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Reviewing the Life Cycle: Women's Lives in the Light of Social Changes

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1. Introduction

Our chapter involves both a theoretical revision and a set of reflections that aim to analyse and redefine the significance of the final stages of the female life cycle, which has been revolutionised by two major set of circumstances: the increase in life expectation and the social changes that have taken place in the western world during the second half of the 20th century. In this regard, our reflections deal with the consequences that this spectacular prolongation of life has had for women. We also discuss the new significance that living into old age may have for women who will reach old age during the early decades of this century and who are the beneficiaries of the important social changes of the second half of the past century.

These important social changes have facilitated the virtually universal access of women to basic education, and of a very large proportion of women to higher education, as well as the generalisation and utilisation of new information and communication technologies. The incorporation of women into the labour market and the cash economy has altered relationships and the position of women in the world and has enabled them to renegotiate their intimate relationships, their sexuality and rates of birth-giving, and thus to modify to a great extent their future lives as elderly women during the first half of the 21st century.

2. Feminist critical gerontology

Our theoretical framework is based on critical gerontology, which analyses the extent to which political and socioeconomic factors interact to shape the experience of ageing, and treats age, gender, ethnic background and social class as variables on which the life course of the individual pivots, insofar as it predetermines their position in the social order. Critical gerontology shows a desire to explore the social construction of ageing within a broad sociopolitical and humanitarian context. The field also studies the disparate ways in which individuals grow old, and the social and political disempowerment than often accompany ageing (Minkler & Holstein, 2008: 196).

Feminist gerontology may be regarded as part of a project of development of those epistemologies which, from the perspective of the social sciences, question dominant perceptions of the lives of certain marginalized segments of the population. Feminist

gerontological research attempts to document the experiences of elderly women and to promote new interpretations of female ageing, “asking questions about what ‘everyone knows’, and to examine ideas, positions, theories, and policies from the perspective of the least advantaged” (Minkler & Holstein, 2008: 199).

Critical feminist gerontology has documented the experience of elderly women, encouraging the development of more complete and more complex interpretations of their lives, and has discussed the necessity of studying and understanding their life trajectories in greater detail, revising the lacunae and inconsistencies that a large proportion of current gerontological studies offers, as a victim of the ‘ideology of age’. Taking as its point of departure the notion that feminism is “a form of politics which aims to intervene in, and transform, the unequal power relations between men and women” (Hollows, 2001: 3), critical feminist gerontology emerges as a form of study via which we claim to alter the power relationships which, in this case, are mediated via age and gender (Ray, 2006; Freixas, 2008).

3. The new life course

One of the most significant processes of the 20th century has been the gradual ageing of the global population, particularly in the developed world, where life expectation has risen spectacularly. There are two immediate causes of this process in our society; the decline in birth-rates and the increase in life expectancy, which is due to the fall in the death rate at advanced ages. This faces us with a social fact that lacks precedents in human history. We have thus been witnesses to a structural change that has led to *the ageing of old people*, which is to say that the number of nonagerians and centenarians is growing, bringing social, cultural and health-care challenges as well as a duty to study the phenomenon. At this point in time, we can claim that as we approach old age, we still have many ‘productive’ years ahead of us, time that represents an unprecedented resource in terms of number and potential (Minkler & Holstein, 2008). Today’s elderly women were the promoters of one of the most important demographic transformations in history, in that the reduction in their rates of giving birth led to a true demographic transition.

Ageing is not a process that can be viewed solely through the prism of age; it possesses other nuances of great importance, both collective and individual. Growing old for women is not the same as for men, nor does it have the same meaning for members of advanced and developing societies. It is not the same to grow old, having enjoyed a good education, with access to culture and to a health-care system, accompanied by professional activity and emotional and interpersonal relationships, as it is to do so outwith the limits of the system. The fundamental challenge is thus not to live longer, but how to live our extra years in terms of health, financial security, wellbeing, social insertion, and personal, cultural and social significance. Ageing is an achievement, a triumph, not a cataclysmic event (Freixas, 2002). The old vision of age as an inevitable process of loss, illness and decrepitude is no longer valid, as a significant proportion of women and men play important roles as active members of society and enjoy a degree of autonomy and satisfaction to very advanced ages.

