modern situation expects them to take an active part in political life, for example as voters. In a situation like this, how do we reconcile these two conflicting expectations?

Louise: I think that it's extremely difficult to change the whole context of how an older person relates to culture. The only way you can begin to change is to work with the younger women because they someday will be older.

Graciela: I want to speak of the Mexican culture where certain older women do wish to retire to consider their religious and spiritual values. But there are other older women who want to stay part of their families and help their families. They also want to learn the things they couldn't learn when they were younger, and especially, they want to learn activities that might earn money. Most don't have social security, they live on handouts from the family—so they want to learn not just for learning's sake, but to gain some economic security.

Elsa C.: So you're saying it's a question of personal choice. Are there any beliefs in other countries that older people should retire quietly into the background?

Eva: No, our system is just the opposite. In Ghana, our women are outgoing; they do just what they want to do without any institutionalized repression, so to speak. Even in Islamic Africa where women are somewhat suppressed, they are very outgoing.

Virginia: I just want to say one thing about Muslim society because I worked in Morocco for nine years, and also in Kenya where Islam is prominent along the coast. I would say women in these societies have a special role to play. They're supposed to be mostly seen, at least in public, and not heard. But the home is run by the women, and it's the same in many societies. Once the woman has attained maturity, she rules the household. Women are powerful even when they're not out in public, and women gain power as they grow older.

Elsa C.: Let's come back to Daw Aye's question because I don't think we've really answered it. If you're under a religious mandate that tells you, as you grow older, to "annihilate desire," can this be reconciled with activism? Would you like to explain a bit more what you mean?

Daw Aye: In predominantly Buddhist countries, everybody is an individual. There always is a marked equality between men and women. These countries also have been agricultural countries, labor intensive, so you find women working alongside men in the fields and in all other agricultural activities. So, women always have had more or less equal participation with men, except in the South Asian countries.

So it's because of their religious beliefs that older people withdraw. Society respects such withdrawal from active, especially political, life. But since we are building our democratic systems on "one person, one vote," each vote counts. So when you try to mobilize people, you always start with their individual interests and their "rights." But such an approach goes against a philosophy that says "forget your rights as you advance in age, as you move into your next existence, forget yourself." How do

you reconcile this? That was my question.

Graciela: I wonder why we want to change the way Buddhist women look at life when they are older. Maybe they are happy that way. I think people prefer to die in the way their culture teaches them. I come from a country with a very deep culture, and we don't want to change it. We want to enrich ourselves with other ways of thinking, yes—I think that the Buddhist religion is very good for your spirit.

Virginia: I certainly agree that one should not attempt to change those who don't want to be changed. I had the impression that some people wanted to change and they didn't know how to do that. I don't know if that was the point . . .

The Dilemmas of Growing Older

The dialogue then turned toward a discussion of the difficulties older women face in different cultures, and how they must work actively to achieve empowerment.

Graciela: **I want to come back to the question of power and older women. In my country [Mexico], most older women don't have any power. They are kept in their homes as old servants and are not respected at all; the old women stay at home because they'd rather be servants than be alone. Not the old men; they are more respected because they worked and earned money.**

Louise: What's going to happen to women such as yourself when you are older?

Graciela: I have my own income.

Louise: So that's a significant point: economic independence.

Yenny: It's somewhat different in Colombia. All grandmothers are taken care of by their grandchildren because they are seen as still useful to society; they can be a help to their sons and daughters. They can help them get ahead. There's a lot of attention paid to the advice of older people.

Graciela: In Mexico, the situation differs according to the social level; it's very similar to Colombia. The only middle-aged or older women who have power in Mexico are the mothers-in-law. The son brings the new bride to his home where the household is run by his mother. The poor daughter-in-law is like a servant, and she only gets power when she goes out and sets up a house on her own.

Yenny: I have one question about a point that we were discussing in our preparatory session: Does the older woman just get power automatically or is this something she constructs? Is this something she builds in her earlier life? I think that the woman begins to build her power from 15 years of age onward, depending on her temperament, her position, and her formation. It's an integration by the woman herself—of learning, of living, of experience.

Eva: The Ghanian woman is always told that one day she will be alone, either through divorce, separation or widowhood. One day she'll be by herself with her children and grandchildren. So along the way she plans for herself in such a way that she has attained a certain stature by the time she becomes the head of a household.

Louise: I think that's important. Here in the United States we're trying after the fact to build self-esteem in older women who have become separated, divorced, or widowed. That's not a very good way of doing it. I work with women who don't feel that they have any power or any contribution to make to society or even to their own welfare. People need to grow up in families that believe in education for women as well as for men. Education is very empowering, if in fact women are then allowed to go out on their own and use that education. Most women don't really gain power, whether we're talking of political power or any other kind of power, until they grow older because it takes years to become empowered. In the United States many women who are prominent have inherited their husbands' wealth and position. We haven't yet arrived, but we are moving toward the point where women achieve stature and power in their own right.

The Key Importance of Family

The group's focus then turned toward the key importance of the family in relation to the welfare of older women.

Elsa C.: **Nevertheless, most women live in a family unit—either their natal or marital family, or with the family of one of their grown children. How does this affect the empowerment of women?**

Daw Aye: In the past, we took for granted that women's education for self-reliance would take place in the family. But now we see these responsibilities carried out by society. Education and health care are taken care of by a formal system. There is no time, no inclination, and no skill for the caring, nurturing, and educating that traditionally happened within the family. Yet don't we still have to rely on the family as a primary unit for empowering individuals and for the welfare of members and for the community? What alternatives do we have?

Graciela: That depends on the country. But I think in most places older women want to live with their families, and the right place for us—I'm speaking for myself— is to live with my family, with my children and my grandchildren.

Virginia: Yenny, are you married?

Yenny: Separated.

Virginia: It's an awful lot easier to do things if you don't have a husband.

Yenny: That's why I separated.

Louise: A lot of American women are doing the same thing.

Virginia: Now you see, we're facing a problem: Is separation the way women become empowered?

Louise: The family is still a very important part of society. You have to work with a husband to help him understand what is going on among women today. I've had to do that but also, since I had only sons, I trained them to understand women's issues and they both are terrific feminists.

Eva: I think that this is something I have to do, too, since I have four sons. I have to start training them to understand us.

Virginia: In Africa, a woman's future depends on producing children, right?

Eva: Yes, it's true. The whole system is such that you have to produce children to continue the generations, and it makes you feel good about yourself. But that doesn't mean it's easy! It's very difficult to find an African man who will do housework. My husband's mother trained him to sit back and watch his wife do everything. In a lot of African systems, and especially in Ghana, there are also two-career families because of so many educated women. Before I came here, I always had two household helpers taking care of the house and the children. The tragedy is that we often don't teach our boys to take care of the household so they grow up not knowing how to cook or do anything.

Louise: It's very difficult with two careers. The two-career family is one of the most difficult aspects of our culture today in the United States. In my own family, my husband was transferred and I had a very good job. I wasn't going to move, and so I lived in one city and he lived in another. I tell my children now, "See what I did when I was 50, I was before my time." But that is one of the big problems in this society.

Yenny: It's all very well to talk about this complementarity between husbands and wives, but in Latin America, the men are very *machista* and it's hard to think about your making any such arrangement with them

But this doesn't mean we should block the search for some way to complement each other. This whole business about the family breaking up is something that really concerns me. I think that all the civil strife in Colombia now is really because there isn't the basic support of a strong family system anymore.

Eva: This is symptomatic of what happens in Africa, too. Often the man goes away to work in the city and leaves the family back home, breaking up the family unit and making cohesion difficult in the family.

Graciela: And in societies where the government doesn't give support to the individual, the only support people have is their own families. I think that even in coun-

tries where families receive a lot of support, it's better for an older person to live with a family than in an institution.

Louise: Well, human beings are social, and the way that we grow and help our own nations is through the family unit. But that's not any longer the traditional family; one of the things that we're talking about more and more now are single heads of household. We're now moving to redefine what a family is. Even the U.S. Census has redefined it: people living together under the same roof.

Older Women and Their Grandchildren

The conversation emphasized the role of older women in the socialization of the younger generation and their role in the community.

Virginia: **I want to get back to the older women. In some societies, the socialization of children and grandchildren is in the hands of older women. Eva has some interesting new ideas about training her own sons, but in many countries the socialization is in the hands of the grandmothers, who may not share such attitudes at all.**

Graciela: Which cultures?

Virginia: In many parts of Africa and Asia.

Daw Aye: I cannot specify the exact places, but I know of programs where grandmothers are trained to take care of preschool children. Older women can be educated in new ideas and technology. For example, because older women are traditionally midwives, in many places they now are being retrained so that they will able to perform with the most aseptic conditions.

Eva: We have such a program in Ghana, mostly in the rural areas where there are not enough hospitals and maternity clinics. These older women are retrained to do the work they've been doing all their lives as midwives.

I want to come back to the training of grandchildren by the grandparents. In Africa, this is very often what happens, but society is changing. The nuclear family is shrinking and because of economic constraints in the urban areas, some people who would normally send their children to their parents don't do so any more. They don't have the money to send along. This cuts the link with their parents in the villages and robs the grandchildren of cultural education by their grandparents. This is a problem that at some future date we have to address.

Daw Aye: There are huge migrations of people from the rural to the urban areas in Asia, especially with the new manufacturing sectors and the opening of the export zones. So, young people—including many young move away, but then when they have young children, they often send them back to their parents in the rural areas. A great deal of money is sent back—and it occurs to me that if somehow we could inject some kind of management skill (I don't mean in corporate terms!) for grandparents in the upbringing of their grandchildren, as well as in household affairs, this might bring about a unity in the family even if they have to live in different places.

Louise: Are there any kind of school centers where the grandparents can take the children, any preschool programs?

Daw Aye: Not in the rural areas.

Eva: Unfortunately, most of our preschool programs also are in the urban centers. In the rural areas there are only the basic elementary schools and health systems—there is so much to be done. The largest population is in the rural areas, so if we are still going to maintain the system of sending children back to the rural areas, there is a lot of work to be done.

Building Coalitions for Empowerment

The participants next talked about concrete steps toward empowerment of older women.

Virginia: **I want to move to another question. We've philosophized and we've discussed. But our theme here is to talk about coalition building and empowerment. What might be our priority steps?**

Because I think if we could figure out some next steps—maybe this group could become a larger group.

Louise: To respond to Virginia's question about coalitions, I think that first you have to know why you want to coalesce. In other words, what are the issues? And I think that depends on your own particular country. For example, in Mexico you have to decide if you want economic independence for women—is that what the women think is important? Sometimes people don't know what they want, so the point about education and knowledge is certainly a first step. You can form a coalition to prepare and disseminate materials, and that certainly is important in itself as a first step.

Daw Aye: In the Asia-Pacific region, almost every country has women's organizations. Some of them are national and go right down to the grassroots. Those organizations are recognized as well as sponsored by the government. Other indigenous associations may not be national in character, but they still have good organization and are quite active.

We also have national machineries that coordinate the voluntary associations and organizations. These are the vehicles that we can approach. Since the care of the elderly, especially elderly women, is usually undertaken by women, we need to supply them with research material on what aging means in the modern sense, and some kind of information on how to deal with these problems. Such steps would be very useful. The women's organizations already have a networking system to exchange and disseminate information. So the machinery and the people are already there. The only thing that needs to be fed into the pipeline is information.

Eva: I think that research on such issues should necessarily be done by women. Men have their own point of view in the questions they ask, and their end results tend to be different from what women would find appropriate to disseminate to other women. So it's very important that any research be done by women who understand the issues better.

Graciela: I agree with you, and I think that investigators from the same country should be asking the questions because they understand the language and the culture. We have in Mexico "participant action" groups, where both the participants and those who conduct the groups grow. We have to listen to what older people want because we don't want to impose on them the things we might want them to do. I think the coalition should be formed by first asking the older people what they want.

Louise: But you still have to give them ideas because sometimes their experience has been so narrow they can't always conceptualize what might be possible.

Graciela: I think the main thing I want to emphasize is to ask the older persons what they want. But you are correct, you have to ask the right questions and present options.

Yenny: Colombia is a very structured society. As many as ten different layers might exist in the society. When you work for a rich family, as I do, you observe a lot of different styles of living. The older, well-off women have their own way of life. They have their lives organized; they meet for tea and to play canasta.

At the same level, other women go to their club where they gossip about everyone in town. Going down to another level, those not quite so well off, they're the ones who are with the church. They do a lot of knitting. They're the ones who train all the domestic workers to be good workers, teaching them to cook, knit, and everything else.

And still others among the elderly rich are in asylums, but not asylums of the poor; and another group of rich women dedicate themselves to helping these asylums for the elderly. But my question is, all this is going on in the upper levels of society, but who is going to work for the really poor old women? Nobody. At the level where I work, for example, the older household workers have no social security, they are alone, they have nothing, nothing.

Louise: It's the same in the United States. Older women in poverty, that's one of our largest problems. In every society it's the

same. As one of the speakers emphasized, we not only have to look at divisiveness in gender, but we also have to look at divisions among classes.

Yenny: I understand that in spite of the fact that this country is very rich, there are many poor. But going back to Virginia's question, because she's asked us to be concrete, I would like to suggest that maybe we could create some kind of coalition, not just give charity, because when you give something it's not appreciated. Some kind of institution, I don't really know what mechanism, that could collaborate with the older women and men of Latin America—because I think both need help.

Graciela: In Catholic countries, the solution may be to work within the church. The church is the "club" of older women. It's the only place where younger, and middle-aged and older women can go without their husbands' permission.

So I think older women need to be encouraged to do social and community work through the church; that may be the only way of empowering older women. They need to get together with other women—younger, middle-aged, and older doing some sort of work in common— social work, not only saving their souls, so that older women can feel empowered, and as you were saying, feel valuable and assertive, and build their own self-esteem.

Louise: We're not all looking to become political activists.

Graciela: Let me tell you, I'm a feminist and the "personal is political." Whatever you do, even if you go to church, it's a political action. It's not a division of political here, religious here, family there. Everything is political because everything is connected.

Networking Among Older Women

Finally, the conversation emphasized the importance of networking in building coalitions between the young and the old, and the importance of friendship and bonding among older women.

Elsa C.: **We've talked about coalition building. How can this be carried out in the concrete?**

Yenny: I just read here in a flyer that I picked up from VEMEA [Véjez en México, Educación y Acción] the question, "Why don't the older people of Latin America organize their own congress?" This really grabbed my attention, and I find it very interesting—that they could get together and examine their own problems.

Graciela: VEMEA has two or three seminars a year where older women get in touch with middle-aged and young women. For instance, one was called "Women Facing Aging and Death" and there were young girls, 18 or 20 years old, and old women, 83, 84 years old. They formed groups—not by ages, but all mixed—and discussed their different outlooks on life. They also had participatory dramas, so the women could "talk" without talking of themselves. They had panel discussions, and the young girls were very friendly and very loving with the older women. I think this is one way of trying to motivate people to change their ways and attitudes.

Louise: That's very good: the intergenerational approach in a nonthreatening environment, that's excellent.

Graciela: The solution for women of all ages is friendship among women. For middle-aged and older women, that's essential. When you're older, you have the freedom to discover the richness of having friendships with other women. For instance, I'm 61, and one of the persons who has most influenced my life is Betsie Hollants [founder of VEMEA], who is 85. Coming to the previous conference [sponsored by PAHO and AARP in Mexico before the World Congress on Gerontology] and coming to this conference has been a wonderful experience of getting in touch with different perspectives on life from both older and younger women. I think that's the solution for the empowerment of older women: to seek the friendship of other women.

Louise: Graciela has expressed it very, very well. You build coalitions through friendships—or as it is called in this country—"networking." Those persons here who were also at the Mexico conference greet-

ed each other as old friends. They have stayed in contact through letter writing, each of them a potential support and actual support for other people around the world. That in itself empowers us. It's very important to know you are not alone, and that there are some universal aspects to our work for and with the elderly.

Daw Aye: That seems to be general in every culture; as women get older they become closer to each other and find it easier to get along with each other.

Yenny: This has been a new experience for me. I have always been worried about the problem of the older domestic worker, but before coming here I had no idea that there were other people who were also worried about older women. Now through this experience and meeting all of you, I know that I am not alone. I know just whom I'm going to call on now when I need help. And remember that I don't necessarily mean material help but assistance in thinking about older women.

Virginia: Let's remember that although there are networks and international groups on aging, international groups on women, international groups on everything, there is no network of older women. At least there is no formal structure, no more than a network of people who read and listen. I wonder if we should try to work toward some kind of structure that would have focal points. Irene [Hoskins, editor of *Network News: A Newsletter of the Global Link for Midlife and Older Women,* published jointly by AARP and IFA] is passing information to all of us, but this does not mean that we do anything locally. We are not taking any initiative to see if there could be groups concerned about older women in our countries.

Louise: One idea would be to start Women's Initiative programs [an AARP department that administers programs designed for older women] for midlife and older women in several countries.

Virginia: We have to work out a plan of how to do it.

Graciela: I think such programs have to be for middle-aged and older women because our experience is that it's sometimes very difficult to change an older woman, no? Of course, many are flexible. But I think that we should start in middle age.

Louise: AARP programs start at 50 years and older, and we work with people, with women of all ages.

Virginia: Actually, older women seem to be doing things, as you've all noted. Women are much more apt to form groups than men, perhaps because men are already in the power structure. Women operate in the community structure, where they organize around specific needs. They may coalesce around births or marriages or deaths, or to get money to put a roof on a house. They set up credit associations. They do things about water and they get together and build.

Older women and midlife women are almost invariably the leaders in this. I think that they bring their daughters to meetings and train them on the job but it's not until you're a woman at midlife that you're really in some kind of position of power. But the thing is that all these local groups are small and separated from each other and we need to help and think about ways in which they can become more powerful by joining forces.

Let me move onto what I'm doing now at the UN as the representative for AARP. I work with various coalitions of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), one of which is the UN/NGO Committee on Aging, made up of infinite numbers of organizations that have some kind of concern about the world's growing numbers of elderly.

Just this past week, we got together with other organizations for a consultation on midlife and older women, and I would say that through the UN the situation of older women is becoming more of a global issue. Just recently the Third Committee of the General Assembly of the UN met, and Julia Alvarez, who is the ambassador from the Dominican Republic, took the initiative—which she has done any number of times. Everyone knows Julia; if there's ever been an advocate for midlife and older women, she's the person. She came up with a resolution on the question urging two things:

- *First,* that experts meet to look at the

situation of midlife and older women throughout the world, particularly in the developing world, to come to some kind of actions that can be taken by governments and by the UN.

