

# Remembering What was, and Knowing What is

By Tesa de Vela

*The encounter was brief but most enlightening. Despite her extremely tight schedule, Dr. Mary Racelis was more than happy to find the time to share with me her views on older women. Dr. Racelis is an academic. She teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of the Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines. She is also the Director of the Institute of Philippine Culture. Now 68 years old with 5 children and 12 grandchildren, Dr. Racelis, single again, enjoys her life to the fullest.*



Dr. Mary Racelis is 68 and enjoys her life to the fullest.

*To her credit and to my embarrassment, Dr. Racelis arrived right on time for our appointment. I, on the other hand, was 20 minutes late. After my profuse apologies (and rather lame excuses), we started our discussion. What follows is a general summary of that discussion on older women's concerns and situations, providing a kind of backdrop to the in-depth interviews with two other older women.*

Dr. Racelis began by identifying the areas of concerns of older people. Specifically these were issues related to *health, active-ness and dependency*. She had observed from her interactions that "the usual illness of older persons are heart disease, cancer, diabetes, dental concerns and their psychological health conditions. I assume the health issues of an older person from the upper-middle class of developing countries is very similar to those of an older person from developed countries in the North...perhaps because of their similar lifestyles." She added that appropriate

health care is of course much more of a problem for those who cannot financially afford it.

She also explained why leading an active life and not being dependent on others are also huge concerns for older persons. Apparently many women become leaders in community organisations in their older years simply because they have more time on their hands. Their household responsibilities are much less, given that their children have grown and are raising families of their own. More importantly, being active in community affairs gives older women a sense of self-satisfaction and fulfillment.

Without a doubt, Dr. Racelis says, "Older women still play the role of nurturer in the family, especially to their husbands and grandchildren. This can be stressful for older women. Many of them spend their time caring for their husbands while they themselves are ill and are in need of care. Older men, on the other hand, tend to have more idle time to play chess, checkers, and so on. In the meantime, their wives may be taking care of grandchildren." Surprisingly and regardless of this situation, she pointed out, that women live relatively longer lives than men.

Her view on the nurturing roles older women play is simple: "I think it's okay to enjoy one's grandchildren... but one should not feel primarily responsible for them. Older women just don't have the strength and ability for it anymore. On the issue of equality

between older men and women... it is not such a concern. At least not in my generation, maybe in your generation (referring to the interviewer) things will be different. Older women in my generation are merely wanting to lead quiet and peaceful lives. And to do this they learn to pacify their men."

She strongly believes government programmes need to get more serious about geriatric issues and concerns. She described the situation in the Philippines where families, not the government, are expected to take care of its older members. She said the State does not recognise its share of the responsibility in caring for older persons. It is left solely to the household. However, she explains "...many families in the Philippines cannot afford to take care of its elders even if they want to and try very hard to. The demand becomes too great for such poor families."

By the end of our conversation, I was left with two striking impressions about older women. One, that the cultural values and traditions that influence how we view and relate to older women (at least in the Philippines and countries with similar cultures) are both an advantage and a disadvantage. It would seem that while older women have their families to turn to for love and support, this could also be a cause for dilemmas when older women become dependent solely on their families for love and support. And two, that while statistics might say women live longer lives, those statistics do not tell us about the *quality* of women's long lives.

I soon discovered I had just hit the 'tip of the iceberg.' Those impressions were broadened and many more came to mind, after I talked with Sosamma Chacko from

India (residing in Malaysia) and Kim Il-Soon of Korea. They are remarkable women. I hope you enjoy reading their stories as much as I enjoyed interviewing them.

SOSAMMA CHACKO IS A RETIRED NURSE. SHE IS ORIGINALLY FROM KERALA STATE, INDIA, BUT NOW RESIDES IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA. NOW 74 YEARS OLD, SHE IS THE PROUD MOTHER OF THREE DAUGHTERS AND CONSIDERS HERSELF BLESSED WITH SIX GRANDCHILDREN.

#### What are your concerns?

Being looked after would not be my concern if I were living still in India. In Indian culture, in our own traditional family life, parents are to be looked after by the sons. If [they have] no sons then [the job falls on] the daughters, usually the youngest daughter. But in Malaysia, in the present times, with children leaving you and everything, old-age homes are available. I don't mind being in an old-age home. But now I live in my own home with my husband. He is very healthy. I don't think I will be left alone.

Being a nurse by profession and having trained girls to look after the old, I think if [nursing homes are] well looked after, nursing homes are okay. There are plenty of retirement homes. Even the government has its own old-age homes.