The spectacular increase in life expectancy has changed people’s psychological position in the life cycle. The old clichés regarding ageing and death once the barrier of the fifties had been passed, have been largely dispelled, and today, we can look forward to a long phase of life to which we must give meaning. Middle age (50 – 65), regarded as a cultural category,

has acquired a recognised status as a stage of life distinct from the third age (65 – 80) and the fourth (older than 80). Studies of age need to add a description of each aspect of our state of mind that deals with the life cycle, revealing the fears and assumptions that invade it.

4. Gender and ageing

The characteristics of the lives of women, and their wide individual variations, make it difficult to analyse their experience in terms of the classical stages of development, which are adapted to the masculine model, which is still regarded as the norm. In such studies, theories of adult development have traditionally been based on largely male sample populations, whose experience and perspectives have ignored those of women, while the results obtained on the basis of such samples have been generalised to apply also to women, treating these as deficient when their experience and performance do not correspond to masculine standards. Virtually no studies have attempted to consider the significance and consequences of the differences in socialisation and the life options of women and men in old age.

It is several years since certain female authors first pointed out the necessity for the psychological study of the development of males and females to be separated. In spite of the fact that studies of the psychosocial development of women are still few and far between, we now possess a number of works that illustrate the lives of middle-aged and elderly women from other perspectives (Arber & Ginn, 1995; Bernard et al., 2000; Freixas, 1993; Friedan, 1993; Gannon, 1999; Greer, 1991; Pearsall, 1997). A large proportion of the available studies of the second part of the lives of women have been carried out on sample populations drawn from the middle class; white, heterosexual and with average levels of education, thus leaving in the shade knowledge of the experiences and lives of an important segment of the female population that is the process of becoming old.

A number of female writers (Barnett & Baruch, 1978; Freixas, 1997; Gilligan, 1982) have argued that the words of Erikson and Levinson—who proposed the development of the adult personality through unidirectional, irreversible, hierarchical and universal stages that do not take into account individual differences—does not represent the reality of the situation for women (Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1978). The life experiences of men are intimately related to their chronological age, as a variable in which the events of their lives are framed, belonging as much to the family as to the occupational sphere. However, this type of model does not function in the life of women, for whom adulthood involves a wide variety of role models that are not based on chronological age, since their lives may offer a large number of combinations in which their occupation, partnership and child-rearing involve several levels of use of their time and commitment that mean that the roles of wife, mother and worker may possess different degrees of importance at different points of their life cycle. This tends not to occur in the lives of men, in whom the unidirectionality of events has usually been clearer. The differences in involvement in the public and private spheres is the cause of completely divergent paths of life, which means that in the development of women, the evolution of relationships frequently exerts greater pressure than does that of chronological age as such (Luque, 2008).

Viewed from a feminine perspective, ageing can be a wide-ranging challenge, insofar as they need to face their personal and social situation which, in many cases has left them in poverty and dependence. Furthermore, they need to uncover certain of the most deeply-

rooted sociocultural demands that have anchored them to profoundly restrictive models, related to concepts of beauty and youth that have no respect for the natural processes of human development.

5. Social changes

The important social changes that have taken place in the West in the course of the 20th century have involved new social, political, cultural, sexual, family and financial organisations of such importance that they have transformed the social and private lives of both men and women. A good proportion of the successes achieved by the end of the 20th century originated in the feminist movement and its thinking.

5.1 The new social organisation

In the case of women, the new social organisation has produced such a degree of structural change that their lives will never again be marked by the social conditions that previously constrained them and in which they lived, deprived of education, liberty, financial resources, voting rights, and control of their own bodies and sexuality. Their lives remained at the mercy of men—fathers, husbands, brothers, priests—who were the sole possessors of all rights. These social changes have given them access to education, paid work, social and political participation, as well as to the use of their own property and to their bodies and sexuality, as mentioned above.

In the case of the 'new' elderly women of the 21st century, one of the principal effects of their longevity has been the lack of models of elderly women with meaningful lives. With the aim of filling this blank screen of some 30 years of extra life with content, and in the lack of social models to which we can look, the new elderly women of the first half of the 21st century will need to look to each other if they are to trace out a new route-map. We may assume that this new generation of elderly women will be happier than their grandmothers, given that they have succeeded in dismantling some of the social requirements that previously restricted their lives. Nevertheless, social change never takes place without pain, puzzlement and uncertainty. It is probable that the new life situations that we analyse in this chapter will noticeably improve their sense of satisfaction with life.

