

# Giving Them a Louder Voice

Doing this issue on older women has been a process of learning and discovery for all of us involved. From identifying contributors to finding the right photos, to searching for the politically correct term—everything has been a new and exciting experience.

It was from Mary Racelis, a Filipina who is active on this issue, that we learned the politically correct term is “older persons,” instead of elderly. Elderly connotes feebleness and dependency, she said, while “Older Persons” simply indicate they’re being in the upper ranges of the age spread. “Older persons” is also the term the United Nations uses, she noted, may have come about from many NGOs pressuring the world body to make the shift.

Of the many insights that came upon us in the course, one was clearest of all: the issue of older women has not been sufficiently addressed by the women’s movement. Yet, one out of 10 persons today is over the age of 60 and likely to be a woman. Latest data from the UN show that the number of people over 60 years, estimated at 605 million, is expected to double to 1.2 billion by year 2025. Those living in developing countries are expected to account for almost three-quarters of the age group.

According to the State of World Population 2000 report, women receive less old-age support from public programmes than men because public pension systems were built on the premise that the men are the primary

economic providers. We all know now that this is not true. The attrition of jobs associated with men on account of the sea changes of technology, plus the economic dislocation due to globalisation, has forced more and more women to take on paid work on top of their household responsibilities. In many poor households, women are the main breadwinners—albeit in the nonformal, ergo invisible and uncounted sector. To make matters worse, women suffer from high rates of disability at older ages because of their lack of health care, education and nutrition in earlier life. Thus, older women are more likely to be poor, compared with older men, as a result of the accumulated impact of lower lifetime earnings, lower pensions, lower social status and weaker access to property and to inheritance.

On top of these, older women are more likely to take care of their older spouses. In countries with large numbers of migrant women workers, older women often take on the role of caregivers of their grandchildren. For sure, the AIDS pandemic has increased the number of older women left as sole providers of their children.

Needless to say, it is imperative for the women’s movement to address the concerns of older women and build on what has been started by the groups that identified the issue as an emerging one in the Beijing + 5 Review.

For this issue of *Women in Action*, our contributors tried to reach out to as many older women as possible who were

willing to share their stories with us. Zenaida ‘Bridget’ Pawid writes about the lives of six indigenous women from Northern Philippines; Reihana Mohideen discusses the plight of older migrant women in Australia; Lorna Israel looks at the young-and-old dichotomy that exists even among women in the church. In addition, the views of the older women who agreed to speak with our writers are juxtaposed with those of six young women members of the Network of Asia-Pacific Youth.

Through this issue, we hope to raise awareness on the issue of ageing. We also call attention to the World Conference on Older Persons to take place in Spain in 2002. But first, does everybody realise that the 1st of October is the International Day of Older Persons?

Interestingly, the International Tribunal on War Crimes against Women (07-12 December 2000) held in Japan concluded recently. The strength and courage of the older women who were forced to become comfort women to Japanese soldiers during World War II were extraordinary. This was plain to see as they testified and retold their stories, without fear, driven only by a quest for justice—a legacy that should inspire the younger generations of women. The challenge now posed before us younger women then, as we take up the cause initiated by our mothers and grandmothers, is to give a louder voice to their issues.