I do volunteer work at HOSPIS, a day care centre for the terminally ill. In the last year I have not been very active but I still go for meetings once a month.

photos by Tesa de Vela



**I never used to be frightened of anything in my life. But now I am afraid of being left alone.**

I read, write correspondence and things like that. I doze off during the daytime too. I do a bit of small work in the house. I take walks in nearby areas. I don't go out for anything like theatres because I am not used to it. But I do have friends who come to my house or take me out to lunch. The nurses I trained, my students, they come to visit me, take me out for lunch. Sometimes I cook something for them and ask them to come.

After retiring at 60 years old, I went into training girls for geriatric nursing. I trained them on how to be gentle with the old people, how to feed them.... I train them how to give tender loving care—TLC! Just as we do for the children, you need it for old people also because they crave affection. They are frightened.

I never used to be frightened of anything in my life. But now I am afraid of being left alone. I don't want to be alone. I don't know why. I like to be with people. Before, I liked being alone. I didn't mind it.

Last year I had more health problems, and psychological feelings. My husband is mostly out working in East Malaysia. But I was also traveling, 5-6 months in a year I was out of the country. I love to travel. I only go to places where I have family to stay with—brothers, cousins, daughters. When I visit my children, I enjoy my grandchildren—I tell them stories, we go for walks... wonderful times.

I went to visit my brother who is losing his memory due to Alzheimer's disease. When I was there he was so happy. He could still remember me and I would remind him of all the old memories. When you are old you can easily forget the new memories, but old memories are very clear. The happy ones and even the hurtful ones are very clear.

**How are older women different from older men?**

In any community that I have come from, even where women are liberated and educated, women are still treated as second-class. Even for my mother, the men were number one! She was not impartial towards us. So I tried my best not to be like that. So I gave so much freedom to my daughters. I was more the liberated type. I resented being treated second-class. It is worse for the uneducated women.

There is this old lady who passes by my place and I give her my old saris because she has no money. She tells me she has an educated son, a well-placed man. But his wife doesn't like her. So she had to leave. So she just lives in the temple area, she sleeps there. Her son gives her money once in a while, she said.

I am happy that I am not dependent on my children for money, especially because I have daughters. My daughters are highly educated ones but cannot work. One is an 'expat' wife [whose husband is a foreigner employed in another country] and they are not allowed to work. The other one has got small children so she cannot work. It is only my youngest daughter who is working. I do not spend much for myself. I am not financially dependent and that makes me happy. Not even on my husband.

Older men do not have to worry about anything because they know women will look after them if anything happens to them. Whereas if anything happens to me I need to worry who will take care of me. In the hospital I used to watch the women. They come and look after their husbands. Women's instinct is such—unlike the men.

My husband knows he will be very well looked after.

### What is your society's attitude toward older people?

Malays I think also depend on the family and community to support older people. The Chinese have got a lot of money so they can pay for old-age homes. In India the Catholics train girls to look after the old people, not as nurses but as companions. In Malaysia it is costly to hire nurses. It is cheaper to stay in the nursing homes. The Catholic-run nursing home is one of the nicest in Malaysia.

### I have lived a full life. Completely full life.

Government nursing homes are not as comfortable. The government's support for the older people is still not sufficient. There are not enough homes for them. And they are not happy in some of the homes, maybe because these are not well-managed. I'm not sure how they are run but the old people there are not happy.

Families are expected to take care of the older members but when they are busy working you cannot expect them anymore. Things are changing. I don't expect my daughters to look after me. They have their own lives. Although my first daughter always says 'stay

with us!' But in my culture if you don't take care of the older ones, the society, your community will judge you. You are judged on how you take care of the older ones."

### What lies ahead for you?

"I want to be peaceful...to be healthy... and to be happy. My happiness is always associated with my children and grandchildren. Most of my expenses are because of them. I pay a lot for phone calls. When I am alone I just want to hear their voice. It is so easy to just dial and say hello to my grandchildren."

I have lived a full life. Completely full life. I worked my whole life—up to sixty I was still working. I took a university degree. I was lucky to study. I had a professional life that was very satisfying, if it was not satisfying the girls [her students] would not be coming to see me. I liked my work. I'm happy with my three children. Though we have our differences...you can't have 100 percent perfect. A lot of blessings I have. A very loving family I have. I thank God for the blessings I have. More than what I deserve. More than what I expected.

To go off I am so willing. I am so prepared to close my eyes. It is in God's hands. I only hope it is peaceful. I don't want anyone to suffer for me. I am not frightened about dying. I just don't want to be a burden on anybody.