This, in the sense of a subjective perception of wellbeing beyond what the objective data might suggest, lies along two axes: that of 'control' of one's own life, and that of 'happiness'. The gender-based division of work that has ruled in industrialised societies has assigned to men the pole of 'control' (access to education, money, work outside the home, power, status) while limiting women to the pole of 'happiness' (relationships, emotions, care). This model of social organisation places men and women in different life spaces; the world of affect, relationships, care-giving, raising children, are all part of the feminine specialisation, while men are assigned the biblical tasks of earning the family's bread, going to war and defending their wives and their flocks, which in practice involves the total management of money and of political and private power. This model has led to the devaluation of all the activities and practices supplied by women, which has meant that the 'feminine space' has come to be regarded as inferior, and thus something to be avoided in the process of masculine identity, which has traditionally been constructed on the basis of denying its feminine side.

However, this division of social roles generated a lack of satisfaction among both parties, distancing men from the life of the emotions and women from power and from control of their own lives. The voices that demanded a more equitable division of these two spaces came from women, as they were more aware than men that this way of locating themselves in the world resulted in deficiencies which had lasting and irremediable consequences, especially in old age. For this reason, from the 1960s onwards, a good number of women progressively and definitively joined the world of paid labour, thus availing themselves of the use and management of their own money and possessions; meanwhile, they were also struggling to access education and the universities, and to have legislation passed that would give them better control of their lives, their bodies and their sexuality, giving them a radical transformation of their everyday life —although they might not have realised that at the time— above all, of the conditions of ageing, assuming the responsibility for their own well-being, not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually. All the above changes modified the relationships and the position of women in the world and enabled them to renegotiate their intimate relationships, their sexuality, birth-giving and, as a result, to modify to a great extent what will be their lives as elderly women during the first half of the 21st century.

We do not know whether these elderly women will be happier than their predecessors, because it is not age as such that is the cause of a lessening of pleasure in growing old, but rather the circumstances associated with life in old age that can determine a greater or lesser feeling of happiness. In this synthesis between the pole of control and the pole of happiness that marks the life of individuals, the old values of the popular song —‘there are three things in life: health, money and love’— continue to be basic aims. Family, social and friendship networks, a higher level of education, good health and financial resources are the indicators that sustain us in adequate comfort in our old age.

5.2 Feminism and the life of older women

The great social changes that have marked the second half of the 20th century doubtless affect the pattern of life of men and women of all ages, in such a way that these important social changes will have important consequences for the old age experienced by women. Feminist movement has provided the foundations of the transformation of the public and private life of women —and thus of men— by overcoming the many social and cultural limitations that restricted their lives to the fields of reproduction and the private world.

The 60s and 70s of the previous century produced major social changes in favour of the civil rights of discriminated minorities —particularly those of black people and of women. The activities of the women's liberation movement encouraged the passing of laws that eliminated many of the social barriers that limited the lives of women in fields such as education, civil rights, reproductive and sexual rights, and of rights to work and to hold property, and so on.

Feminism, as a theoretical perspective and a social movement, has illuminated our understanding of power relationships within the family and emotional life, and has unveiled the system of maintenance and reproduction of such concepts. The feminist slogan ‘the personal is political’ led to a structural change. By claiming that the relationships that rule our private lives are power relationships, it suggests that many of the problems that we

regard as 'personal' originate in society and, as such, can only be resolved by social and political change. On this basis, the creation of a collective consciousness mobilised women in their search for objectives and changes in their situation, although the emphasis on equality hid reflections on gender-based differences. Moreover, social recognition of rights has in many cases not been accompanied by true equality and the transformation of social, political, economic or personal life practices, in which women remain at a disadvantage, and which become significantly worse in old age.

The new elderly women of the 21st century to whom we refer in this chapter⁽¹⁾, born in the final third of the 20th century—heiresses of the benefits and discourses of the second wave of feminism, daughters of May'68 and the great social movements propelled by faith in change—, convinced that 'the personal is political' will revise each and every one of the elements of the social contract and of love: they will examine through a magnifying glass the received prescriptions regarding daily life and will denounce the patriarchal agreements that dominate both the personal and political spheres. They will insist on the deconstruction of identity inherited from the feminine 'mystique' (heterosexuality, femininity, passivity, obedience, maternity) across a continuum of crises of identity throughout their lives, until old age which, in the lack of a recognised legacy, offers itself as a blank space, without models and accompanied by many fears and ghosts; with a single strength derived from their links and the bank of arguments of feminist thinking and epistemology.