- *Second,* that every country gather data on midlife and older women, or at least make sure that the data they have already gathered are disaggregated by sex and age.

To carry forward such initiatives, we will have to build broader coalitions to empower midlife and older women. We expect our power to be felt. It's one thing to talk and another to take action. We do have the numbers, we have the talent, we have the sensitivity, so let's leave here with the resolve to make a difference.

Selections from Each Participant

It seems to me that we should not be talking about older women in general, but about how we can incorporate them into the development process. I don't think we can presume that in our Third World societies we're ever going to have full social services for older people. Unless we allow older persons to work, unless we incorporate them into the development process, I don't see any solution to their problems.

Julia Tavares de Alvarez
Alternate Representative of the Dominican Republic to the United Nations

In the case of older women, it is very important now to design an information network, an orientation so that every mature woman plans her old age . . . so that she acquires the capacity to be the older person she wishes to be, and not an old woman who is institutionalized and manipulated. For this to happen, women need to plan for their old age before they retire. How I wish this could be a matter treated in the school books! The adult woman must take on the responsibility for her old age, accept it, and believe that the best thing that can happen to her is to achieve old age. We must work to *demystify* the images of old age: the venerable grandmother, the cane, the meekness, the sweetness—the lies. We need education, information, training, and opportunities that put an end to the myth that the elder is one to whom everything must be given.

If we wish to attain respect and dignity, we are going to have to win them for ourselves—nobody is going to give them to us. Therefore, to benefit the rest, our principal task is to raise the consciousness of women and men, because the movement of the elderly is not of women only. Both men and women need to become conscious that to attain a good old age, they must prepare for it.

My idea is that education is a kind of boundary: on the one side is the old peoples' home, occupational therapy, the hospital, the psychologist's couch, the tears and the pain, and on the other side is education, the preparation we are beginning here at this conference that is going to enable us women to avoid passing to the other side of the boundary into physical degradation. The women that we see in the old age homes once were young: they loved, they laughed, they worked—why did they end up there? What needs to happen is that those of us who are connected to government and other institutions must plan that older women and men do not end up like this; that they plan in their old age to be strong, happy older people, *demystifying* their image in the same way that we have demystified the image of the mother.

Let's get off our venerable thrones! Let's struggle, work, become aware, participate in our family life; read the newspapers, the political news, and go out to the latest theatrical events; talk with young people—in short, remain active. We have to educate the younger women to become strong old ladies! Women of my age never had any preparation. Nobody ever told us anything; what we know we have learned in practice. To achieve a good old age requires work, preparation, effort, but we have to do it!

María Cristina Arteaga
VEMEA-Vejez en México, Estudio y Acción (Old Age in Mexico-Study and Action)

During my 20 years of working in Africa and China, it was my experience that at the local level, both midlife and older women seemed far more apt to form mutual support groups than did men—probably because women's contacts are so much less structured. Women walk to fetch water or wood; join church, sewing or discussion groups, as well as credit societies and other special interest groups; collaborate in child care. This happens in

both the developing and developed world. Women get lots done relatively quietly and get little if any publicity. They may not be "empowered" politically at the national level, but they are potent forces in their own communities.

Almost invariably, these local groups are organized by women of a "certain age," as the French would say. They are the ones who have taken up the cudgels to solve their own and their communities' needs. They are doing it in a way they see as logical: by joining with other women who see the same needs. We now call this coalition building. These groups, however, are scattered. The important things they do would be infinitely strengthened if government policies and the allocation of resources would support them and encourage these coalitions to expand and other coalitions to develop.

At the United Nations, one sees coalition-building and the resulting empowerment of groups with similar interests on a somewhat different scale. International nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have obtained consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Commission have certain privileges that provide empowerment: the right to observe, present written statements and, on occasion, speak in many of the committees. When they join forces, their voices and concerns or solutions to problems often are heard, and often heeded.

Attending the regular meetings of the NGO committees (on women, aging, development, family, substance abuse, and others), one is struck by the fact that most of the loyal, active representatives are gray or white-haired. One can understand why. Younger women are busy looking after their families, or hanging onto jobs that bring the needed money home. Their time is limited. These tasks then fall to midlife and older women. They have gone through many battles for their convictions, and have experience on how to attain their goals. They join with others and go after whatever they see is needed. NGO representatives have the enviable possibility of being publicly more creative and critical than do the official governmental representatives, and they often contribute the liveliest part to many international meetings.

The situation of older women is becoming a new global issue. The world is aging and women outlive men almost everywhere. This is still a relatively new field, one that until now has been submerged by the other interests of women's international organizations or aging in general. As yet, no international organization has a special focus on the situation and needs of older women. But this concern is beginning to be felt at local levels, and ultimately will build toward a global condition.

Virginia Hazzard
Representative of AARP at the United Nations

The way for women to acquire power is through public office. One has to have *political* power . . . to realize all the things we always talk about in every event we organize.

Men don't talk about social problems in the Parliament—about such things as job tenure so that the husband is not out of work, about the problems of our children, about the need for housing. Men talk about oil, mining, and other extractive industries; certainly these are necessary for the national economy, but social problems need to be in the forefront.

One can't be an independent because then you never get elected. One has to become a party insider, to fight from the inside, and this means that women have to join political parties and struggle shoulder to shoulder with the men, and even fight them at times . . . otherwise they don't permit one to participate.

Senator Juana Castro Zegarra
Senator and Treasurer of the Senate of Peru

The respect accorded elderly people in Africa is evident in the traditional words used to describe them. These expressions include "elder," "he or she who knows," "he or she who has vision," "wise old lady." In traditional African societies, age is calculated not in years but in stages of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Each stage has roles or patterns of behavior assigned to it. In the Ghanaian setting, an elderly person is said "to have arrived."

Older women continue to play important roles in political, economic, and social life in Africa. Such roles include the education of children, the teaching of culture, and passing on the rules of inheritance and descent. The Ghanaian woman is always told that one day she will be alone, either through divorce, separation, or widowhood. Therefore, throughout her life, she is preparing for that day so that she will feel comfortable with herself when she "arrives."

Large numbers of women at midlife and older ages with limited education are found in either the rural or the urban informal sectors of the Ghanaian economy. They undertake a variety of activities: commodity trading; food processing; and crafts such as weaving, pottery, or jewelry making. Quite often by the time the woman trader reaches midlife, she has greater economic power than her better educated counterpart who might have worked with government or commercial firms and is on pension. The Ghanaian household rarely contains only a nuclear family. By the time a woman reaches old age, she almost always heads a household of her children and grandchildren. By this stage she becomes the caregiver, the educator, the peacemaker, and the counselor. Her advice is sought on a variety of problems not only by her immediate family, but by people living in her neighborhood, members of her church, or other organizations.

Ghanaian women have a knack for organization, and very often two or three generations of women from the same family belong to the same society—cultural, social, economic, or political. Cultural societies are organized to instill in young people the need to uphold traditional values. Credit unions or benevolent societies are formed by market women and women farmers to provide easy credit for farms or businesses, or to build a house. The keeping of joint bank accounts with a husband is almost unheard of in Ghana; since some men have more than one wife, the women have their own households and don't have to account for their income.

Market women's benevolent societies wield a great deal of political influence, and needless to say, it is the women who have "arrived" who have the greatest power. We have a saying to the effect that the Ghanaian woman never stops working "until the bones are weak." When she becomes too frail to work, she expects her children or extended family to care for her. There is yet another saying in our vernacular that translates literally as follows:

Care for me while I grow my teeth, so that I will care for you when you lose yours.

Eva Naa Borkor Forson
Vice President, UN African Mothers Association

Our labor union grew out of a household workers group founded 20 years ago in Bogotá with the support of Father Oscar Ramón Torres. The first meeting of the union took place in July 1978 with 26 members. The founding of the union was preceded by a series of manifestations and marches by household workers; their demands can be summed up as follows:

- No stipulation on minimum age was made for engaging in paid housework; as a consequence, female children were super-exploited.
- The female household worker, in many cases, arrived at old age in the most deplorable state of health and without any provision for social security.
- The great majority of household workers were illiterate and were denied the possibility of studying.

The union set out to address a series of problems: defending the rights of the household worker; training her and professionalizing her work; winning for her a better salary, and affiliating her to the social security system.

We had our second national assembly in April 1979 with 31 members present. The task at that moment was to win legal recognition for the union, something that we had requested from the Ministry of Labor as a result of our first meeting the year before. Finally, after several unsuccessful attempts, we won our legal status in 1985 with the help of a lawyer; today we have about 200 members, but only about half are active.

Affiliating household workers to the social security system has been a permanent concern of the union since its creation. It has been a long and difficult struggle, culminating in marches, denunciations, and sit-ins in official institutions, mainly in 1985.

The government employed a series of pretexts to justify its denial of social security affiliation to the household worker—that the worker did not always work at the same house, or that a worker might only put in two days per week—thus she did not fulfill the minimum work hours required.

Even though we finally won the right to social security in 1988, the problem is not yet solved. Affiliation remains a constant complaint of the worker, and a headache for the government. Only about 15,000 domestic workers, out of some 200,000 at work in the country, are affiliated, or about 7.5 percent. The director of the Institute for Social Security (ISS) admits that the excess of forms and questionnaires for joining social security explains this small number. Another factor is no public campaign has promoted joining, nor is affiliation obligatory. The instability of this type of work also makes it difficult to administer social security,

especially for those who work by the day in different households.

Yenny del Carmen Hurtado
Treasurer, National Union of Household Workers, Colombia.

Why did we decide to organize ourselves [as the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo]? In that epoch of terrible repression, it was a sin to be young in my country, a sin to be intelligent. It was a sin for the young to go out in search of their family, and it also was a sin for a man to do so because, theoretically anyhow, men are supposed to be more intelligent than women. So the women took to the streets, and our menfolk had to stay behind at home or at their work, or wait one or two blocks away from the police station to see if we were going to be set free so that they could accompany us home.

So these were reasons behind this surge in women's movements, and I would say that "the power of not having power" was what permitted us to organize ourselves to locate our families, or at least to know something about their fate. We often left the younger women behind, weeping, because they thought that they, too, had the right to go out to search for their sisters and brothers—but we explained to them that we did not wish for more "disappeared" in our families. And so they let us go—since we were crazy old women, nothing would happen to us, and indeed, that's how it was.

In summary, what we are doing is shaking things up, with a lot of effort, a lot of pain, and a great deal of organization. Our strategy is simply to look for whatever "space" we can find. Just that—we take advantage of whatever small spaces we can identify, because each space means another child found. We are moving forward and we are rescuing our children in spite of the mental outlook of the judges, the majority of whom are men, and of the laws also made by men.

Elsa Pabón de Aguilar
Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, Argentina (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo)

Guidelines for Discussion Leaders

These guidelines are intended to assist in carrying out three discussion sessions of about one-and-one-half hours each. These sessions might constitute a series sponsored by a women's club or seniors' group; a day-long workshop for professionals in health or counseling; or three university classes for advanced undergraduate and graduate students.

The AARP workshops on women's empowerment took place in settings where many of the participants were health professionals, social scientists, or demographers; many also were from the developing world. Therefore, there was little need for extended discussion of global demographics on middle-aged and older women. Thus, the Guidelines for Discussion are designed to enable interested nonspecialists to go several steps beyond the materials developed in the AARP workshops.

For organizations that do not wish to study the demography of aging, two sessions can be based on the materials in sessions II and III below. In this case, the first discussion begins at point 3, session II below.

Session I is devoted entirely to considering the demographics of aging in the Third World, and to analyzing the differential situation of elderly women and men. To assist us in this endeavor, we have added a monograph by Kevin Kinsella, *Aging in the Third World*[1] to the materials in this publication.

Session II covers some of the main points in the Chaney article on older women's empowerment in cross-cultural perspective (part II of this publication).

Session III is based on "conversations" that took place at the two AARP workshops among 13 "empowered" older women from ten different countries (part III of this publication).

The sessions are organized so that source material is selected and reframed for discussion, with the participants encouraged to draw parallels between their situation and the one they are reading about.

Session I
Some Necessary Background to the Empowerment of Older Women

Readings: Chaney article (this publication), pages 1 to 4; Kinsella monograph, pages 1 to 18. We also will refer to Torrey, et al.[2], but you do not need this publication.

1. How old is "old"? In what regions of the Third World do most older persons live? How do we decide that someone has reached midlife or old age? Chaney states (page 3) that in some preindustrial societies, elder status is attained as early as age 40 or 45 years; yet in European and North American cultures, persons at these ages would be considered hardly middle-aged.

   Some Considerations

   - What defines age? Are distinctions among children, adolescents, young adults, midlife adults, young elderly, elderly, and "oldest old" persons valid? For what reasons is elder status accorded to persons in some cultures who, in other societies, might still be considered in their younger years? How would you refine these categories?
   - Is age a cultural or social concept, rather than a chronological one?
   - Is one as "old as one feels," and therefore, are ethnographers correct in accepting their informants' own views on whether they are young or old?
   - Are significant "markers" in the life span more useful in defining status than those that classify people strictly on the criterion of age? For example, would the birth of a first grandchild be a good indicator of arrival at midlife? A[illegible] of a great grandchild, of elder status?
   - What effects might such self-definitions of age have on those who need to gather exact statistics on age categories or to have accurate information on people's ages—for example, census

takers, social security agencies, demographers, social scientists?

2. Let us continue with the concept of who is "old," looking at figure 1 on page 2 of the Kinsella monograph[1].

Some Considerations

- Only on the African continent south of the Sahara are proportions of older persons still small, but even there they are increasing. Among the remainder of Third World populations, proportions of the aged vary dramatically, based on sharp differences in life expectancy among persons in these countries. Do these contrasts surprise you?
  - In Hong Kong and Uruguay, for example (we are still looking at Kinsella's figure 1, page 2), 17 and 22 percent respectively of the population is 55 years of age and older, while in Bangladesh and Kenya, only 7.2 and 5.1 percent respectively are among the 55 and over age group. In countries where the overwhelming majority is younger than 55 years, is it surprising that those who have lived a half-century or more would be considered old?
  - We note the differences in life expectancy among countries (Kinsella, figure 10, page 10). In 1988, Hong Kong had the highest life expectancy among the countries shown, 78 years; the United States, 74.6 years (Torrey et al.)[2], and Bangladesh, only 51 years. How old is "old" in Hong Kong? In Bangladesh? In Europe or the United States?
- Nevertheless, even if we look only at the proportions of persons who might universally be considered older, Kinsella's study (page 5) of 22 countries shows that population groups aged 65 to 74 years, and 75 years and over (the oldest old), will grow more rapidly during the next two decades than the "younger old," that is, persons 55 to 64 years of age.
  - The oldest old already constitute 17 percent of the total world population aged 55 years and over. Twelve percent are in the Third World; 23 percent are in developed nations *(ibid.)*.
  - If this age group continues to grow at the pace demographers predict, by the year 2020, 61 percent (150 million) of the world's total population aged 75 years and over will live in today's developing countries *(ibid.)*.
  - The pace itself is startling; demographers predict that between 1985 and 2025, the percent increase of those 65 years of age and older will range from 357 percent in Guatemala to 292 percent in Brazil, to 201 percent in Bangladesh. Among developed countries, the proportions of the aged also will increase, but not as dramatically. Canada's 65 and over population will show a 135 percent increase; the United States, 105 percent; France, 67 percent; and Sweden, 23 percent (Torrey et al., figure 4, page 6).
  - Kinsella (page 3) notes that, in absolute numbers, some of the figures are "staggering": by the year 2005, China will see an increase of 75 million persons aged 55 and over, and from 2005 to 2020, another 139 million persons in this age group will be added. By 2020, India's older population will increase by 123 million.
  - Just for comparison's sake, let's consider projections on older populations in the developed world (Torrey et al., figure 5, page 7). In 1985, persons 65 years and over totaled 16.9 percent in Sweden, 14.1 percent in Austria, 12.4 percent in France, and 12.0 percent in the United States (Torrey et al., page 6). In the United States, the proportion of older persons could increase by 20 percent from 1985 to 2025, and the numbers could grow from 29 million to 59 million in that period *(ibid.)*.

3. What might explain the rapid aging of the world's population? Kinsella's monograph goes briefly into the reasons for the recent phenomenon of aging populations in many countries throughout the world (pages 5–6 and figure 6).

Some Considerations

- "Young" societies are those with high fertility and high mortality rates; this means that the bulk of the population is in its younger years. As recently as two decades ago, 50 percent or more of the populations in most Third World countries were under 15 years of age.
- Then, as diseases are eradicated through mass vaccinations and more people have access to public health services, infant mortality decreases and life expectancy increases. Mortality rates decline, while fertility most often remains high, leading to rapid population growth. This period, often called the

"demographic transition," is accelerated through foreign aid programs offered to Third World countries.

- In the third stage, both fertility and mortality rates come into rough balance. The stage then is set for rapid increases in proportions of the aging.

4. What are the consequences of the growing proportions of older people in the Third World?

Some Considerations

- Developing countries are in a "mode" of attending to the needs of the still-large cohorts of young, whose education, job, and health care requirements vary considerably from the needs of older people.
  - In the developing world, little notice has yet been taken of the dimensions of growth in the aging population, and almost no consideration has been given to the problems posed by the aging populations at either governmental or nongovernmental levels.
  - The large increases in numbers and proportions of older persons already are beginning to pressure inadequate nutritional, health care, and social security systems.
  - In the developed world, we already are attempting to deal with the new situation posed by increasing numbers and proportions of older persons. Do you think we are succeeding?
- The question for developing countries is whether governments alone will be able to meet even the minimal needs of their older populations. In relation to health and disability, for example (Kinsella, pages 14–16), not enough research exists to tell us if their situation will be at all similar to the developed world, where about 60 percent of noninstitutionalized older persons "have no significant functional impairment and have a satisfactory level of well-being."
  - Without doubt, many frail elderly will have no other recourse than to depend on public welfare.
  - But will it be possible—and necessary—for older persons in the Third World to become much more self-sufficient? To organize to meet many of their own needs? Even, in the precarious economic situation of their countries, to contribute to the development process?
  - And what about older people who live in developed countries? Can they also become more self-sufficient, less dependent on public services? In what measure is the fate of older persons in their own hands?

Session II

Empowerment of Older Women: the Situation in the Third World

Readings: Chaney article (this publication); Kinsella monograph, pages 11 to 15.

