

Older Women: Their Quest for Justice and Peace

by Susan A. McDaniel

Myths, misconceptions and stereotypes about women and about older people combine in ways that prevent us from noticing some promising new developments in the quest for justice and peace. A popular stereotype sees the person working toward peace and justice as youthful, and significantly, often male. Older women tend to be stigmatized and without much status in our society. These two factors mean that older women's potential as peace and justice seekers may be underestimated. As older women become a statistically more important group in Canada's aging society, the movements for justice and peace might receive an unexpected boost.

Women and Aging in Canada: Some Facts and Trends

It is necessary to understand the situation in which older women in Canada live in order to understand their growing role in movements for peace and justice. What follows in this section is a very brief outline of that situation.

Women 80 years and above are projected to outnumber men 80 plus by a ratio of more than 2 to 1 in Canada in 2001 (McDaniel, 1986: 64, 109). In *Canada's Aging Population*, I suggested that, to some extent, fears about Canada's aging population may be premised jointly on the dismal images of older women in our society (who are portrayed by the media as old at 25!) and the growing numerical dominance of women in an aging society.

Women who are older, and single mothers with dependent children, constitute the bulk of the poor in Canadian society. An October 1986 government report found that "Seven-tenths of the elderly poor are women. Women constitute 82.7% of the unattached elderly with

low income." Also, "Families led by women run over 4 times the risk of poverty as families with male heads" (National Council on Welfare, 1986:7). Both groups of women fall into poverty because of the false assumption that women are permanently linked to men in our society and can rely on men financially.

For older women, pension schemes are not "user-friendly:" 30% of public pensions and 78% of private pensions in Canada have no survivors' benefits at all. Further, women are penalized in annuity payments because we live longer so receive less income per month. Those who need the pension the most, get the least (Gee and Kimball, 1987:63-66; McDaniel, 1986:72,73).

Older Women as Peace and Justice Activists

On the good side, at least from one point of view, women tend to become more socially and politically active with age. This has been insufficiently examined in gerontology and social science research, perhaps because angry young men have preoccupied those who study social movements and political sociology, and a problem of orientation has dominated gerontology. In fact, remarkably little is known about women's experiences with aging at all, except for widowhood.

However, it is becoming acknowledged that angry old women are a growing force in our society. The "Grey Panthers" in the US, led by the outspoken Maggie Kuhn, for example, is a militant rights group for older people. In Canada, the impressively successful movement to reverse the de-indexing of pensions by the Mulroney Government in 1984 was led by women. It may be that women, with time, recognize the unfairness of our

treatment — sort of accumulating injustice with wrinkles. It may be that those lines on our faces and greying hair do not represent poor judgement after all (as media ads would have us believe), but character and wisdom acquired over time.

A Toronto play in the fall of 1984 addressed this in comedy — what becomes of the aging baby boomers (the university students of the 1960s that we either were or remember). They recreate the politics of the 1960s as "geriatric hippies," demanding decent pensions and health care. It may look in 1984 like love beads in wheelchairs, but by 2011 when the first of the baby boom retires, it may come true. The likelihood is high, too, that the movement at that time, unlike the movement of the 1960s, will be led by women.

What explains women's growing activism with age? An obvious explanation is frustration born of the convergence of ageism and sexism. Older women are treated with derision, at best, in our society and at worst, subject to mistreatment and crime. The images of "grannies," "little old ladies" or "the blue-haired set" certainly do not suggest self-determination and dignity on the part of older women. Older women who are complete humans, including being sexual, are the objects of humour and contempt. (The psychologist, Carol Tavris, in doing a study of female sexuality among older women got this answer: "I am 60 years old and they say you never get too old to enjoy sex. I know because I once asked my Grandma when you stopped liking it and she was 80. She said 'Child, you'll have to ask someone older than me'" Dulude, 1987:326).

That older women are more often poor seems to add to the stigma. It also reinforces the image of old women as witches or hags. It is difficult to maintain the

image of the "wise old woman" in the face of grinding poverty, disability, discrimination and fears of violence and mistreatment. Mistreatment of older women is not confined to violence by the young on the streets and in their homes, but seems to have become institutionalized as the following statement by two gerontologists reveals: "Increased efforts to improve the health status of older women might be undesirable, and an equally appropriate action might be to examine why women live so long and remove the factors that lead to this persistence" (from E.F. Borgatta and M.B. Loeb as quoted by Dulude, 1987:328).

Clearly, the accumulation of years adds to women's motivation to seek justice, not only for ourselves but for others too. Our own sense of being mistreated, mislabelled and misunderstood can lead to empathy for others who experience similar problems. A spirit seems to be born of the struggles of older women, a spirit which can be directed into political action. Further, aging may represent liberation from rigid gender role expectations for both women and men. Strict adherence to socially prescribed gender roles is largely a pattern of youth. With growing years and wisdom, apparently we have the good sense to realize how inhibiting and inflexible these gender roles are and to dispense with them.

For women in particular, aging represents an opportunity for greater freedom from family responsibilities — mothering, parental expectations and risk of pregnancy — for the first time in our lives. Aging can bring with it an invigorating opportunity to be independent and self-determining, to devote one's time to things that matter to oneself. (A quote from a short story by Mary Wilkins Freeman who died in 1930 at age 78, tells a great deal: "Old Woman Magoun had within her a mighty sense of reliance upon herself as being on the right track in the midst of a maze of evil, which gave her courage.")