A good number of these women, who will make up an important fraction of the elderly population of the 21st century, have been characterised as refusing to passively accept the life models left to them by previous generations, have renegotiated the meaning of many received prescriptions and have modified the sense of ageing, taking as their point of departure vital and intellectual positions that are very different from those of their mothers and grandmothers. They have challenged cultural images of the 'little old lady'; asexual, self-sacrificing, lacking opinions, desires and necessities, always available, undervalued and weak, giving way to the model of an elderly woman who is active and sexual, attractive, who utilises her power and her new position in society, in her family, her network and her relationships (Kingsberg, 2002). These women will face old age with experiences of work, finance, family, status and power that are very different from those of their predecessors, and as such, enjoy greater financial, social and intellectual resources. All this has required the redefinition of many of the social roles that they have played up to the present day in terms of partnerships, family, paid employment, money and sexuality, etc. Theories of the life cycle have yet to develop a set of arguments that value the significance of these factors in individual and psychosocial terms.

On the other hand, the reflections produced by feminism at the end of the previous century regarding sexual differences have helped to give value to 'the feminine', and to recover the values that women have historically brought to relationships and the sustainability of life, recognising their civilising efforts (Libreria delle Donne di Milano, 1987). Thanks to these contributions, the elderly women of the 21st century find themselves occupying new fields of

¹ The new elderly women to whom we refer represent minor cultural, social, political, economic and personal avant garde. The elderly women of the 21st century also include women who remain rooted in the models of the previous century, for whom social change has not led to any real transformation of their lives, although it may do so for their daughters, as a result of their efforts.

meaning and presence in which they do not feel a necessity to deny their femininity in occupying spaces that used to be dedicated to men and for which models were in short supply.

6. Elderly women of the 20th century / elderly women of the 21st century

In their youth, a large proportion of the women who are elderly today lived in social, economic and political situations characterised by poverty, deprivation and submission; they laboured within the family unit, in the fields, and in activities that accorded them neither social nor economic recognition. Nevertheless, many of these women were the promoters, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, of many of the social transformations enjoyed by the elderly women of the 21st century. Their role as pioneers in many areas has yet to be recognised. In reality, as Brody (2010) claims, they made up a 'new frontier' for themselves and for new generations. Also, to the extent to which they needed to overcome the many difficulties and deficiencies from which they emerged more than successfully, we may feel that they have demonstrated an admirable resilience. They have understood how to adapt to losses, to the new environments of life and work, to social and familial change, in a society that is profoundly changing and in which changes they have participated through their questioning. In this too, they were pioneers.

The demographic aspects are the basis of some of the great changes in the lives of elderly women. Thus, the increase in life expectancy will produce one of the most important transformations: while at the age of 60, or even earlier, life for both men and women had more or less come to an end during the first half of the 20th century, for the new elderly, the same age involves launching new initiatives; experiences and lives unlived until the moment at which they emerge as new expectations. To a great extent, this is because the increase in life expectancy is taking place in an epoch in which potent social changes have given the female population a wide range of new resources, both economic and intellectual as well as in the sphere of health. Furthermore, the revision carried out by women who were socialised under the model of submission to the patriarchy —feminists *avant la lettre*— will provide future generations with the ability to choose and to make decisions regarding their own lives that hitherto have been unthinkable.

On the other hand, the social and personal advances encouraged by feminism and the social movements will be concretised in a re-evaluation of age, and thus of the visibility and occupation of public space on the part of elderly people. Elderly women and men will enjoy a social and vital space and recognition that they have lacked until now.

6.1 Education, culture, freedom

One of the most important tasks in the process of ageing consists of 'assigning meaning to life itself', a task that demands a conjunction between reminiscence —giving meaning to one's own past life— and premonition —planning the future. To be able to identify a personal pathway to graceful ageing, accepting one's past and designing one's future, the new elderly women possess highly valuable elements, of which education is probably the most important. This group, born around the middle of the 20th century, does not include illiterate persons. The virtual universal access of women to basic general education and of an important fraction of the female population to higher education, as well as to the spread

in the use and knowledge of the new information and communication technologies will offer them an extremely interesting panorama.

The new elderly women will communicate with their daughters, grandchildren and friends by email, and buy their airline and theatre tickets via the Internet, on which they will also check the weather and read the papers in their own homes.