1. We now consider in detail the women's situation. But because we are interested in context, we always compare older women's potential and problems to those of older men. First we will look in the Kinsella volume at the contrasting demographic picture regarding two important issues where a sex differential exists: life expectancy, and health and disability.

Some Considerations

- Turning first to Kinsella (figure 11, page 11), let's look at the overall life expectancy figures for women and men. Many of the Asian and Latin American countries show an advantage in life expectancy of women over men of 5 to 6.5 years. Even in Africa, where proportions of the elderly are still small, women have a distinct advantage in life expectancy.
- This advantage in life expectancy translates into higher mortality rates for men, and consequently, larger proportions of elderly women in many countries of the developing world. Some of these rates are show in Kinsella's figure 12, page 11.
  - Since most women still marry men several years older than they are, women's predominance in the older years also contributes to a high incidence of widowhood among women. Some of these rates are shown in Kinsella's figure 18, page 18.

2. Kinsella is not able to go into much detail on the specific health and disability situation of older women in comparison to men—very little research exists—but he does report several differences.

- For example (figure 13, page 13), on crude death rates from cardiovascular diseases,

women are advantaged over men. On differences in rates of disabled elderly (figure 16, page 15), women are disadvantaged.

- Such differences need to be taken into account since much of the health research is carried out on male populations (as it is in the United States), and we do not know nearly as much about the health and well-being of elderly women, either in the developed or developing world[4].

These considerations make it all the more necessary for women at midlife to prepare for their later years, and for women who already have reached elder status to be aware of their potential to contribute to their own well-being.

3. We now are ready to discuss women's empowerment at older ages. Chaney asks us to consider some specific issues in relation to this question (pages 1–2):

   - Are all older persons everywhere affected by physical, psychological, and economic woes?
   - To what extent do family structures and kinship systems affect the well-being of older persons?
   - Can older persons do anything to change their lives? Does personal creativity and initiative count in mitigating negative aspects and improving the quality of life for the older people?
   - How do older women fare, in relation to older men, in various cultures around the world? And what can women do, both personally and in collaboration with others, to improve the situation of the elderly?

4. What the author intends to do is to review evidence, particularly from ethnographic accounts, of elder women's status in cross-cultural perspective. Her major thesis is that some societies "empower" older women, and she defines empowerment (page 4) as

   > *increased freedom to choose occupations, pastimes, and friends, not only because one is freed from the demands of raising children, but also freed from the formal taboos and/or informal strictures of traditional cultures that often surround women in their childbearing years.*

   She reports that the ethnographic accounts tend to show the following (see pages 2–3):

   - The situation of both female and male older persons is better in preindustrial societies, while opportunities to become empowered at older ages diminish with modernization.
   - Not all older persons acquire prestige to the same degree; thus empowerment may depend, in part, on personal initiative.
   - The position of older women improves less than the position of older men, yet still substantially improves over the life span.
   - Deterioration of the position of older persons in industrial societies may be a phase of early development; later on, when there are more resources to go around, their situation can improve.
   - Organization may be an important key to the empowerment of older persons, both women and men.

5. Which of these propositions would you suspect might also hold true for developed countries? For the United States?

   - Do you think that it is possible for women to "prepare" for older age so that they can live a more productive, independent life?
   - Are women's chances of laying a foundation for improved status in their old age better in the developed world? Or, considering the status accorded to women in traditional societies, is there more likelihood that women in the Third World can become empowered in their later years?
   - What is the situation of women who were economically well off during marriage but who through widowhood, divorce, or abandonment, face later life without a male partner? Is the situation better or worse for women in the developed world, compared to developing countries?

6. Chaney's paper considers a number of traditional roles that empower older women in many cultures (pages 9–14). Let's discuss each of these; decide whether these roles are truly empowering, and see if we can add others that the author missed. Let's also decide whether any of these roles are open to older women in the industrialized world.

   - *Mother of adult children:* Here the author is referring to perhaps the first prestigious role open to women in the Third World. Are there parallels in First World societies as children reach maturity? Is this demonstrated in closer relationships characterized by friendship, caregiving, and economic support?

- *Mother-in-law:* In many preindustrial societies, the role of mother-in-law gives women their first chance to control another person (the daughter-in-law; here we do not consider *her* position, which is often not a happy one). Does this role, which often translates into a more equal relationship between the woman and her male partner, have similar repercussions in the industrialized nations?
- *Grandmother:* This is the role that universally confers status on Third World women, regardless of their social class or economic level. Does it seem as if the grandmother—often almost venerated—gains more prestige in some Third World societies than in others? Than in your own?
- *Keeper of the lineage, leader in religion and ritual:* Again, it is an almost universal occurrence in the Third World that older women gain prestige because they know and guard the rites and rituals (arranging marriages, presiding at initiation rites, carrying out traditional religious practices). Are there any similar responsibilities for rites and rituals that confer prestige on older women in industrialized nations?
- *Councillor and leader:* In many preindustrial societies, elderly women assume important offices in the councils and assume leadership positions. What are the prospects for older women doing so as their countries modernize? Or is politics in the more developed countries, even at the local level, a younger woman's game?
- *Free and autonomous beings:* Chaney demonstrates that in many cultures, older women achieve much greater freedom of action—to give their opinions, travel from home, drink and participate fully on ceremonial occasions, and even engage in behavior that would not be tolerated in younger women. Any parallels here in your own society?

7. The author has, on the whole, painted a fairly positive picture of the increased status of elderly women in preindustrial settings. Do you think she is correct in her somewhat guarded conclusion regarding prospects for organization? Given their prestige and freedom to act, what is to prevent older women from organizing to enhance their roles in their societies and even to engage in political decision making?
   - Is blood thicker than water? That is, will kinship ties prove stronger than the issues facing older women, preventing any effective concerted action?
   - Are other statuses that cross-cut age groups—class, race, gender, religious affiliation—more important than the pressing issues that might motivate older women to work together?

Session III
Conversations on the Empowerment of Older Women

Readings: "Conversations on Empowerment" in Mexico and Washington, DC (this publication).

Conversation in Mexico

The Nature of Power

1. What do you understand by the terms "power" and "empowerment"?
   - Do you think that women, in general, have ever held real, effective power? If so, what kinds? If not, why not?
   - Do you think women ever achieve power? If so, what kinds? If not, why not?
   - Do you think the participants have dealt effectively with the definitions of power and empowerment? How would you define them?

2. Does power take various forms, as some participants suggest, or is power simply the ability—as Olga Garcia tells us—always and everywhere to be able to carry out whatever one wants to do?
   - Elsa Pabón of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo suggests that there is a moral power that contrasts with the naked power of a dictator. Do you agree or disagree?
   - Several participants suggest that while women have not always had political power, they have controlled certain economic resources, and this is as good as, if not better than, political power. Others thought that without political power, any other power is useless. Which position, in your opinion, is correct?

3. Is acquiring public office—at least by some women—the way to power for others? Will older women ever be empowered if they do not have

advocates in the world's parliaments and congresses? Do women usually support measures that benefit other women?

Intergenerational Alliances

1. Do you think that older women should/could find allies among midlife and younger women, and learn from them?
   - Is there anything distinctive in older women's empowerment, or do they acquire power in just the same ways as younger women?
   - Elsa Pabón and Olga García mention two instances (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and household workers in Uruguay) in which older women themselves organized without assistance from other women, and with few resources. They suggest that older women in the Third World are less hemmed in by custom and, therefore, have greater freedoms and less to lose in organizing and making demands. Do you think this is true? And does this advantage also exist for older women in industrialized countries?

2. Elsa Pabón says that the ideal instrument to restructure society would be an integration of "youth and energy, experience and age." Julia Alvarez says that older women can learn from younger women's efforts to organize in the women's movement. Considering the generational gaps that seem to exist in most societies among women at various life stages, do you think this is realistic?

Strategies for Action

1. Julia Alvarez suggests that older women have been left out of the development process in Third World countries. Do you think it will be necessary to harness the energies and talents of older women and men in development if older persons are to have the services and [illegible] they need? Is the same true for [illegible] countries?

2. Maria Cristina Arteaga and Juana Castro both believe it is essential for women of mature age to decide on the ends or goals they are seeking through the moral empowerment of women, the knowledge to define specific objectives, and the courage to set out to achieve them. Is part of the problem, in your opinion, that women do not set clear-cut goals in their organizing efforts?
   - Elsa Pabón believes that the strength of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo was that they had one aim, and that women of all classes could unite behind it. Is this a prerequisite for success?
   - Gloria Scott thinks that nothing will happen to better older women's condition until they have the research and information to demonstrate to policymakers and planners that older women's contributions are crucial to national development. Julia Alvarez underscores the importance of quantifying such information to convince politicians and change policies. What is your opinion?

Educating Our Daughters

The participants engaged in a lively exchange on the importance of educating younger women, so that they, in turn, would not face the same problems in growing older as their mothers' generation is facing now. The participants agree that this kind of education should take place not only in the schools, but also through mothers. Do you believe a dialogue between mothers and daughters is necessary? Is possible?

Winning Power

There seems to be a consensus among the participants that older people must seek and win empowerment for themselves; nevertheless, they disagree on whether they should proceed alone.

- Olga García goes so far as to declare "There are no intermediaries." But several of the others think that winning power involves, on the one hand, support for women seeking public office (Olga, Elena Urrútia, Juana Castro), and on the other hand, seizing every advantage to "move forward into all the small spaces ceded to us" (Elsa Pabón). This involves, she says, planting ideas among younger people.
- Elsa Pabón puts forward the interesting idea that women need to begin "to" live' a little earlier." Midlife women, she says, need to think about themselves and about the society, and not wait until they are old women to do so. This will, she says, lead to greater consciousness among older women so that they can enjoy their old age.

- Juana, Elena, and Olga all give examples from their own organizations of older and younger women working together: younger women in leadership positions inviting older women to collaborate as advisors; women of all ages organized to fight for elder rights (as is the pattern in VEMEA); and complementary support to older persons who may not know about the many possibilities for services and activities. Can you give examples of instances in which older and younger women joined on behalf of a cause that benefited all women?
- Julia Alvarez sums up the discussion by observing that the main point must be consultation—listening to older persons, and opening a dialogue with them on their needs and interests.

Conversation in Washington, DC

Cultural Meaning of Aging

1. The discussion at the Association for Women in Development (AWID) meeting in Washington opened with several questions posed by Daw Aye, who comes from a Buddhist culture where elderly people are expected to withdraw from worldly desires. Yet the modern world presents demands that conflict with this notion, for example, that society mobilize politically and economically for development.
   - Daw Aye's first question is whether such demands can be reconciled. Are there similar conflicts between old and new cultural norms in your society?
   - Graciela Hierro and Eva Naa Borker Forson point out that the situation of older women in their countries is different. In Mexico, older women are interested in learning activities through which they can earn money. In Ghana, and even in Islamic Africa, Eva and Virginia Hazzard describe women as outgoing—they rule their households, they are powerful even if they do not hold public office and, as they grow older, they acquire more power. How do cultural norms constrain or support women's access to power in your country?
2. A consensus appears to emerge on the statement that there should not be any concerted effort to change those who do not wish to alter their approach to life and to growing old, and that change must begin with younger people, who someday will be old. Do you agree or disagree?

Dilemmas of Growing Older

1. Graciela Hierro paints a rather dark picture of older women in Mexican culture as not much better than servants. She adds that only mothers-in-law have power. Yenny del Carmen Hurtado suggests that while grandmothers in Colombia still live in the family and help take care of the household, they are respected and their advice is heeded. What is the relationship of the grandmother to her children and grandchildren in your country?
2. Graciela also suggests that older men in Mexico are respected because they have worked and earned money. Is the economic independence of older women a key to greater respect?
3. Yenny asks if empowerment is attained automatically on reaching older age, or if older women must gain power by constructing the basis for empowerment through what they learn and experience in their early lives. What is your opinion on this question?
   - Eva says that the Ghanaian woman knows that she will one day be alone, so she plans for herself and strives to attain a certain stature and position by the time she becomes a head of the household.
   - Louise Spivack comments that this approach appears to be correct; in the United States, she says, those working with the elderly try to instill self-esteem after women become separated, divorced, or widowed.

   Which situation prevails in your country? Do women prepare for their old age? Do they reach old age with some assets and resources such as personal property and savings; a dwelling and land of their own; education and/or useful training; and a circle of friends and membership in any organizations? Or have they been so caught up in the lives of others that they have made no preparations for their own old age?

Key Influence of the Family

There is a fairly long discussion of the centrality of the family in the lives of older women. The participants agree that the family is the best place for an older person to live.

- Louise remarks that husbands and sons have to be "trained" to understand the changes going on among women today. Eva comments that she must think about teaching her sons to cook and clean, or otherwise they will grow up not knowing anything. To what extent are women responsible for their current situation? It is they, after all, who educate their sons.
- Yenny reports that while men are very *machista* in Colombia, and she feels that collaboration in the household is out of the question, the deterioration of a strong family support system there concerns her greatly. Eva also believes that the family is under stress in Africa, as the men go to the urban areas seeking work, leaving the women and children behind to till the land and get by as best they can. Is out-migration from the rural areas also affecting the family in your world region?
- Louise points out that the family unit endures, but not in the form of the traditional family. Single heads of household, particularly women, are increasing. Is this the case in your country?

What is the situation of the family in your country? Is the form of the family changing? Do husbands and sons collaborate in housework? How do the changes in society and culture affect older women in your country?

Older Women and Their Grandchildren

The conversation turned to the role of older women in the socialization of the new generation. In many cultures, grandmothers have a special responsibility toward the formation and education of their grandchildren. Is this the case in your country?

- Virginia and Daw Aye discuss whether grandmothers would necessarily be attuned to the new ideas required for societal change. Do you think that older women are open to changing their ideas to the extent that survival in modern life requires?
- Several examples of older women adapting to changes in the culture and society are given: in Asia and Africa, for example, older women who are midwives have been successfully trained in new methods. Has anything similar taken place in your country?
- Mention is made of the frequent custom in developing countries for young people struggling in the city to send their children back to the rural areas to be cared for by their grandmothers. What is the situation in your country? Do older women have any role in the socialization of their grandchildren in your society? Do you think such a role would be positive in conveying the cultural values of your country and ethnic group to the new generation?

Building Coalitions and Networking

1. The conversations end with a discussion of the necessity for older women to organize and build coalitions.
   - Louise emphasizes the necessity of first carefully defining the issues around which such coalitions would take place.
   - Daw Aye describes the network of local and national women's organizations already in place in the Asia-Pacific region, a situation that is paralleled in most other world areas. She seconds Louise's suggestion that an important first step is to disseminate information and material on the situation of older women.
   - Eva and Graciela suggest that research on issues related to older women is best done by women because they understand the issues better than men, and that researchers preferably should come from the same culture as those they study. Graciela also mentions the technique of "participant action," where the participants play a key role in planning and evaluation of their groups.
   - Louise and Graciela agree that while it is necessary to consult with older people to find out what they want, it may also be necessary to present options because sometimes the experience of older people has been narrow.
2. Yenny describes a multilayered class society in Colombia where older persons at the top level are cared for, but very little is done for the older poor. She mentions household workers as being

in need particularly in their old age, many times living alone and without pensions. Louise points out that the problem of poverty among older women is general throughout the world.

3. Graciela suggests that, in Catholic countries, the solution may be for older women to work through the church, which functions as their "club." Is organizing through religious institutions an option in other world regions?

4. The participants offer a number of other suggestions on concrete ways to build coalitions.

   - Yenny likes the idea of older people getting together to examine their own problems, as suggested by Mexico's VEMEA.
   - Graciela describes how, in VEMEA, older, midlife, and younger women come together several times each year in panels, seminars, participatory dramas, and other activities. One event, "Women Facing Aging and Death," attracted women from 18 to 84. Do you think this method of networking—mixing women of different ages and walks of life—is a good strategy?
   - Virginia points out that no formal networks serve older women and their organizations. She mentions the AARP/IFA Global Link for Midlife and Older Women, but points to the need for local institutions. Graciela, taking up a theme often reiterated in these conversations, says that such programs have to begin with midlife women—it is too late to wait until women are old before organizing and networking.

   Can you add to these ideas?

5. Virginia closes the conversation with several observations on older women and organization. She notes that in many cultures, women, more often than men, form groups around specific issues: births, marriages, deaths, house repair, credit, potable water. She says that almost invariably the leaders of these groups are older women. Although they may bring their daughters to the meetings, it is only when women reach midlife that they start to attain power.

   Virginia then describes the work of AARP at the United Nations, including efforts in the UN Commission on the Status of Women and the UN General Assembly requesting first, that the situation of midlife and older women throughout the world be studied in depth, and second, that every country begin to gather data on women in the older age groups. Do you think measures of this kind are a good place to start? What other actions would you consider helpful?

   The AARP representative concludes by suggesting that only by building broader coalitions will midlife and older women be empowered. She suggests that the numbers are there; what is needed now is "the resolve to make a difference.'

Notes

[1] Kevin Kinsella, *Aging in the Third World*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Washington, DC: 1988). International Population Reports Series P-95, No. 79. Available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402.

[2] Life expectancy figures are from Barbara Boyle Torrey, Kevin Kinsella, and Cynthia N. Taueber, eds., *An Aging World*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (Washington, DC: 1987). International Population Reports Series P-95, No. 78. Available from the Superintendent of Documents.

[3] The Bureau of the Census bases its projections on three "assumed" population growth rates—lowest, middle, and highest. Figures quoted here use the middle series of projections.

[4] An excellent discussion of health issues facing women at midlife and older ages is Lee Sennott-Miller, *Midlife and Older Women in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Status Report*. American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) (Washington, DC: 1989).

Excerpts from

Aging in the Third World

Courtesy of U.S. Department of Commerce,
Bureau of the Census

Written by Kevin Kinsella

Older Population Growing Fastest in Developing Countries

While the world's total population currently is growing at a rate of 1.7 percent per year, the population aged 55 and over is increasing 2.2 percent per year; and the number of persons aged 65 and over, 2.8 percent annually. Every month, the net balance of the world's older population (55 years and over) increases by 1.2 million persons. More than 80 percent of this monthly increase, almost 1 million persons, occurs in developing countries, where the growth rate for persons aged 55 and over (3.1 percent) is three times as high as in developed countries.