**KIM IL-SOON IS A FARMER AND SHE OWNS A KARAOKE SINGING ROOM. SHE RESIDES IN SEOUL, KOREA BUT REGULARLY TRAVELS TO KYANG-JU PROVINCE TO WORK ON HER FARM. SHE MARRIED AT AGE 17 AND NOW AT 65 SHE HAS 6 CHILDREN AND 10 GRANDCHILDREN.**

### **What are your concerns?**

I get up at 6 a.m. to prepare the food for my youngest son before he goes to work. I clean the room, wash the clothes... I have very little time to rest. Then I open the karaoke room, which is my business. I cook food for dinner and after cooking I eat, usually alone. I do not eat with my husband because we take turns in minding the karaoke room. I work there up to one to two in the morning.

Normally I stay in Seoul. But when it is the season for planting the rice my schedule changes. I go to Kyang-Ju province, to our farm, which is four to five hours by bus. In Korea we only have one harvest time. So in spring we plant the rice. I put the pesticides and everything. I do everything. These days you can only see old people, normally women, doing the farm work. There are no young people in the provinces. The young people want to be in the city.

Until I am healthy I can do this. Korean people are very strong. I don't depend on my children for support because I have my own property.

When Korea was colonised by Japan, the Japanese would take away the rice we harvested. We were left only with little amounts of rice. So we would have to hide the rice if we wanted to eat more. But the Japanese would search our houses and if you were caught hiding rice you were punished physically. Some people were even killed. When Korea got its independence from Japan, the farmlands were sold to the farm-

ers. The life of farmers became better.

Older people remember this experience. We cannot forget it. This is why we work hard. The young generation does not know these things.

### **How are older women different from older men?**

My father was an elementary school teacher. His life was very different. He was a good person. He could not cheat people, lie to other people... Many people could not understand the kind of person that he was. My father could not relate to adults, only children. This caused a lot of quarrels between him and my mother.

### **Children don't follow what the parents say. Now the parents follow what the children say.**

My husband likes to be with friends. He enjoys drinking with them. He thinks he should spend his money, enjoy his money while he still can. I don't think that just because I am old I don't have to save money. I still think about saving money. But my husband's belief is very different from mine.

I am still very healthy except for some pain in my knees. My husband is also very healthy. I don't drink or smoke but my husband does.

I don't think about relaxing. I do enjoy chatting with neighbours sometimes. But usually I am looking for work to do. Planting rice for me is relaxing. I enjoy it. I don't think I need to rest. When I am in the house, I am always looking for something to do. I believe that even if I die tomorrow I should be working hard to develop my country. Right now in this hotel room [where the interview was being conducted] there are too

many lights switched on. If we switch off one light we would help develop the country. With water it is the same. We should not waste water.

### What is your society's attitude towards older people?

The situation was very different when I was young. For me it is difficult to understand some things. The young generation no longer obeys and respects the old people and their parents. The world is changing. The situation I see is that the daughter-in-law behaves like she was the mother-in-law. There are many difficulties. Children don't follow what the parents say. Now the parents follow what the children say.

Children don't give money any more to their parents. In Korean culture, the sons, especially, are expected to give money to their parents. But if your own son does not think of giving money to his parents, you cannot expect your daughter-in-law to think of giving either. Normally the young generation doesn't want to give money to their parents.

Nowadays, if the parents live with their children, the mother becomes a maid. I cannot imagine this happening to me. It is so different from when I was young and how I served my parents.

At home I cook, I clean the rooms. In my mind when my children eat what I prepared for them, it makes me very happy. But in my children's mind it is different. They do not appreciate it. Children today don't think about giving their parents money. Instead they think about how to get money from their parents.

The young generation does not think about conserving these things. In Korea we have public baths. The young people think just because they have already paid, they can

waste water. They don't care how much they use. In my mind I want to scold the young people. But if I do that they would just tell me that it is not my business.

### What lies ahead for you?

"I want to see all my children married. I would like my youngest daughter to stay in Korea. I wish for all my children to be successful and happy. That would be my happiness. Other parents just think about themselves and don't think about their children. I am not like that.

I would also like to do some community service, maybe for older people. When I went to the public bath I met an old, poor woman who stays in the shelter for old people because she has nowhere else to live. No family to look after her. I think she was abused by her husband. I scrubbed her back and she appreciated it very much. I admire the work of my daughter who helps women victims of violence. I would like to do something like that. There is also this place where you can volunteer to make kim-chi for the poor people. I'd like to do something to help other people. I would also like to write a book about my life but it is too difficult for me.

I don't need much rest, just four hours. I am happy to be a farmer, something young people don't like to be. I have made and will continue to make sacrifices for my children. I want my children to be more comfortable. I would rather work than rest. My children don't really like that part of my character. If I don't have work to do then I want to do things for others... while I am still able.☺

*Tesa de Vela is a feminist in her own mind. She teaches at the International Studies Department of Miriam College, Philippines. Tesa would like to thank Mary Racelis, Sosamma Chacko and Il-Soon, Kim for graciously giving their time and sharing with her a part of their lives. Marami pong salamat!*