Education allows access to information, and that in turn to liberty. The elderly women of the 21st century, given that they will have had an education, will be able to take up paid work (their own money) and will have had their own experiences of management and access to various forms of power and control. In no way do they resemble their grandmothers who, to the extent that they came from a society in which women were regarded as being less intellectually gifted than men, had very restricted access to education, which was reduced to a rudimentary level. This limited them to the role of housewife (wives, mothers, grandmothers) as the only possible occupation, leaving them in old age without money of their own and with very limited access to cultural and intellectual resources.

6.2 The work cycle of women

The most obvious consequence of the access of women to education is their incorporation into the labour market, which has markedly changed —although still with important limitations— domestic life, financial relationships within the family and, in consequence, the power relationships within the family and in social life. The model of social organisation of our culture is profoundly androcentric and not only ignores the peculiarities of the life cycle of women, but even punishes them for not running with the same rhythm as their male companions and being ‘distracted’ from their professional career by their child-care duties, performing tasks of care-giving and emotional support that are ‘not the concern’ of their male companions. All in all, the years dedicated to these tasks of sustaining life do not count in their curricula, thus giving men an advantage through their lack of solidarity in the tasks involved in civilising the world. A similar problem arise in the area of pensions, which are calculated according to a model of working life derived from the division of labour between the sexes, as a result of which the typical variability in the trajectory of the feminine career obviously operates to the disadvantage of the financial level of women in old age.

The financial insecurity which women in previous generations faced in old age is related to the fact that in many cases they entered and left the labour market as a function of the financial requirements of the family and the demands for care of their husbands and children. These are women who have abandoned interesting jobs in order to follow their husbands in his work, who have been unable to rise in their professional career for fear of injuring masculine honour, and who have left the house to work ‘at anything’ when their male’s wage has not come in. All in all, the heterosexual definition currently defines the age of women who invested their capital in marriage, with the idea that this would supply their financial necessities in their old age, but when the hour of truth arrives find themselves in misery. Moreover, in a society in which women’s most important value lies in their reproductive capacity, having an intellectual occupation was often seen in a negative and suspicious light, since intellectual work for women was considered to have a negative impact on childbirth (Hirdman, 1994).

We may think that some of the new elderly women—insofar as they have had a history of work that is more continuous and of higher status than that of their predecessors—will enjoy old-age pensions that will permit them to live the long later years of their life in a better financial situation than their mothers who, in accordance with the model of gender-based division of labour, put their efforts into unpaid domestic work, and thus found themselves consigned to poverty and financial dependence in their old age.

The fact that feminism has emphasised the necessity for women to have a 'purse of one's own' (Woolf, 1938)—a financially independent life, a career—should not be interpreted as a desire to adopt the masculine model of work. In fact, this is not the case, although some women are obliged to assimilate themselves to this model if they wish to advance in their professional careers. Many women of recent generations, in spite of their definitive incorporation into the world of work, continue to structure their working life around the requirements of the family and their duties of care. The flexibility in work demonstrated by women is not usually a matter of choice. They need flexible working conditions in order to be able to reconcile this aspect of life with the demands of the family.

Women want an equilibrium between paid work and their other activities, including leisure, care and voluntary work. One of the challenges of contemporary life will be to bear in mind the new, creative forms of life that women are putting into practice—most of them as solitary adventurers—given the difficult conditions that the traditional forms of relationship, derived from heterosexual romantic love, place on them.

6.3 Rethinking the model of retirement

The androcentric model of retirement, in which one changes from paid work to 'not working' from one day to the next, is probably in need of revision, attributing value to the work cycle of women who pursue extremely diverse career paths which, besides paid work *sensu strictu*, include care-giving, providing emotional support, voluntary work and a range of community and social activities of great importance and enormous social value, such as the irreplaceable tasks of making life more supportable and humane.

Just as diversity is the norm when we speak of the family types of the 21st century, so is it too when we observe the wide range of situations that have defined the social life of women since the late 20th century. The reflections aroused by a number of studies suggest a pre-retirement model of work that takes the form of a transition between working and retirement that could bring about an improvement in the experience of retirement, ameliorating the crisis of meaning and identity that can result from a single life-model, such as we often find among men (Everingham et al., 2007). In fact, some companies already ease the transition to retirement of both men and women by allowing them to reduce the number of hours worked and the range of tasks they undertake. For example, some universities reduce teaching hours, while maintaining the amount of time available for research, thus making best use of the intellectual capacity of their academic staff. Such a reduction in hours worked as retirement approaches could be adapted to a great extent to the range of women's careers.