Majority of World's Older Population Lives in Developing Countries

There are now some 370 million people aged 55 and over living in developing countries, representing 58 percent of the world total in this age category. Over the next three decades, the regional distribution of older population will change considerably; by 2020, the proportion in developing countries is projected to rise to 72 percent, with the absolute number exceeding 1 billion.

Persons aged 65 and over in developing countries also outnumber their counterparts in the industrial nations, by 13 percent in 1988 (159 million versus 140 million, respectively). In 2020, the 65-and-over population in developing countries is expected to surpass 470 million, which will be more than double the number in developed countries.

Caribbean Is "Oldest" Developing Region

Among the world's developing regions, the Caribbean has the highest proportion (12 percent) of population aged 55 and over. Asia and Latin America have more than 10 percent and 9 percent, respectively, and Africa as a whole has 7 percent.

The high percentage of older population in the Caribbean has resulted from a history of relatively low fertility rates combined with significant emigration of young and working-age adults. Although Africa presently has the lowest proportion of older population, its growth rate for ages 55 and over will be the highest among world regions during the next decade.

Table A.
Percentage of Total Population in Older Age Groups: 1988 to 2020

Region	Year	55 years and over	65 years and over	75 years and over
Asia	1988	10.4	4.5	1.3
	2005	12.8	6.1	2.0
	2020	17.5	8.3	2.7
Africa	1988	7.0	2.9	0.7
	2005	7.2	3.1	0.8
	2020	8.2	3.6	1.0
Latin America	1988	9.4	4.4	1.4
	2005	11.4	5.5	2.0
	2020	15.8	7.5	2.7
Caribbean	1988	11.7	6.1	2.2
	2005	13.7	6.8	2.6
	2020	18.7	9.0	3.3

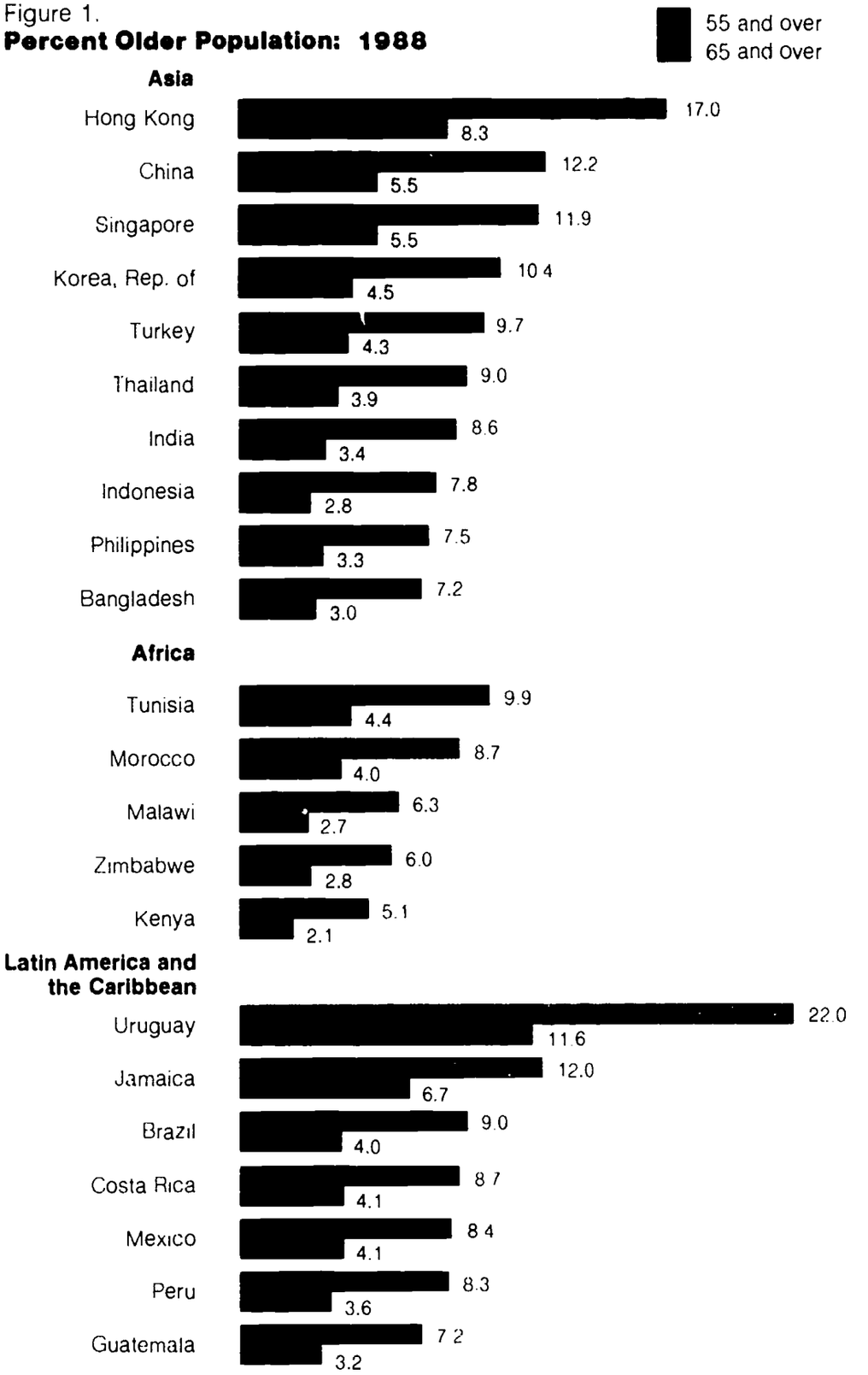
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Center for International Research, International Data Base on Aging.

Within developing regions, differing historical circumstances have produced a wide range in population age structure. Figure 1 portrays the diversity found among the 22 countries specifically examined in this report. Hong Kong, China, and Singapore, with low levels of past fertility, have proportionately greater numbers of people in older age groups than do other Asian nations. As already noted, Africa tends to be younger than other developing regions, although Tunisia, Morocco, and other Northern African nations have aged more rapidly than many of their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. Uruguay is outstanding among Latin American nations. Decades of relatively low fertility have combined with the emigration of working-age individuals to produce a Uruguayan population that is now aged by most standards, with 22 percent of its members over the age of 54.

Many Older Populations to Triple in Size by 2020

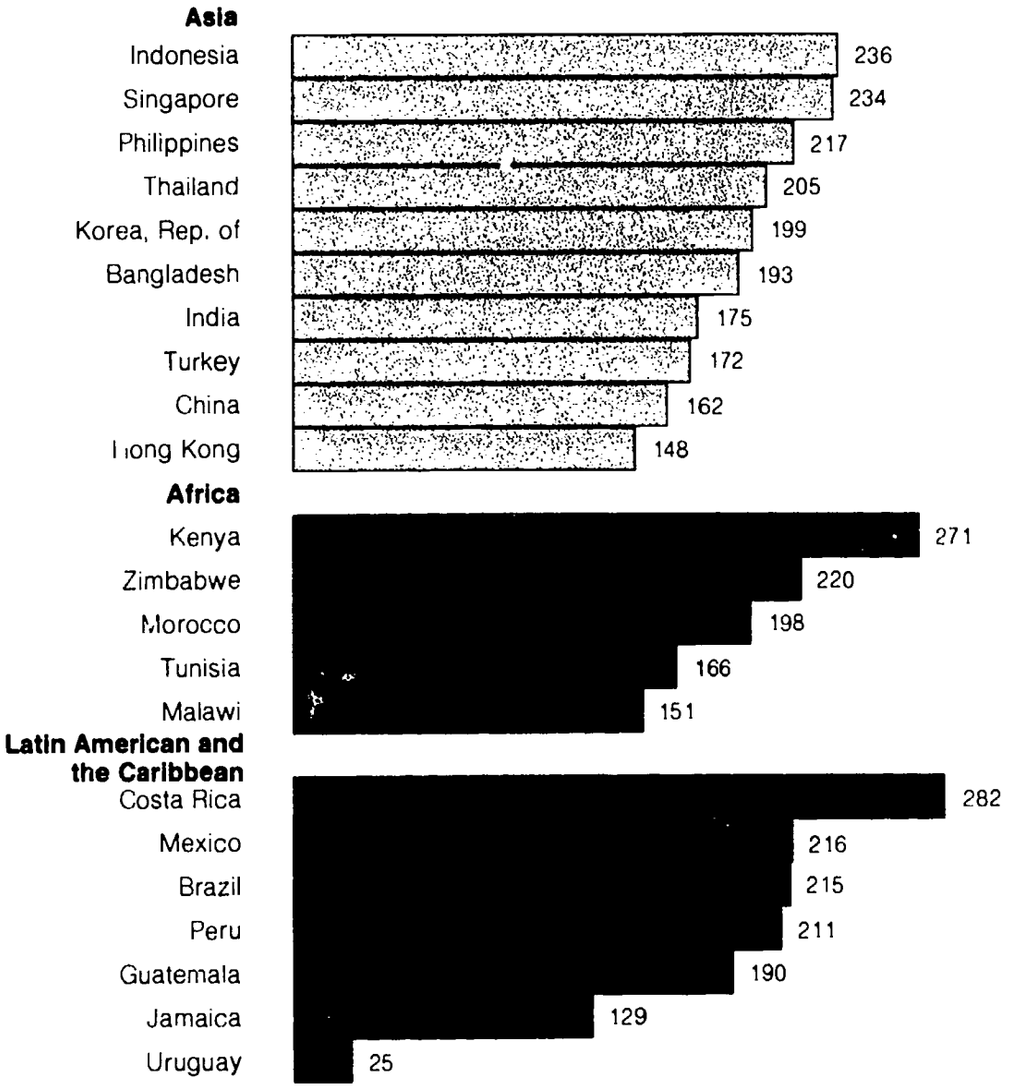
During the next three decades, percent growth in the older populations of the 22 study countries will range from 25 percent in Uruguay to 282 percent in Costa Rica. The latter represents nearly a quadrupling of the number of older Costa Ricans by 2020, compared with a projected total population (all ages) increase of

Figure 1.
Percent Older Population: 1988



Source: See Appendix B for this and all subsequent figures

Figure 2.
Percent Increase in Population Aged 55 and Over: 1988 to 2020



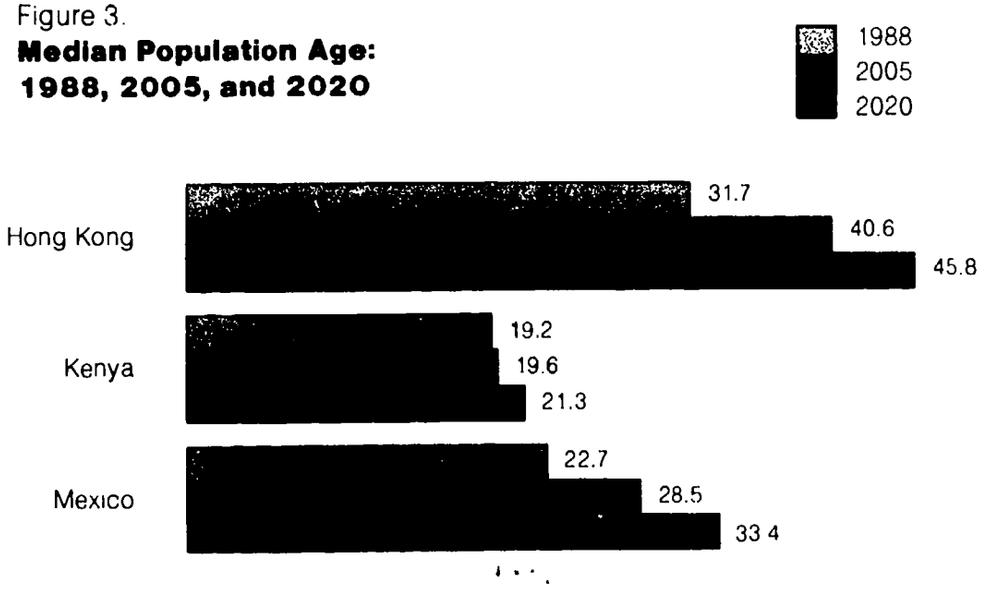
74 percent. Absolute numbers of persons aged 55 and over will more than double by 2020 in all nations except Uruguay, and will more than triple in 10 of the 22 countries (figure 2). In some instances, the absolute numbers are staggering: China alone will witness an increase of 75 million persons aged 55 and over by the year 2005, and another 139 million from 2005 to 2020. India's older citizenry will increase 123 million by 2020. Nations with relatively low percentages of older population today tend to have larger projected percent increases, although the cases of Singapore and the Republic of Korea show that there are significant exceptions.

Median Age to Rise in All Countries

Another way to think of population aging is to consider a society's median age, the age that divides a population into numerically equal parts of younger and older persons. For example, a median age of 25 years indicates that the number of persons under age 25 equals the number who have already celebrated their 25th birthday.

The current median age of countries in this study ranges from 19 years in Kenya to 33 years in Uruguay, with all but a few nations under 25 years. During the next three decades, median ages will rise in all countries, with typical gains of 8 to 10 years. The increase will be least in Sub-Saharan African countries, and greatest in East and Southeast Asia; half of all persons in Hong Kong and Singapore will be over age 45 in the year 2020, a rise in median age of more than 14 years relative to today (figure 3).

Figure 3.
Median Population Age: 1988, 2005, and 2020



Older Age Groups Have Varying Growth Rates

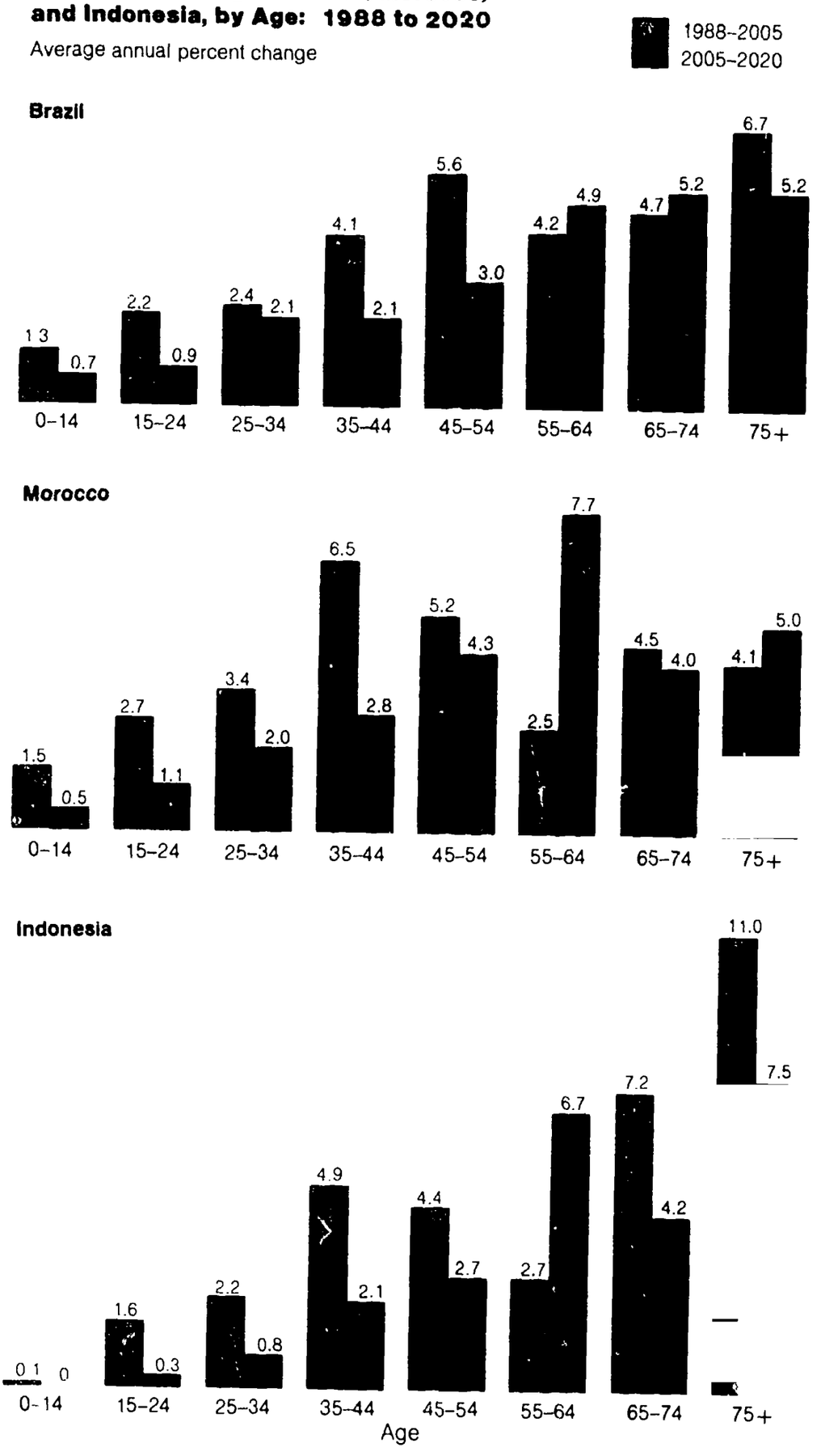
Within the broad population group aged 55 and over, narrower age groupings display differential growth rates over time. In a given country, these differences may be due to the effects of past wars, natural disasters, or fluctuations in fertility levels 55 or more years ago. Because the "older old" often have different needs than do the "younger old" (in terms of economic support, health services, long-term care, etc.), an anticipation of varying growth rates within older populations is important to both short- and long-term planning in developing nations.

In the 22 study countries, as in most developing nations, the next two decades will see generally higher growth rates in the 65 to 74 and 75 and over population age groups relative to the 55 to 64 year old category (figure 4). However, from 2005 to 2020, average annual growth among the 55 to 64 age group will be higher than during the preceding period for 19 of the 22 countries, and will often outpace changes in the older age groups. Between 2005 and 2020, the absolute number of persons aged 55 to 64 will more than double in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, and Jamaica, while six other nations will have increases of 85 percent or more. These increases in the future population aged 55 to 64 will reflect the large cohorts born between 1955 and 1965, persons who will begin to swell the older ranks of their national populations after 2010.

Figure 4.

Population Change in Brazil, Morocco, and Indonesia, by Age: 1988 to 2020

Average annual percent change



Oldest Old Now Growing Faster Than Other Older Age Groups

At the aggregate level in both developed and developing countries, numbers of persons aged 75 and over are increasing more rapidly than those aged 55 to 74 years. On a regional basis, the growth rate of the oldest old population is now higher than that for all older ages (55 years and over) in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, and will soon become so in Africa as well (figure 5). The oldest old today constitute 17 percent of the world's total population aged 55 and over (12 percent in developing countries and 23 percent in developed nations). In many countries, this age group is projected to be the fastest growing component of the older population well into the next century.

