

Elderly Women

Introduction

"Age only matters when one is ageing. Now that I have arrived at a great age, I might just as well be twenty." Pablo Picasso

Given that the year 1999 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year for Older Persons with the theme 'Towards a Society for all Ages,' the File for this issue of *Al-Raida* is devoted to elderly women. Since the problem of aging in Lebanon is not as drastic as it is in Western and developed countries, we are fortunate to have the time to prepare ourselves, plan ahead and determine whether the measures taken by these countries to alleviate the problems of their aged citizens are also relevant to our culture and society.

Another source of knowledge and inspiration that we can learn from is the United Nations whose Principles for Older Persons

assert the need to take action to alleviate problems that the elderly face worldwide in order to ensure a dignified existence for the old and a society that caters for the needs of all its citizens. Among such principles are ensuring independence to older persons including access to food, shelter, clothing, and health as well as the opportunity for work or other income generating opportunities, and the right to reside at home for as long as possible and continue to participate actively in society. In addition, old persons should also be entitled to benefit from family and community care and protection and to have access to health care and legal services. They should also be able to pursue opportunities that would give them self-fulfillment, and finally live in dignity free of exploitation and physical and mental abuse.

For the United Nations, the society for all ages is one that "adjusts its structures and functioning, as well as its policies and plans, to the needs and capabilities of all, thereby releasing the potential of all, for the benefit of all." It is a society, according to the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, that "does not caricature older persons as pensioners, but sees them as both agents and beneficiaries of development."

It is true that when we talk of elderly, we do not always mean the sick, the disabled and unproductive who should be given all the care that is their due. By old we also mean, the majority of people above 65 who are still healthy and active. To be old does not mean to relinquish all social functions and live on the margins of society feeling estranged and cast off. It is a period where the elderly, particularly women who constitute the bulk of the older population, can feel free from many shackles that had chained them in the past. Now is the time for them to challenge stereotypes of women as weak and dependent and embrace a new image of themselves as individuals who no longer have to fit into particular moulds. They can be themselves without the need to subscribe and bow to the stereotypes of wife, mother and lover and to "drink life to the lees," perhaps for the first time in their lives. Accordingly, late life can truly become a potential period of enrichment, independence and self-realization.

The articles in the file cover various aspects of aging, with special emphasis on women. We will essentially attempt to shed light on the elderly population in several countries, their demographic, social, economic as well as physical and mental health problems. Moreover, the file will include an analysis of old age pension schemes in Arab countries, testimonies of women in nursing homes, as well as an interview with a female geriatrician.

Picture Credit: Pierre Couteau