As well as the potential for being liberated from family responsibilities in our older years, women are freed from the cumbersome stereotypes associated with youth. We are no longer automatically regarded as sex objects and so can devote ourselves to other tasks than cosmetic self-enhancement. Women's longer-term close friendships give us a potential

power base for political action as well as the solidarity of shared experience.

Gender factors are also relevant in explaining older women's potential for political activism. Throughout our lives, women tend to be at the forefront of movements for justice and peace. This is not due to biological predispositions, but to a combination of social learning and social positioning. Women learn, early in our lives, the connectedness of human life. Women, in fact, are taught in many cultures to specialize in the supportive function, sometimes to the point of selflessness. The ideal-typical woman is giving, self-sacrificing and supportive to egos other than her own.

Social positioning of women in families and societies, including our own, is such that we are the guardians and repositories of family good-will. We are responsible and see ourselves as responsible for the smooth functioning of relationships within the family. Often we serve as ambassadors on behalf of our families to outside agencies and organizations, such as schools, churches, extended families, in-laws, welfare agencies, doctors, and others. This can be seen as an advocacy role, one which is performed to keep relations smooth. These are women who are taught as girls that "playing the game" means to play so all will have a good time and no one will lose, or at least lose unhappily. As Jean Baker Miller (1976:83) suggests:

Women stay with, build on and develop in a context of attachment and affiliation with others. Indeed, women's sense of self [is] very much organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations and relationships.

It may not be surprising, then, that women are so often found at the forefront of movements for peace and social justice. Women in Great Britain and New York have staged massive months' long peace camps — invisible to many of us because of the limited news coverage they have received. After Chernobyl, 20,000 women in Finland declared that they refused to become pregnant until nuclear reactors were made safe or banned.

In South Africa, the heart of the social movement against Apartheid is women. The serenity and constancy of Winnie Mandela comes immediately to mind,

despite repeated imprisonment, torture, isolation cells, banishment, separation from her husband for two decades, and a heart attack in her thirties. The women of Soweto also come to mind — boycotting substandard schools, organizing self-help groups for literacy, food distribution and healthcare. At Crossroads, also in South Africa, women left to themselves for months while their husbands are trucked to the city or the mines to work, hold on to their homes, their principles and their dignity, despite extreme violence and destruction of their community by the South African authorities. On our own continent, at Big Mountain in New Mexico, where Navajos are being forcibly relocated, the grandmothers are leading the resistance.

It is not a coincidence that women are so keen on social justice, nor is this concern guaranteed by gender. Women are thought and taught to be guided more by emotions and relationships than by abstractions, either moral or intellectual. Women are taught by their socialization and social roles to be peace-makers, to care, to value survival and continuity above 'winning.' According to Brickman (1981:61):

mainstream culture is skewed dangerously towards a competitive, aggressive, hierarchical, win-or-lose way of being in the world ... By bringing the traditional strengths of women (nurturance, caregiving, flexibility, responsiveness, relatedness, empathy, depth of feeling, altruism, warmth, creativity and spirituality) from the private into the public arena, there may be a chance to redress the imbalance that is threatening the world.

Or, as Ursula Franklin, the eminent University of Toronto metallurgist and peace advocate, said in an interview in CAUT Bulletin, "Women's upbringing develops a feeling of context. Men decontextualize. The major problems facing society today seem resolvable only in context."

Conclusion

The converging effects of life-long experience with caring and connectedness, the experience of injustice in a society characterized by negative attitudes toward women and older people, make

older women likely candidates for participation in peace and justice movements. Gender structure, in particular the gender aspects of aging, works in such a way as to place women at the forefront of peace-work. Women are also less likely than men to accept the belief that war is intrinsic to human nature, perhaps out of our own recognition that biology is not destiny. This may add to our motivation to work toward peace.

Bibliography

- Berger, R. 1982. "The Unseen Minority: Older Gays and Lesbians," *Social Work* 27:236-242.
- Borgotta, E.F. and M.B. Loeb. 1981. "Toward a Policy for Retired Persons: Reflections on Welfare and Taxation," in N.G. McCluskey and E.F. Borgotta (eds.), *Aging and Retirement: Prospects, Planning and Policy*. New York: Sage.
- Brickman, Julie. 1984. "Feminist, Non-sexist and Traditional Modes of Therapy," *Women and Therapy* 3(1): 49-67.
- Dulude, Louise. 1987. "Getting Old: Men in Couples and Women Alone," in Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (ed.) *Women and Men: Interdisciplinary Readings on Gender*. Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.
- Franklin, Ursula. 1986. cited in *CAUT Bulletin*, December.
- Gee, Ellen and Meredith Kimball. 1987. *Women and Aging*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- McDaniel, Susan A. 1986. *Canada's Aging Population*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Miller, Jean Baker. 1976. *Towards a New Psychology of Women*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- National Council on Welfare. 1986. *Progress Against Poverty*. Ottawa: Government Printing Office.
- Sinnott, Jan. 1986. *Sex Roles and Aging: Theory and Research from a Systems Perspective*. Bosel Karger.
- Wilkins, Russell and Owen Adams. 1983. "Health Expectancy in Canada, Late 1970's: Demographic, Regional and Social Dimensions," *American Journal of Public Health* 73(9):1073-1080.

Susan McDaniel, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Waterloo, is the author of two books, Social Problems Through Conflict and Order (with Ben Agger, 1982) and Canada's Aging Population (1986). In 1987-88, she became the recipient of the first Casgrain Research Fellowship.