It might be useful on financial grounds, given the erratic work-life histories of many women, with their serious consequences for retirement pensions, to lengthen their working lives, albeit in a partial fashion, allowing them to include periods of paid work alongside

periods of other activities of interest, even if unpaid. This is not to forget the structural changes that are a result of our present longevity: for earlier generations, retirement coincided with the beginning of 'old age', the loss of one's faculties, senescence. Today, at 65, most of us enjoy an enviable state of health and can boast of knowledge and skills that make us useful in many spheres of work, social and community life. All of this favours the idea of creating *à la carte* retirement policies that would allow those who wish to do so, to compensate for some of the difficulties that they are liable to meet at the moment of compulsory retirement.

A unitary model of retirement does not correspond to the different implications of the work and family world of women. In fact, the new forms of retirement that society ought to be organising emerge from this plural reality and also, in these times of crisis, from that of the new generations of women and men for whom work will be no more than a matter of security, as it has long been for men, both historically and up until the present day. We might say that we find ourselves facing a society in which work insecurity is drawing both women and men down to the same level, and that the time has come to revise the forms of retirement, in order to be able to take new situations into account. This demand has been made time and time again by women. Although the different way in which women have interacted with the labour market has historically been regarded as 'second-best', the current crisis appears to be minimising gender differences in the world of work (Everingham et al., 2007).

The fear of financial insecurity will continue to be a prevalent feeling in the women of the coming generations who have worked intermittently, particularly for those who lack a partner but have family obligations. Such insecurity is based on the practice of part-time working, in the need to combine a number of obligations, and in the culture of flexible working that has left women in a financially vulnerable situation by denying them a secure income and a continuity of employment that would guarantee them a successful retirement. Thanks to a number of ideas derived from feminist thinking, the new generation of elderly women will probably take more seriously the topic of continuity of employment and pensions, which ought to reduce the numbers of elderly women in poverty.

6.4 Health and paid work

The health of elderly women in the 21st century is benefitting from the thinking derived from women's health-oriented networks which, since the end of the nineties, have produced interesting studies of differences in morbidity between men and women and have questioned diagnoses, treatments and medical practices regarding women's health (Valls et al., 2008). To date, little research has been done on the topic of the benefits of paid work on women's health, while the few studies that do exist suggest that social and relationships resulting from work outside the home protect women from mental and physical illness, by enabling them to raise their self-esteem and sense of security in decision-making, while offering them social support as well as a greater feeling of satisfaction with life (Sorensen & Verbrugge, 1987).

Paid work also offers other health advantages; it enables people to structure their own time and provides financial benefits, social contacts and professional identity. Where women are concerned, participation in the world of work improves their health insofar as it offers social

status and power in addition to financial independence and self-esteem. The social support provided by paid work is valued by women as the most important element in keeping them there, quite apart from the potential financial necessity. The participants in Forssén and Carlstedt's study of health and paid work emphasised that this enabled them to control and relieve their illnesses and that it offered a number of health benefits, of which they mentioned the importance of enjoying a meaningful life, feeling competent and needed, and being recognised and enjoy a good mood, and that it helped to structure their days (Forssén & Carlstedt, 2007).

A topic of great importance in the lives of elderly females in the future will be the relationship that emerges between the massive incorporation of women into paid employment and their experiences of health. To what extent has the participation in the labour market been a source of physical and psychological health—even when such work has been hard, poorly paid and little recognised—in comparison with that of their predecessors as housewives or unpaid labour? Future studies ought to take into account the new relationships between women, their bodies, health and attractiveness, topics of great importance in the ageing process, while bearing in mind the double standard of ageing denounced by Susan Sontag (1972).