Unlike younger age groups, the oldest old in developing countries are fewer in number (45 million) than in developed countries (60 million). As the large birth cohorts of the past grow older in developing countries, and as life expectancy continues to improve, these absolute numbers are expected to balance at 71 million just before the turn of the century. By 2020, 61 percent (150 million) of the world's population aged 75 and over will reside in today's developing nations.

Among the 22 study countries, oldest old proportions of the total population range from less than 1 percent in several African and Asian nations to more than 4 percent in Uruguay. In all countries (except Malawi and Zimbabwe, where average life expectancy remains low), the growth rate of the oldest old during the period 1988–2005 will exceed that of the 55–to–64 age group. The oldest old will increase more than three times as fast as the young old in Hong Kong, and more than twice as fast in China, Indonesia, and Uruguay. Rapid growth of the oldest old will be especially pronounced in Asia, with Indonesia having the highest average annual growth rate of all 22 countries in both the 1988–2005 and 2005 – 2020 time periods (6.2 percent and 5.0 percent, respectively).

The Dynamics of Population Aging

Population aging simply refers to increasing proportions of older persons within an overall population age structure. This process is primarily determined by fertility (birth) rates, and secondarily by mortality (death) rates, so that populations with high fertility tend to have low proportions of older persons and vice versa.

Figure 5.
Average Annual Growth Rate of Total, Older, and Oldest Old Populations, by Region: 1988 to 2020

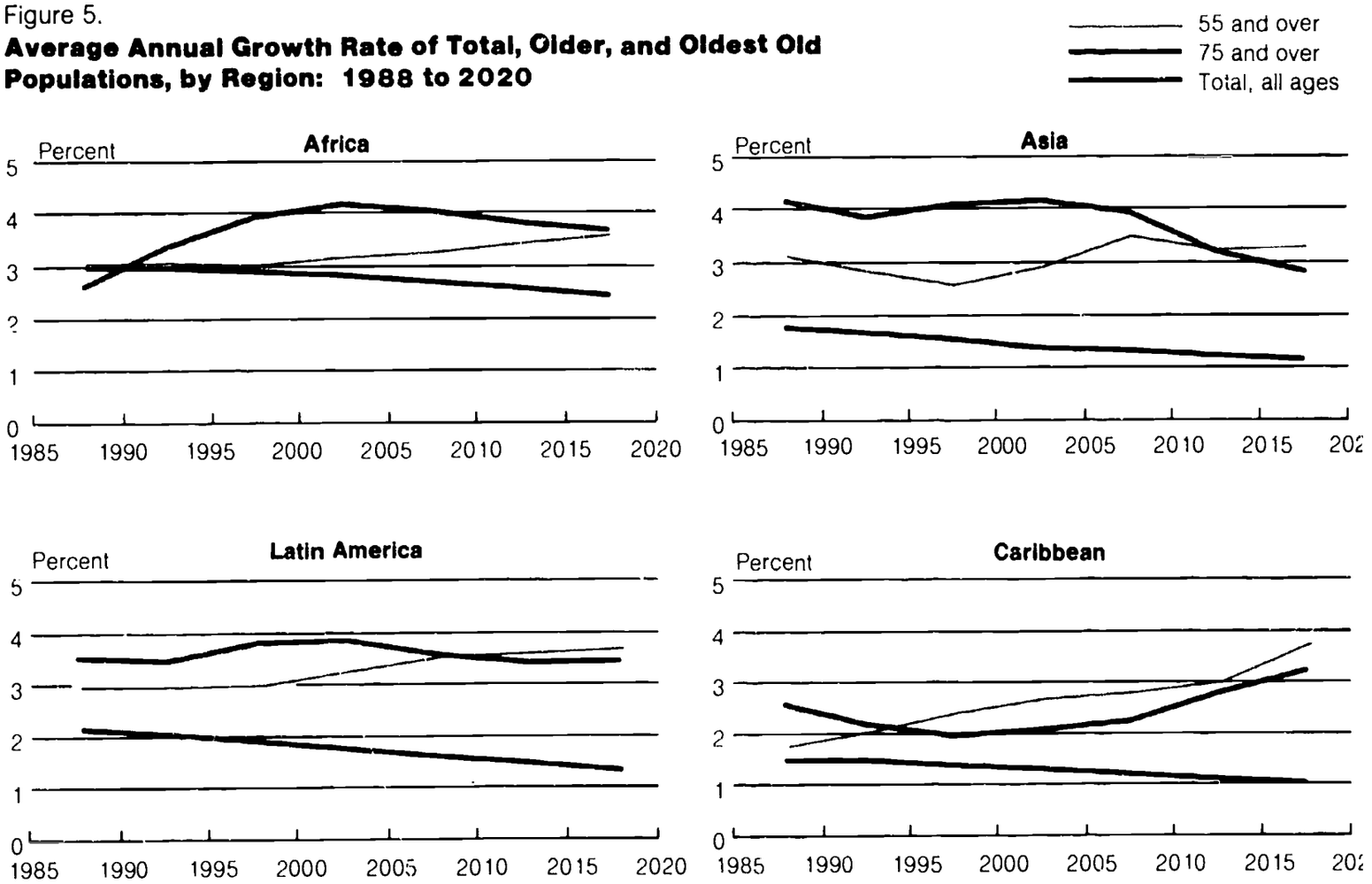
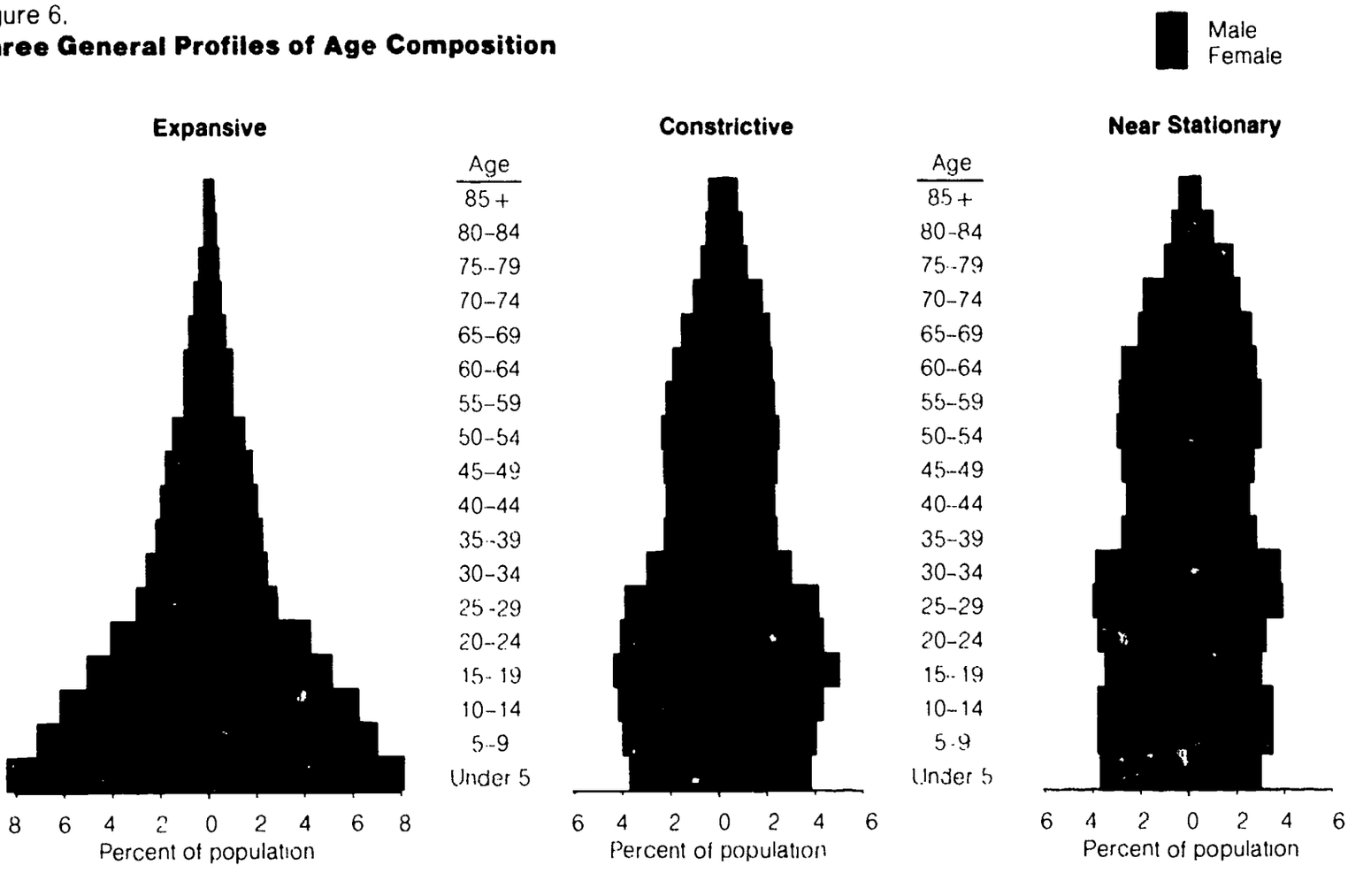


Figure 6 illustrates three general age-sex profiles, one of which applies to most societies today. These three profiles may also be thought of as an historical progression that societies may experience as they age. "Young" societies tend to have high levels of both fertility and mortality, resulting in an "expansive" age structure resembling the shape of a pyramid. As major infectious and parasitic diseases are eradicated and public health measures proliferate, life expectancy at birth increases and overall mortality declines, while fertility initially remains high. Because much of this mortality improvement occurs among infants, more children survive the early high-risk years. Younger population cohorts expand relative to older cohorts, contributing more weight to the bottom of the pyramid.

Whole populations begin to "age" when fertility declines and mortality rates improve, especially at the adult ages. As younger cohorts are reduced in size, a bulge begins to rise above the bottom of the pyramid, resulting in a "constrictive" structure. At this point, societies often make progress in reducing mortality at older ages, and older population components show slight increases. However, the largest population cohorts are still in young or mid-adulthood, and the presence of so many women in their prime childbearing years raises the possibility of a "baby boom echo" which could add girth to the bottom of the age pyramid. Some developing countries (e.g., China and Uruguay) are many years into this aging process, while others (Bangladesh, Zimbabwe) continue to have high levels of fertility which will preclude significant population aging in the foreseeable future.

At the other end of the spectrum are "old" (near stationary) societies such as Sweden and the Federal Republic of Germany, which have had low fertility and mortality for decades. With total fertility rates well below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, successive small birth cohorts have contributed to large and increasing older proportions in such countries. Over time, age structures in these societies lose their pyramidal dimensions and tend toward a rectangular shape.

Figure 6.
Three General Profiles of Age Composition



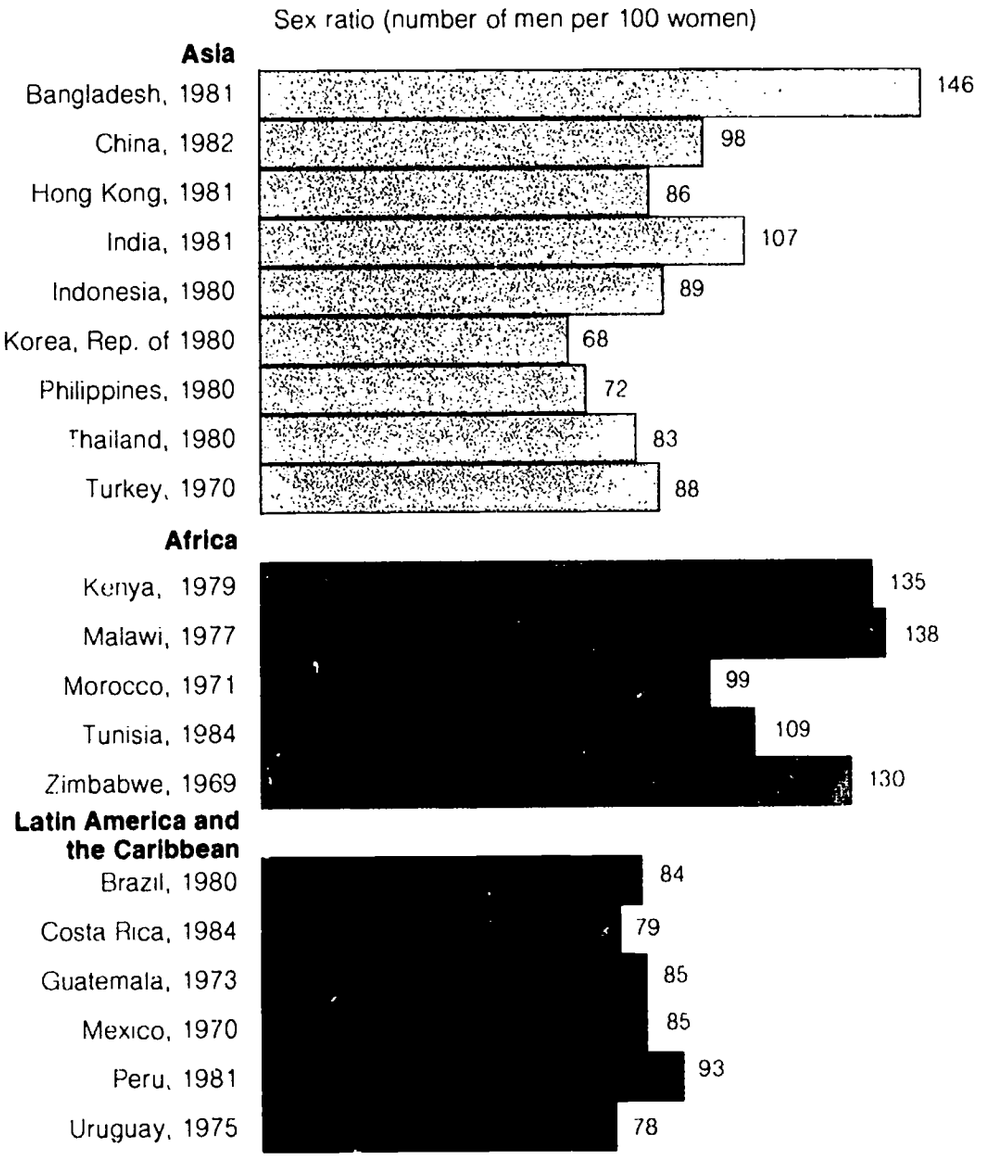
The global population living in cities more than doubled between 1950 and 1975, and the world's urbanization since 1975 has maintained a rapid pace. Change is especially evident in developing countries, and affects all portions of a given population to some extent, including the elderly. Massive rural-to-urban migration of younger persons in search of employment has often been blamed for draining rural areas of much-needed human and financial capital for development. The questions most often asked now are whether the undisputed trend toward more urbanized societies will also lead to serious tensions and conflicts among generations, and whether traditional support systems for the aged will weaken in the face of changing social structures.

Older Population Becoming More Urban

Throughout the world, the older population became more concentrated in urban areas during the 1970's and early 1980's, and this trend is projected to continue. In developing regions, which as a whole are still predominantly rural, approximately 30 percent of the population aged 60 and over resides in urban areas. This proportion is projected to rise to 40 percent by the year 2000 (United Nations Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, 1985). Countries in South Asia and Africa are likely to witness the most rapid gains, as these regions are now experiencing their peak rates of urbanization.

Within urban populations, the proportion of women aged 55 and over tends to be higher than that of men. For example, more than 10 percent of urban female Turks are over age 54, versus 8 percent of urban males. Female proportions in the 22 study countries are uniformly higher in Latin America and Asia (except Bangladesh), but usually lower than that of men in African countries. The causes of the gender and regional disparities are not well understood, although the former may be related to the movement of widows from countryside to city, for reasons of proximity to children and/or services after the loss of a spouse. Differences among countries are illustrated by the urban sex ratios (number of older men per 100 older women) in figure 7.

Figure 7.
Urban Sex Ratios for Persons 55 Years and Over



However, Rural Populations Still "Older" Than National Averages

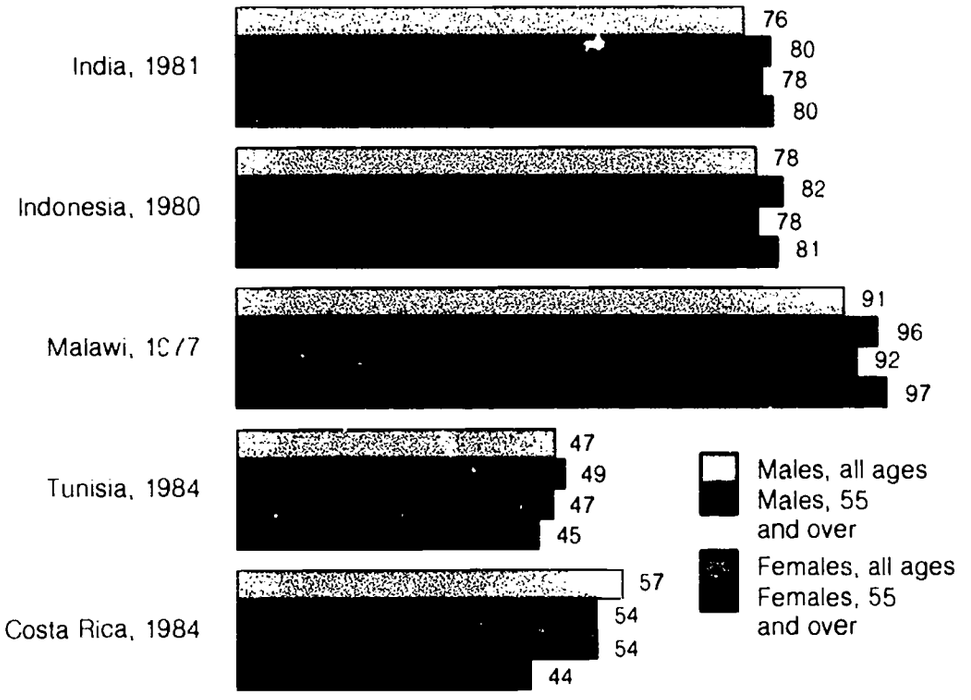
Although today's older (55 years and over) populations are becoming increasingly urban, like populations in general, rural areas remain disproportionately older in most countries (figure 8). In other words, the proportion of the older population that resides in rural areas is higher than the proportion of the total population that is rural. This is largely a result of the migration of young adults to urban areas, and in some cases, of return migration of older adults from urban areas back to rural homes. The exceptions are primarily in Latin America—Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Guatemala—where older residents are more likely than the population as a whole to live in urban settings. This is also true of older women (but not men) in Tunisia and Zimbabwe.