6.5 Body and beauty

Growing old is not easy in a society such as ours, in which the concept beauty is based on two elements that are difficult to maintain as we grow older: youth and slimness. Staying young when we have passed 60 is an oxymoron: we cannot be both old and young, while the need to remain slim, which is derived from an inadequate history of nutrition and an upbringing under an aesthetic model which itself is static, is no easy task in old age. The cultural change concerning the image of the female body has basically taken place since the early 20th century. Naomi Wolf located the start of our preoccupation with diet and slimness in the 1920s, when western women started to obtain the vote and legal emancipation, with certain swings that were functions of the greater or lesser exaltation of maternity as the destiny of women. However, it was most clearly after 1965, with the emergence of the skeletal model Twiggy, that women began to slim seriously and to suffer for the weight that they always regard as excessive. In spite of the fact that women have made advances in terms of rights, status and power, which ought to have brought them a greater sense of self-esteem and of competence and value, their obsession with weight has led them as a rule to feel unhappy, in spite of the advances that ought to have been concretised in the very opposite perception (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Wolf, 1991).

Some of the sociocultural requirements regarding attractiveness that have such a great effect on the life of women while they are still young continue to place limits on their feeling of satisfaction with life and of wellbeing in their old age. Cultural requirements have historically impelled women to involve themselves in 'disciplinary practices' at a high physical, financial and psychological cost in order to maintain their appearance; practices that imply global strategies of control; in this case a biopolitics of control of the female body that leads women into a continual 'must do it', because otherwise they would not exist. Naomi Wolf put it succinctly as follows: "The real problem is the lack of choice." (Wolf, 1991: 354). Faced with this situation, the old women of the future will start to make decisions regarding how they wish to dress, make up and display themselves. They will develop a

standard of personal care that is no longer a matter of pain or obligation, an imperative that makes them suffer because if they do not live up to it they will be excluded, but rather as an element of pleasure or enjoyment, of personal identity and acceptance of what nature has given to each of them, of liberty, of beauty, in order to feel good.

The new elderly women have managed to reflect individually and collectively about the messages and mandates they have received regarding attractiveness, and have been able to construct their own modes of thinking on this topic. Today, ideas of beauty have changed, and we can look to a new concept of beauty that integrates and fulfils them as individuals, that does not demand a particular external appearance, but rather looks into the interior of each individual being, taking self-esteem as its point of departure. Given that the conventional images of women older than 60 with which we have grown up no longer have anything to do with current reality, we will have to construct new patterns for them. The crucial topic here as far as new elderly women are concerned lies in the search for a model of beauty that moves them from the image of a wrinkled little old lady, dressed all in black, whose involvement in her own body image shines by its very absence, to a typology in which there is room for diversity and enjoyment rather than merely the obligation to wear mascara in the process of hiding one's age. All in all, it is a matter of questioning how far elderly women are prepared to go in identifying themselves with what is regarded as attractive in our society: how far they are willing to conform to a model in order to achieve a 'correct' image of growing old.

6.6 New family life

The demographic fact of greater longevity, allied to the lowering of the birth-rate, has altered the structure of the family; this has changed from that of the extended family with many children and few generations to one made up of few children and several generations. This situation has led to a change in the pattern of relationships, which are no longer horizontal (between brothers and sisters), to vertical links (between generations). However, new forms of social organisation have encouraged the appearance of new modes of family life that have already become the norm in the 21st century. Diversity characterises emotional life and the relationships of women who are currently in the process of becoming old, though not without some pain. In spite of everything, the family is, and will probably continue to be, an important aspect of the life of women for all time.

If anything does define the life of the old women of the 21st century, it is the fragmentation of their emotional and work careers. The concept of 'definitive' or 'for ever' under which their grandmothers were socialised, has disappeared at the stroke of a pen. We now live in what Ulrich Beck has called the "risk society", in which we have to be prepared for change, for the ephemeral, for breaks in long-term family and professional careers (Beck, 1992). The normal 'chaos of love' that has characterised our society since May'68 has fragmented our emotional lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). No longer is anything 'for ever', while to introduce this concept into our emotional programme would not be a simple matter, particularly after having put so much effort into the creation of spaces of relationships and connections that were believed to be lasting.

The ideology of the traditional family has permeated the lives of women of all ages, in spite of the fact that for almost half a century new forms of family life have been emerging. The

traditional family model (regarded as a universal model, in spite of the fact that it is basically the result of the gender-determined division of labour dating from the 19th century), which is characterised by the financial dependence of the woman and the lack of male involvement in care-giving and domestic tasks, has been followed by other family models derived from the incorporation of women into the labour market and feminist demands for fairness in the division of responsibilities. These new models have deconstructed the familiar myth, revealing a wide variety of models that have achieved similar degrees of legal, social and personal validity, among which we find the egalitarian heterosexual family, the female single-parent family as well as the male ditto, the homosexual family—both lesbian and gay—, and the recent concept of 'families of choice'. All of these models are derived from the social changes of the 20th century and from the theoretical thinking of the feminist movement (Fortin, 2005).