Older Men Particularly Likely to Live in Rural Areas

The older male population in Asian countries is less likely than younger men to live in urban areas, and the disparity between young and old widens as age increases among the latter. The difference is most striking in the Republic of Korea: whereas 57 percent of all men live in cities, only 39 percent of men aged 55 and over and 29 percent of men aged 75 and over reside in urban locales. A similar pattern is found among the African nations in this study and especially in Kenya, where the total male urban proportion is 17 percent while the corresponding figure for oldest old men (75 years and over) is less than 8 percent (figure 9). As indicated before, the general pattern does not always hold true in Latin America. However, a recent analysis of Mexican data (Ham-Chande, 1986) found a sex ratio of 104 in rural areas for both the 65 to 74 and 75 to 84 age groups, which underscores the general finding that the female preponderance typically seen at older ages is modified by rural residence.

The picture for older women is less consistent. While some countries register the declining proportions noted among men, there is often little difference in female residence by age, and some nations (Turkey, Tunisia, Brazil) have urban concentrations of women that rise with increasing age.

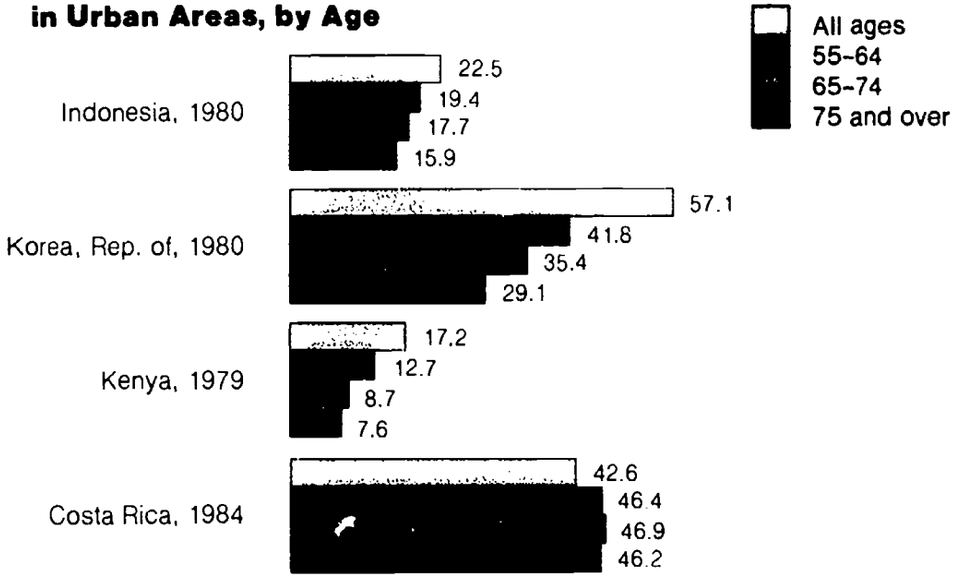
Figure 8.
Percentage of Population in Rural Areas, by Age and Sex



Rural Aging Has Implications for Agricultural Productivity

Rural–to–urban migration, and the resultant aging of producers in low capital–intensive agricultural sectors, implies a potential lowering of labor productivity in many societies and highlights the pressure that rural aging may exert on food supply stability. And as Fargues (1986) points out, even migration between rural areas can exert similar pressures. For example, the Ivory Coast was required to increase its cereal imports by 250 percent between 1974 and 1982. This was partly due to the movement of young migrants from the north (which is devoted largely to subsistence farming) to the south of the country, where they became planters of export crops such as cocoa and coffee.

Figure 9.
Percentage of Male Population in Urban Areas, by Age



The consensus to date is that rapid urbanization in developing countries has had a more deleterious effect on urban than on rural elderly. The growth of urban economies has increased employment possibilities outside the home for women as well as for men. However, there is little relation between urbanization and labor force participation at older ages (Martin, 1987). Rather, the new economic opportunities have mainly accrued to younger workers. Traditional family caregivers often enter and remain in the workforce, thereby complicating the provision of care for elderly family members. Unless the latter have a work history of government service, they are unlikely to qualify for pension support and are more likely than other population segments to require some form of economic assistance.

At the same time, urban housing may be poorly suited to traditional extended–family arrangements, thereby forcing a choice between limited privacy and alternate means of shelter. "The loss of status and esteem, displacement in unfavorable housing conditions, and the exclusion from economic production processes combine to put the older population in urban settings in a marginal position" (AAIA, 1985).

Average life expectancy at birth in today's developing world stands at 59 years, 19 percent lower than the average of 73 years in developed countries. As figure 10 shows, though, the developing country average masks an enormous range among individual nations. Life expectancy in Hong Kong, Costa Rica, and Jamaica rivals or surpasses the levels found in the United States, France, and many other industrial nations. In certain Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries, on the other hand, the level hovers around 50 years. A newborn in Hong Kong today can look forward to 30 more years of life, on average, than can a baby born in Malawi.

Life Expectancy in Developing Regions Highest in Latin America and the Caribbean

On an aggregate regional basis, life expectancy at birth is highest in Latin America (67 years) and the Caribbean (66 years), and is projected to remain so beyond the year 2020 (table B). The Asian average (excluding Japan) is 6 years lower than that of Latin America, while the African average is less than 53 years. Regions with the lowest present levels are expected to show the most future improvement, in both absolute and relative terms.

Women Living Longer Than Men

Women outlive men in virtually all countries of the world, more so in developed than in developing countries. In the latter, the female advantage is usually in the 3-to-6 year range, and tends to be greatest in East and Southeast Asia and in

Figure 10.
Life Expectancy at Birth: 1988

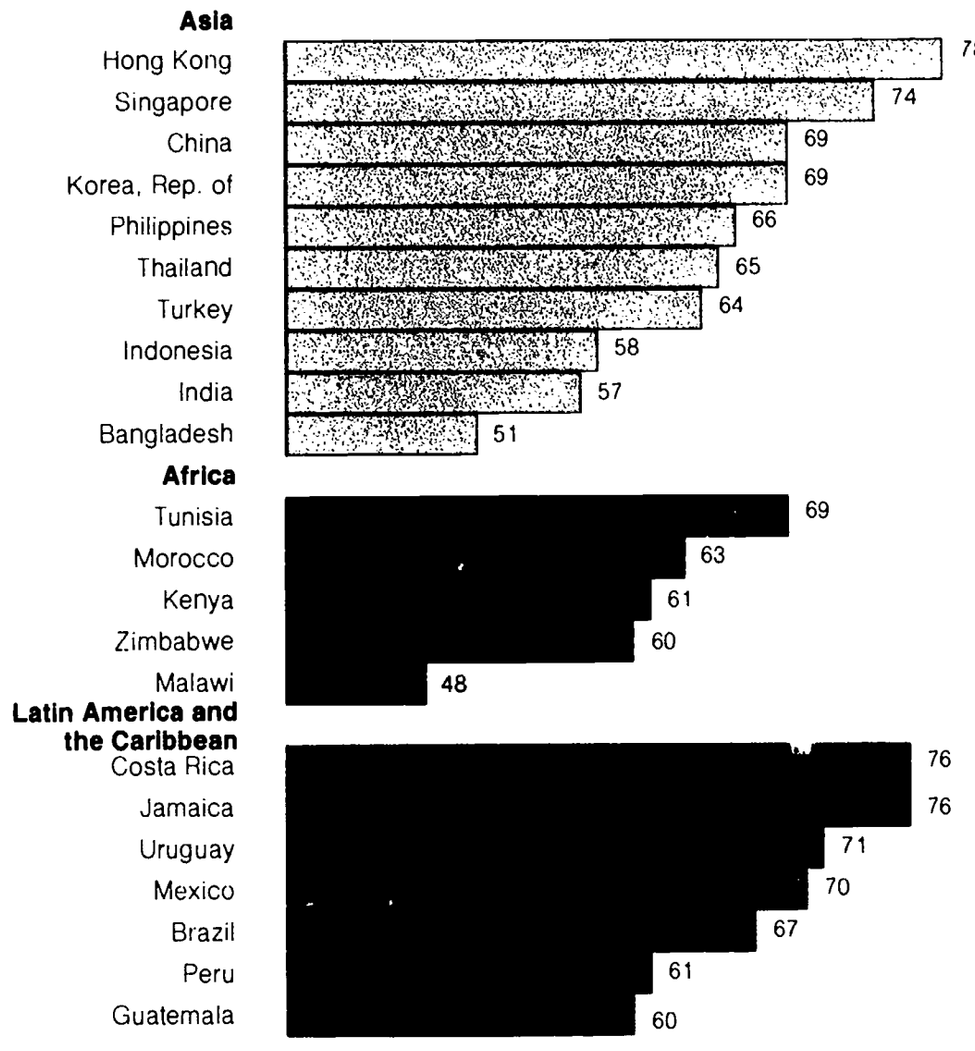


Table B.
Estimated and Projected Life Expectancy at Birth, by Developing Region: 1988 to 2020
(in years)

Region	1988	2005	2020
Asia	60.7	66.6	70.9
Africa	52.6	59.8	65.2
Latin America	66.8	71.7	74.5
Caribbean	65.8	70.2	73.5

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Center for International Research, International Data Base on Aging.

Figure 11.
Female Advantage in Life Expectancy at Birth: 1988

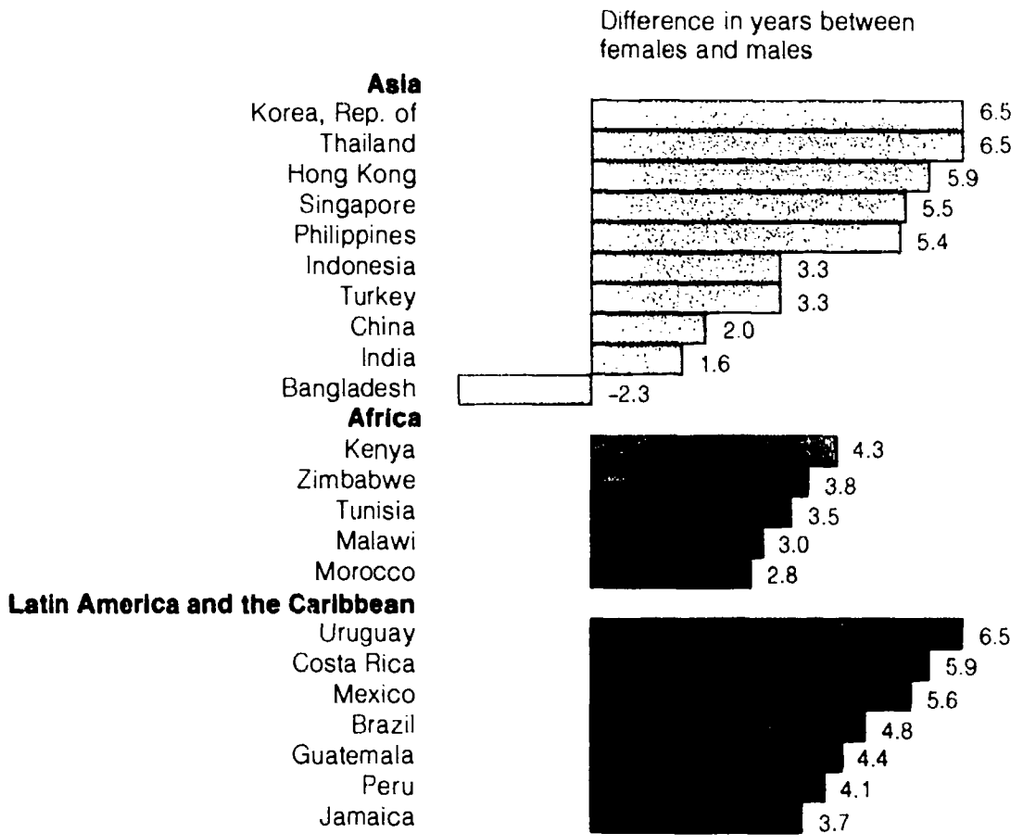
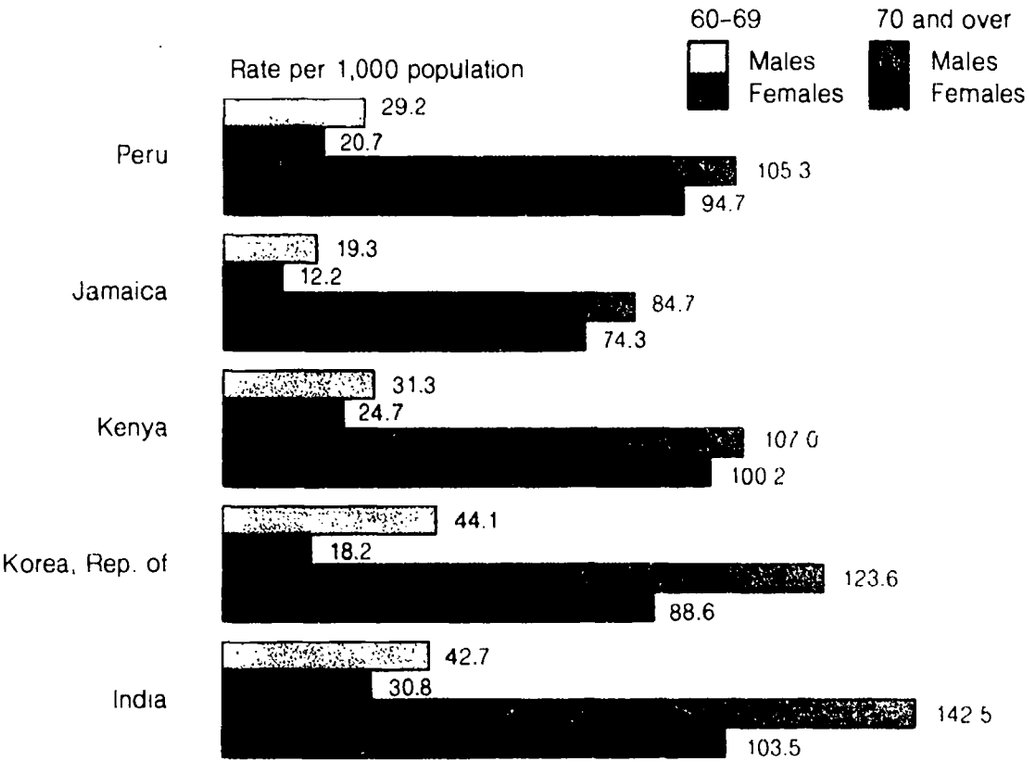


Figure 12.
Mortality Rates, by Age and Sex: 1988



Latin America (figure 11). The typical worldwide pattern is reversed in a few developing societies of South Asia and the Middle East, where a number of cultural factors (among them low female social status, preference for male versus female offspring, and gender differences in the use of medical facilities) are thought to contribute to higher male than female life expectancy at birth.

Given the gender differential in longevity, it is not surprising that in most countries, female mortality rates are lower than male rates at practically all ages, including older ages. As shown in figure 12, this pattern holds regardless of the prevailing level of life expectancy. The relative gender differences in Peru and Jamaica are similar, even though average life expectancy in Jamaica is 15 years higher than in Peru.

Life Expectancy at Older Ages May Improve Faster Than at Younger Ages

When a nation's infant and childhood mortality reach relatively low levels, longevity gains in older segments of the population begin to assume greater overall weight. In the industrialized world, increases in life expectancy at older ages are now out-pacing increases in life expectancy at birth, due in large part to reductions in heart disease and stroke among middle-aged and older adults. In the United States, for example, the average number of years of life remaining at age 65 increased 15 percent (from 14.3 to 16.4 years) during the period 1960–80, while life expectancy at birth increased only 6 percent during the same period.

Although this phenomenon is not yet widespread in developing regions, the proportional increase in life expectancy at age 55 is approaching

(or has already surpassed) the relative increase in life expectancy at birth in some developing countries. Data for Costa Rica (table C) show that from 1973 to 1980, female life expectancy at age 55 increased at a faster rate than female life expectancy at birth, while the reverse was true for men. Estimates for 1987, made on the basis of empirical trends in mortality, indicate that during the 1980–87 period, gains at age 55 for both sexes were greater than the corresponding improvement at birth. Data for Indonesia, on the other hand, suggest that this shift has yet to occur. Indonesia's overall life expectancy at birth of around 50 years in 1976 left significant room for improvement, and the 1976–86 proportional gains at birth remained larger than those at age 55.

Major Causes of Death Differ by Region

Information on specific causes of death among the elderly varies enormously by region and country, in terms of both completeness and accuracy of reporting. Data from Latin America and the Caribbean are thought to be the most reliable, while figures from Asia and Africa (when available) include large numbers of deaths attributed to unspecified causes. On the basis of existing evidence, it appears that the majority of deaths among older populations in most of Africa stem from infectious and parasitic diseases, whereas in Latin America and the Caribbean, the leading causes are cardiovascular diseases. The situation in developing Asian countries seems to be mixed: in the Philippines, for example, communicable diseases are said to be a slightly greater cause of death than cardiovascular diseases at ages 60 to 64, but thereafter cardiovascular diseases are more important (ASEAN, 1985).

Cardiovascular Diseases Paramount in Latin America and Caribbean

A recent Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) analysis suggests that while the transition from traditional agricultural societies to industrial urban societies contributes to increased longevity and higher standards of living, this transition also endangers individual health in a number of ways. A prime example is the shift toward chronic disease patterns in developing societies.

Cardiovascular diseases have become the leading overall cause of death in 31 countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (PAHO, 1986). Among persons aged 65 and over, this has been true since at least the late 1970's (table D).

Table C.

Percent Change in Life Expectancy at Birth and at Age 55, by Sex: Costa Rica and Indonesia

Country and year	Life Expectancy at Birth		Life Expectancy at Age 55	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Costa Rica, 1973	66.2	70.2	20.7	22.8
(Percent change)	*(5.7)*	*(6.8)*	*(3.9)*	*(7.5)*
1980	70.0	75.1	21.6	24.5
(Percent change)	*(3.4)*	*(4.3)*	*(4.7)*	*(6.9)*
1987	72.4	78.2	22.5	26.2
Indonesia, 1966	37.4	40.0	11.9	13.7
(Percent change)	*(31.6)*	*(29.8)*	*(31.1)*	*(19.7)*
1976	49.2	51.9	15.6	16.4
(Percent change)	*(13.0)*	*(13.3)*	*(9.0)*	*(11.6)*
1986	55.6	58.8	17.0	18.3

Source: U.S Bureau of the Census, Center for International Research, International Data Base on Aging.

Table D.

Five Leading Causes of Death for Persons Aged 65 and Over, by Rank Order and Subregion, Around 1979

Cause of death	Northern America	Caribbean	Middle America	Temperate South America	Tropical South America
Diseases of the heart	1	1	1	1	1
Malignant neoplasms	2	2	3	2	2
Cerebrovascular disease	3	3	4	3	3
Influenza and pneumonia	4	4	2	4	4
Accidents	5				5
Diabetes mellitus		5	5	5	

Source: Pan American Health Organization. 1982. *Health Conditions in the Americas 1977–1980*. Washington, DC. p. 123

Figure 13.
Crude Death Rates from Cardiovascular Diseases, by Age and Sex
(per 100,000 persons)

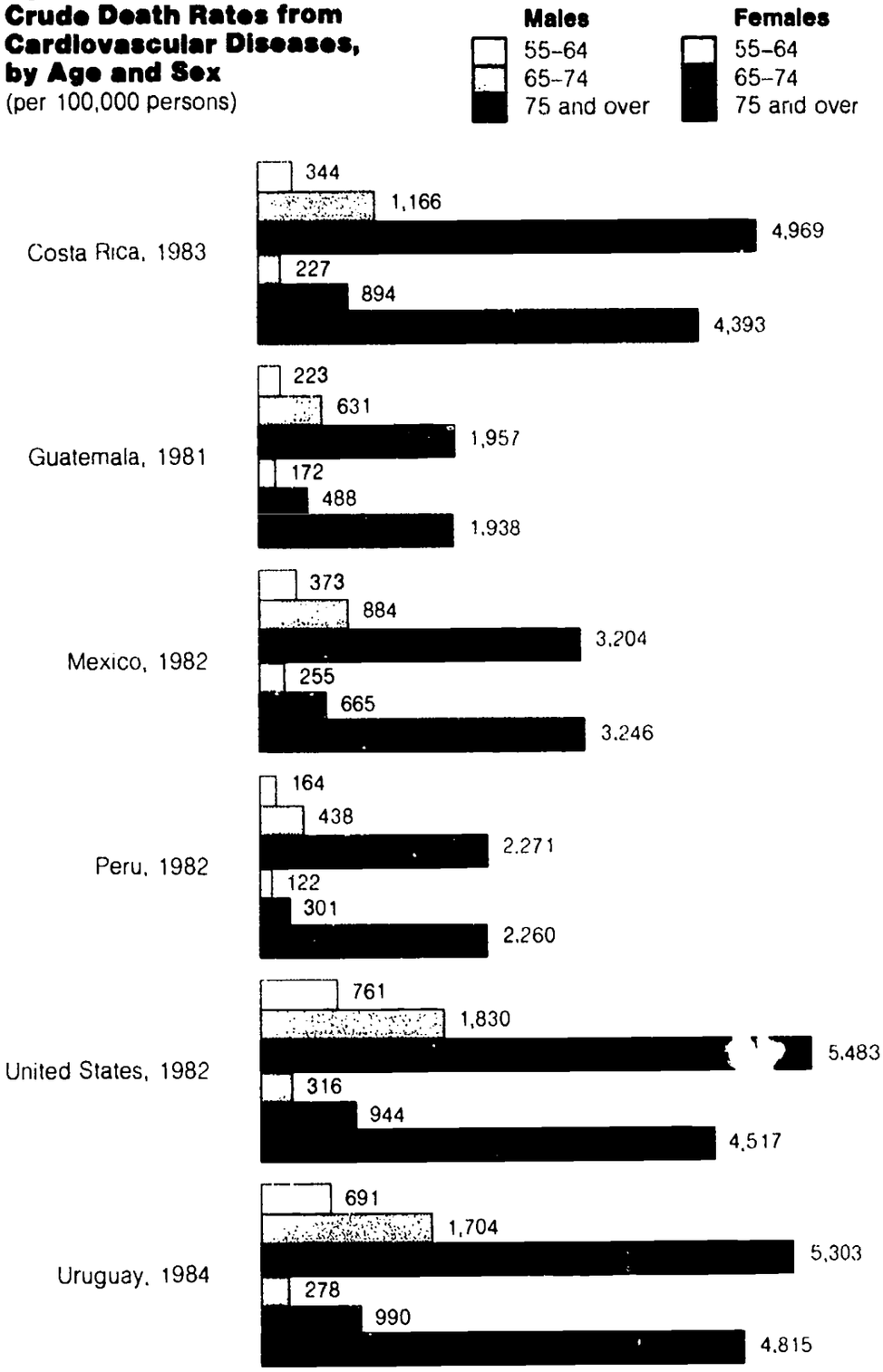


Figure 13 demonstrates the increasing rates of cardiovascular disease that accompany aging in selected countries. Of further interest here are differences between countries, with higher incidence apparently correlated with greater levels of urbanization and industrialization: rates in Costa Rica and Uruguay approach and at some ages exceed those in the United States, while incidence in countries such as Guatemala and Peru is much lower. The potential combined effect of growing elderly populations and increasing numbers of deaths due to cardiovascular disease could be one of heightened morbidity and rapidly escalating health costs.

Cancer Also on the Rise

The PAHO analysis also reveals that in most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, the incidence of malignant neoplasms (cancers) shows a distinct upward trend. On the basis of detailed studies in seven countries, neoplasms are now seen as a leading and increasing cause of death in each nation, especially in the 45 to 64 and 65 and over age groups. The regional increase in life expectancy also has resulted in a greater incidence of diabetes mellitus, which disproportionately affects older persons. Diabetes is sometimes "accompanied by complications (vascular, renal, peripheral) requiring considerable resources for proper care; this is further aggravated by the frequent association of diabetes with other chronic diseases" (PAHO, 1986). Hospitalization data from Venezuela portray the average length of stay for diabetes as 22.6 days, reflecting the medical costs involved in caring for this disease.

For some time, the prevailing view among social scientists has been that modernization is inversely related to the social status, health, and general well-being of older populations. However, the data necessary to test this hypothesis are as yet insufficient; inferences can be drawn from existing studies to both support and deny the basic contention. The major question that researchers now seek to address is whether or not older populations in developing societies will show the same patterns of health and well-being as those that have emerged in the developed world.

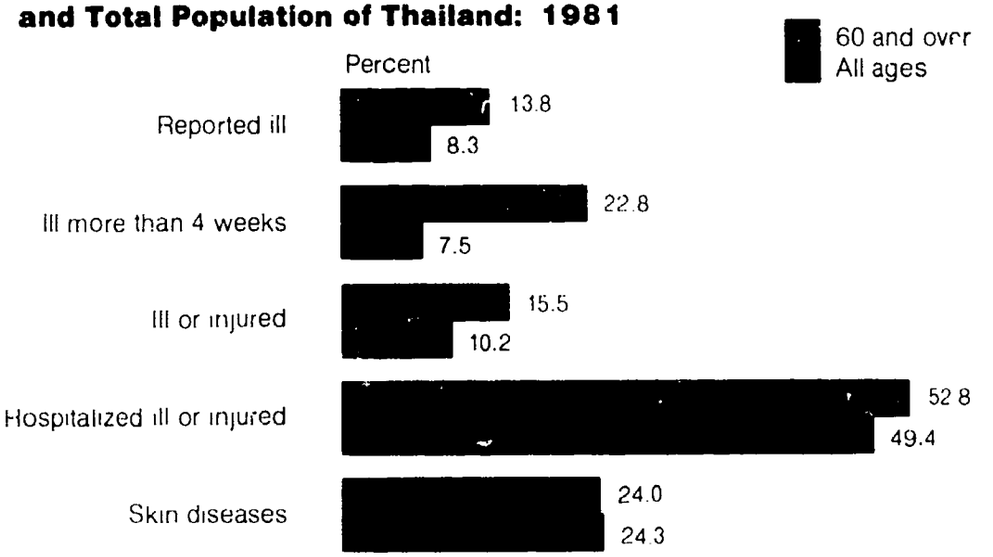
The health status of the elderly in developed countries has been fairly well documented. Cross-national studies show that a large majority of persons aged 65 and over have at least one chronic health problem, but that these problems are serious impediments to daily living for only a minority. An estimated 60 percent of older, non-institutionalized adults have no significant functional impairment and have a satisfactory level of well-being. Approximately 8 percent of older adults are seriously impaired and dependent on extensive supportive care, while 4 to 6 percent are institutionalized. Some evidence suggests that an additional 5 to 8 percent of older community residents are so impaired that they might more appropriately be cared for in institutions (Maddox, 1982). Studies also show that women have higher rates of need for assistance with activities of daily living than do men (Heikkinen, Waters, and Brzenzinski, 1983). An important finding that emerges from the many studies in developed countries is the large extent to which indicators of health and well-being are similar among older populations of different nations.

Much less is known about the health and health problems of older populations in the developing world. Given the similarities found among the elderly in various developed nations, there is some basis for anticipating further similarity in developing countries. However, the lack of extensive medical reporting systems and detailed survey information preclude definitive comments. The results of one study, Thailand's Health and Welfare Survey of 1981, offer at least a hint of similarity: the survey found rates of self-reported well-being (58 percent) and disability (7 percent) that are quite close to those of most developed countries.

Additional indications of developed-developing symmetry in health patterns among older populations come from an analysis of surveys sponsored by the World Health Organization in four nations in Asia and Oceania (Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, and Fiji). The research examined population subgroups constructed on the basis of probabilities of having certain functional and health statuses, and concluded that a number of the basic age, sex, morbidity, and disability associations found in the four developing countries are mirrored in the elderly population of the United States (Manton, Myers, and Andrews, 1987).

The Thailand survey data further reveal that the morbidity level of the elderly (in this case, those aged 60 and over) is significantly higher than the national average (figure 14). The proportion of persons reported ill was 14 percent for the elderly versus 8 percent for the population as a whole, and the elderly experienced longer durations of illness. The level of hospitalization for the elderly is slightly higher than the national norm. Also of interest is that nearly 40 percent of the elderly habitually smoke, versus 29 percent of the total population aged 11 and over (Chulalongkorn University Institute of Population Studies, 1985).

Figure 14.
Health Indicators for the Elderly and Total Population of Thailand: 1981



Gender Differences in Health Vary by Country

Preliminary data from a recent Pan American Health Organization health survey in Costa Rica show patterns of gender-related differences with advancing age in the ability to perform activities of daily living (ADL's) that are akin to those found in the United States and European nations. On the other hand, the World Health Organization surveys mentioned earlier found few consistent or systematic gender differences with advancing age in ability to perform basic ADL's. The one chronic disability indicator that was strongly age-related and consistently higher for women than for men across all four countries is cognitive function. While this gender difference may reflect differential prevalence of Alzheimer's and other dementia disorders, it may more importantly reflect cultural factors such as lower female educational attainment and more restricted opportunities to develop cognitive function.

Firm conclusions regarding differences in health among the elderly in the developing world cannot be drawn from the scant existing data. However, the findings from the Costa Rican survey vis-a-vis the Asia and Oceania studies do suggest that as developing countries attain relatively higher levels of life expectancy and socioeconomic development, gender differences in health and disability begin to emerge akin to those of developed nations (Doty, 1986).

Numbers of Older Disabled Likely to Rise Rapidly

The study of disability in developing countries is in its infancy, but one current effort is making great strides towards a systematic accounting of international data and sources. The United Nations Statistical Office has created a statistical and informational data base designed to assist nations in answering policy-related questions about the description of disability and the need for legislation and services.[1] In addition to its many other functions, this data base will be of great use in studying age differences in disability and in providing a foundation for projecting disability burdens among future older populations.

Figure 15 shows the gender pattern of disability, by age, as determined by the 1981 survey in Thailand. Most striking are the decrease in prevalence among women in mid-adulthood, and the rapid rise in prevalence among older members of both sexes. Figure 16 illustrates the application of empirical gross disability rates to the projected older population of Thailand. This simplistic example assumes that disability rates for men and women measured

[1] The United Nations Disability Statistics Data Base has been developed by the Statistical Office, Department of International Economic and Social Affairs, of the United Nations Secretariat, to compile in one location available statistics using a common conceptual framework. The data base contains information on sources of statistics on disability for 95 countries and areas for various years 1975-86, and statistics on disabled persons from national censuses, surveys, and other data sources for 55 countries and areas. At the present time, the complete data base is contained on 17 5 25-inch 360 Kb diskettes in Lotus 1-2-3 format for use on IBM-compatible personal computers with MS-DOS. Further information concerning data base contents and dissemination may be obtained from Dr. Mary Chamie, United Nations Statistical Office (212-963-4947).

Figure 15.
Prevalence of Disability in Thailand: 1981
(disabled persons per 100,000 population)

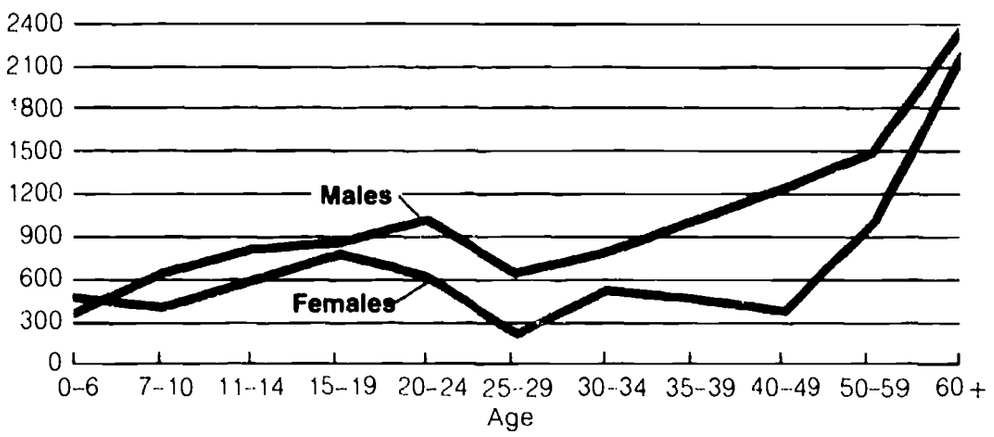
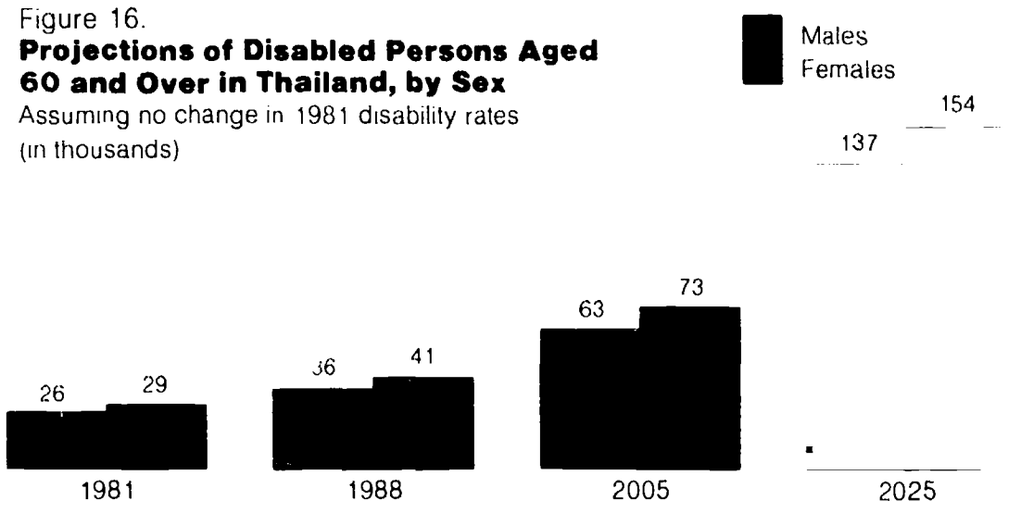


Figure 16.
Projections of Disabled Persons Aged 60 and Over in Thailand, by Sex
Assuming no change in 1981 disability rates
(in thousands)



in 1981 will remain constant in the future. Even with no provision for higher rates of disability as the population ages, the projected increases in absolute numbers of disabled individuals are alarming in terms of future service and care requirements. And if rates of disability at older ages do in fact increase as they have in developed countries, the absolute number of disabled persons will grow accordingly.

Aging Populations Require Altered Health Services

Aging populations encourage a reevaluation of health services and service provision in developing countries. There is little doubt that aging populations face a changing array of health problems and needed services. As noted in the section on mortality, the change goes beyond growth in sheer numbers of older citizens to the nature of predominant illnesses themselves. Declining birth rates, reductions in infant and overall mortality, rapid urbanization, and increasing industrialization all contribute to the rising incidence of diseases and risks that particularly affect the adult population.

The changing patterns of mortality described earlier are, of course, also indicative of altered patterns of morbidity, much of which is now chronic and noncommunicable. The Pan American Health Organization is particularly concerned about cardiovascular diseases and morbidity from chronic rheumatism; within the latter category, lumbalgia and osteomuscular disorders are prominent causes of disability, and chronic rheumatism, in general, is said to be one of the greatest burdens for health care services in many Latin American countries.

One consideration that complicates health service provision in developing countries is the largely rural character of many societies. "Rural areas, having higher proportions of older people, would obviously need more health care for them, yet health services tend to concentrate in more urban centers and are much poorer in rural areas. In Kenya, for example, 90 percent of all physicians [in the latter 1970's] were located in urban areas, so that only about 100 physicians were available for 10 million persons in rural regions" (Siegel and Hoover, 1982). The four surveys in the Asian and Oceania countries mentioned previously confirmed the better health status of urban versus rural elderly.

There seems to be widespread agreement that the future challenges for health systems in developing countries lie in the provision of long-term care and the prevention of risk factors. "In developing regions, the aged share with the young the same environmental conditions that lead to excess morbidity and the same poverty. In general, their health needs involve less intervention for acute care and more continuous care for chronic states" (Heisel, 1985). Beyond the provision of care is the needed development of surveillance systems, especially with regard to chronic cardiovascular episodes, and systems to evaluate the effects of primary care actions aimed at health promotion and risk prevention (PAHO, 1986).

On the positive side, one advantage that should accrue to health systems in the developing world is the development of technology in more developed countries. "The possibility that disability rates among the elderly are lowered by technological and educational improvements, as well as improvements in health, has major policy implications for developing countries" (Doty, cited in AARP, 2:2, 1987). That is, while developed countries may need to await further medical advances in treatment and prevention of chronic diseases in order to achieve significantly lowered disability rates among the elderly, particularly at advanced ages, developing countries at least have the potential to achieve future reductions in disability levels as a byproduct of overall modernization.

Women constitute increasing majorities of growing older populations in all regions of the world. Because of higher life expectancies at birth and lower age-specific death rates, the percentage of women in 5-year age cohorts increases with age. This has been the historical pattern in industrial nations, and is likely to be the case in the developing world as well. Countries such as Uruguay, Hong Kong, and the Republic of Korea already exhibit the gender imbalances at older ages that are typical of more developed nations.

All but four countries in this study have more women than men aged 60 and over. Bangladesh and Zimbabwe are two of the exceptions, but in both these nations, the proportion female shows the usual rise with increasing age. In Morocco and Tunisia, on the other hand, the female share fluctuates or declines with age. The reasons for this anomaly are unclear, since other countries in Northern Africa do not show a similar pattern. The relatively low female proportions at older ages may be related to migration patterns or to censal underreporting.

Female Proportions to Rise in Most Countries

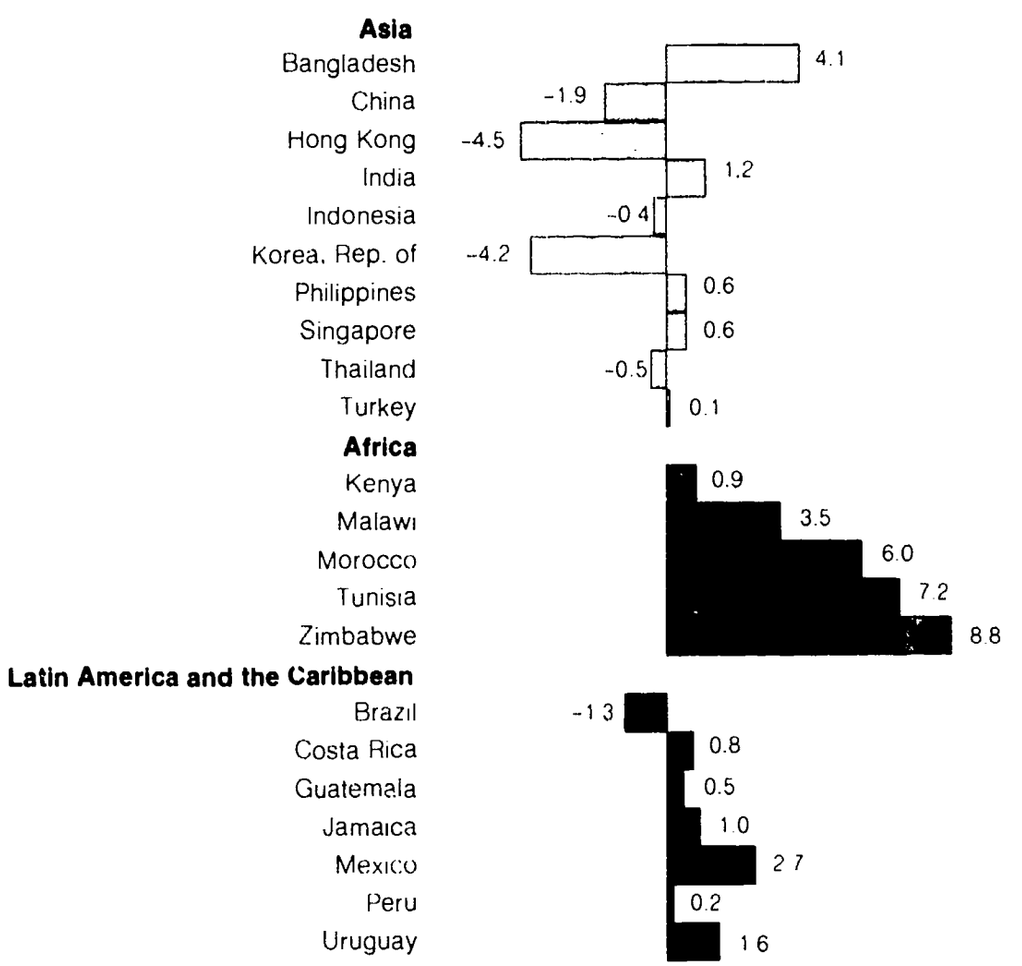
The female share of the older population should rise in most developing countries over the next three decades, such that by the year 2020, women will form the majority of all older populations in the 22 study countries. Figure 17 shows that with the exception of Brazil and several nations in East and Southeast Asia, the proportion of women among the total population aged 60 and over is projected to increase. The gains are especially noteworthy in Africa.

Much of this rise is attributable to assumptions about an increasing differential in favor of female versus male life expectancy at birth: most demographers expect to see a pattern similar to the past trend observed in developed countries, where female gains in life expectancy have tended to outpace male advances.

Marital Status Closely Linked to Well-Being of Older Populations

Marriage (including consensual union) is the most common status among the adult populations in this report, and the consensus of existing research is that the married fare better than the non-married on a number of dimensions—economic, social, emotional, care-giving—during the progression through older life (Myers, 1986). A major concern in many countries today is the large increase in the number of widowed persons, particularly women, within older populations. In developed countries, the issues revolve around solitary living arrangements, lack of pension benefits, and community support mechanisms. In the developing world, concern focuses on the

Figure 17.
Percent Change in Female Share of Population Aged 60 and Over: 1988 to 2020



impact that urbanization and economic development will have upon the extended family, and whether existing social support traditions will continue to absorb increasing numbers of widows.

Widowhood a Fact of Life for Many in Developing Countries

Widowhood rates in older population groups vary widely in the developing world, but regardless of the level, these rates increase substantially with age. Among national populations aged 55 to 64, recent widowhood rates for men and women combined range from 9 to 28 percent, while for persons aged 65 and over, the range is 27 to 55 percent. Countries with data for the oldest old show even higher percentages widowed; nearly three of every four persons aged 75 and over in the Republic of Korea are without a spouse.

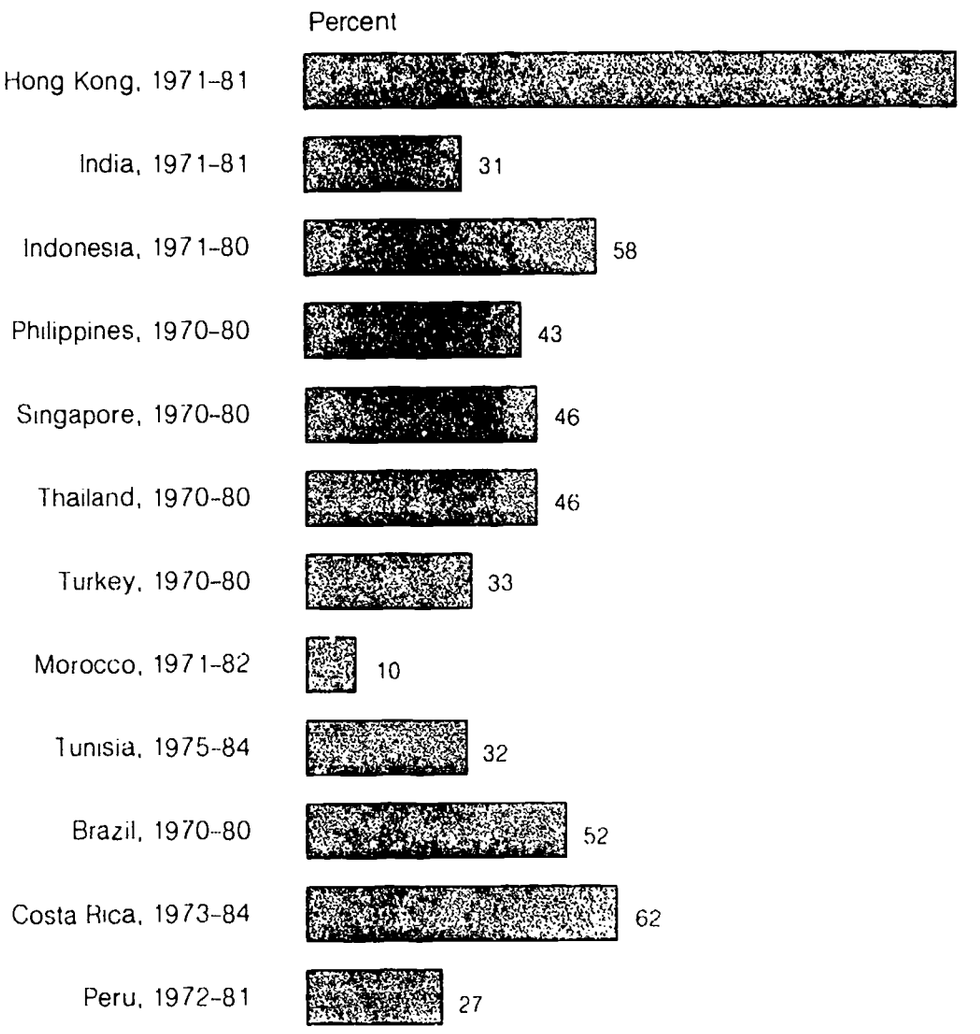
Older Women Especially Apt To Be Widowed

Much lower percentages of men than women are widowed, and in all countries examined, married men outnumber widowers in the age groups 55 to 64, 65 and over, and (where data are available) 75 and over. Women's marital situations are radically different. At ages 65 and over, the number of widows is greater than the total of married women in all countries—more than three times so in Morocco and the Republic of Korea, and twice so in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Singapore, and Guatemala. At ages 75 and over, the female widowed-to-married ratio rises beyond 5 to 1 in some countries.

There are several reasons for the gender disparity in widowhood found in developed as well as developing societies. The most obvious factor is simply that women live longer on average than men. There is also a nearly universal tendency for women to marry men older than themselves, thereby compounding the likelihood of women outliving their spouses. Furthermore, widowed men are much more likely than widows to remarry.

The relationship between elderly well-being and marital status requires that any changes over time in the latter receive close scrutiny. Available trend data since 1970 for countries in this report indicate that female proportions widowed were more likely to decline than to increase or remain the same. At the same time, however, absolute numbers of older widowed women were increasing rapidly (figure 18). The number in Thailand aged 65 and over rose from 354,000 in 1970 to 518,000 in 1980; in Brazil from 893,000 to 1,356,000 during the same period; and in India a total ga of more than 2 million from 1971 t 1981. Thus, the issue in developin countries appears to be one of num bers, not proportions. If, as projected, female life expectancy rises faster than that of men, and if wom increase their share of older popula tions, the net result may be an over all improvement in status for older women under the age of 65 or 70, but a worsening of the situation for older age groups that are at greate risk in economic and health terms.

Figure 18.
Percent Increase in Number of Widows Aged 65 and Over



The essential functions that planned housing and institutions serve in developed countries are usually served by the family in developing nations. Public welfare systems in the Third World serve older populations primarily in a "residual" manner, providing only those services that are impossible for the family to perform (Lawton, 1982). At present, a vast majority of living and care arrangements for older persons are still in the domain of "normal" family life. Of course, this was once true for the elderly in the developed world as well, whereas now, living alone is commonplace. One of the greatest challenges that developing countries will confront in the face of accelerating sccioeconomic change is the maintenance of satisfactory housing and suitable environments for older citizens.

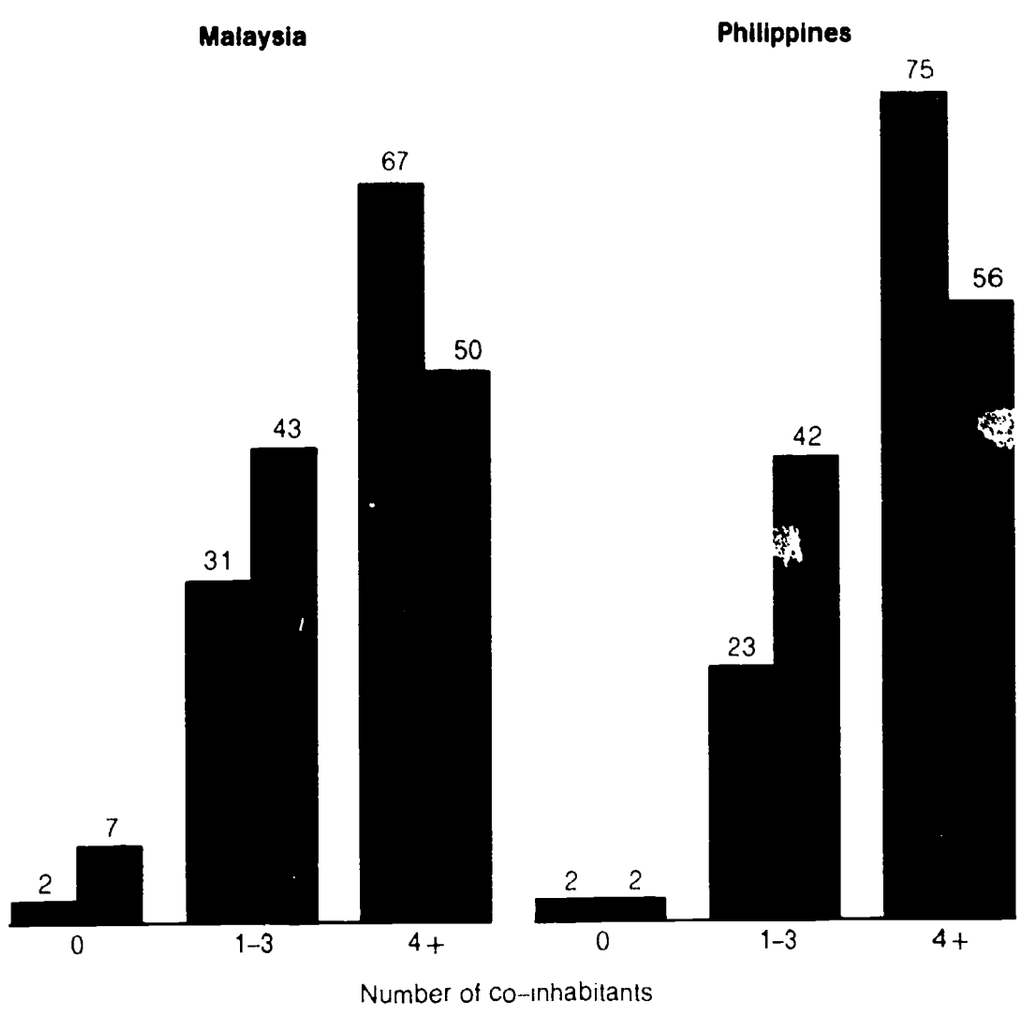
Few Elderly Now Live Alone

Data on living arrangements and provision of care in developing countries are sparse. Most existing information supports the common view that a small proportion of older persons live alone. In the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Fiji, only 2 percent of persons aged 60 and over live alone, and the differences by age and sex are negligible. In Malaysia and Singapore, the figures are only slightly higher (approximately 5 and 6 percent respectively), although the percentage in Malaysia is higher for women and increases with age (WHO, 1986; and ASEAN, 1985). On the other hand, data from Israel reveal that a much higher proportion lives alone, and that the gender differential is considerable. Nearly 40 percent of Israeli women aged 65 and over reside by themselves, compared with only 12 percent of elderly men (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 1985).

In Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea, rural households were found to be smaller and less likely than urban households to include elderly persons living with their offspring. Three-quarters of urban Filipino households with one or more persons aged 60 and over had at least four members, compared with slightly more than half of similar rural households (figure 19).

Data such as these suggest that, in urbanizing societies, aged parents remain in villages while their children move to cities, and also that the scarcity of urban housing may dictate that older parents and adult children live together. While rural elderly may appear disadvantaged in terms of direct familial contact, it should be remembered that family support can be just as strong for parents who live near but not with their children (WHO, 1986).

Figure 19.
Percent Distribution of Population Aged 60 and Over, by Number of Co-Inhabitants and Urban/Rural Residence: 1984



Networking Resources: Organizations Mentioned in this Publication

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is the nation's leading organization for people aged 50 and over. It serves their needs and interests through legislative advocacy, research, informative programs, and community services provided by a network of local chapters and experienced volunteers throughout the country. The AARP WOMEN'S INITIATIVE focuses attention on issues of crucial importance to midlife and older women, including economic security, long-term care, inadequate or nonexistent health insurance, and the needs of women in their role as caregivers.

Association for Women in Development (AWID) is an organization of scholars, practitioners, and policymakers that focuses on international development and gender issues.

Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is a United Nations body, headquartered in Vienna, that was established to carry out the mandates of other UN entities in relation to women; for example, the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies from the UN 1985 World Conference on the Advancement of Women, and recommendations and resolutions of the UN Economic and Social Council.

Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Household Workers (Confederación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Trabajadoras del Hogar-CONLACTRAHO) links domestic worker organizations in 12 countries. A representative of the Uruguayan affiliate participated in the Mexico conversations; and a representative of the Colombian affiliate participated in the Washington, DC, conversations.

Global Link for Midlife and Older Women (GLOW) is an informal network of researchers, practitioners, planners, and activists concerned with issues affecting midlife and older women throughout the world. GLOW is a joint undertaking of the Women's Initiative of AARP and the IFA.

Grandmothers of Plaza De Mayo (Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo) is an organization engaged in finding the children of the members' "disappeared" sons and daughters who were murdered under the recent military regimes in Argentina. Often, these children were adopted by military families or others close to the military.

International Federation on Ageing (IFA) is a nonprofit association composed of some 100 organizations in 50 nations on all continents that represent the elderly or provide services to them. IFA serves as an advocate for older persons at the international level, and an information clearinghouse on issues affecting them throughout the world.

Old Age in Mexico, Education and Action (Vejéz en México, Educación y Acción-VEMEA) is an organization of participant action composed of women and men of all ages and social classes who work on behalf of older persons.

Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is the regional arm of the World Health Organization (WHO), and promotes the health and well-being of the populations of the Americas.

American Association of
Retired Persons
1909 K Street, NW
Washington DC 20049
USA

International Federation on Ageing
Headquarters
Bernard Sunley House
60 Pitcairn Road
Mitcham Surrey England
CR4 3LL

Publications House
1909 K Street NW
Washington DC 20049
USA