Heterosexual marriage continues to be a goal in the life of the new generation of elderly women, albeit to a lesser extent than before. What is certain is that in their time, many of these women married for love, rather than to obtain financial security as had previous generations, marrying men who, while they supported the discourse of equality in theory, continued in practice to behave like their fathers. Cohabitation with these husbands whose theoretical discourses displayed a social sensitivity and democratic framework, but who refused to renounce the privileges of their sex, which they assumed to be something 'natural', often generated relational conflicts which in turn raised the rates of separation and divorce (Coria, 2001). Women of recent generations who have wanted to maintain relationships with their partners on a basis of equality have had to deploy a range of strategic discourses and take part in various practices in order to control the context of daily life (Elizabeth, 2003). The inequalities in intimate relationships are not only a product of interpersonal relationships, but also the result of the limiting effects of cultural norms and other socially significant spaces, such as the family of origin.

6.7 New life-styles

Today, more and more people are adopting life-styles that combine intimacy, physical contact, emotional relationships and company, even though they live apart. Sharing interests, intimacy and social and personal activities need not involve sharing a home or a residence, which resolves some of the problems of cohabitation in later life with persons with whom one has not earlier come to agreement concerning everyday life together. It is thus clear that the structural changes of recent times involve a wide range of intimate relationships which, for the new generation of elderly women, involve moving on from a monogamous matrimonial relationship—which essentially means emotional and financial dependence—to a relationship that Anthony Giddens (1992) called a 'pure relationship' which is kept up only as far as both parties find that it gives them sufficient satisfaction to remain in it. Couples involved in such relationships lack models to follow, and in theory are more egalitarian, autonomous and happy than those in the classical model, preferring to replace marriage with some form of mutual commitment (Gross & Simmons, 2002).

In the new generation of elderly women we already find different 'trials' of relationships in which various alternatives to cohabitation within the framework of classical heterosexual marriage are practised. Some of these go in for cohabitation—i.e. living together with another person outwith a marriage contract—as an alternative to marriage as such. This

mode tends to involve a more egalitarian relationship and may be more satisfactory for women. Another formula that has been tried out with some success is to be a couple, each of whose members live in their own house (LAT; living apart together), a formula that involves commitment, sexual relations and social recognition while satisfying the necessities for intimacy and autonomy, company and independence desired by many people in later life—particularly women. This formula, which is very similar to the ‘pure relationship’ described by Giddens (1992), is less institutionalised and requires a high level of negotiation. Meanwhile, a relationship with another person of the same sex is an option chosen by some mature women, who find areas of mutual understanding with their equals that they had not enjoyed in their heterosexual relationships. Recent legislation that recognises homosexual marriage has offered a certificate of legitimacy to this option, and has contributed to the elimination of social, cultural and family homophobia (Connidis, 2006).

6.8 Links and networks

Enjoying relationships in old age—whatever their configuration—has positive domestic, psychological, social and even financial benefits, insofar as they offer social and emotional support and physical and sexual contact, while also enabling care-giving and domestic tasks to be shared. Furthermore, networks allow different strategies for life in old age to be shared. This would appear to be a positive programme, but to make a success of it demands a good dose of internal freedom that no-one has ever said cannot be exploited, although women may not allow themselves to do so.

Women have always been creative experts in relationships of friendship which, as they grow older, display their inestimable value in the maintenance of wellbeing and a positive ageing process. For many reasons, the depositories of these links of friendship tend to be other women, whether younger, older or of similar ages, shading out differences in age, and giving and receiving, as appropriate, in rich intergenerational exchanges. Carolyn Heilbrun put it thus: “[since the 50s]...after a lifetime of solitude and few close and constant companions, women friends and colleagues, themselves now mature adults, whose intimacy helped to make the sixties my happiest decade” (Heilbrun, 1997: 4).

Too often is age associated with isolation; however, women of all ages form powerful networks of social and emotional support and set up instrumental and emotional links at time when life seems to be losing its balance, and these turn out to be extremely solid structures. Women have ample experience of this; since it is they who establish and maintain relationships within and beyond the family they are very well prepared to develop and maintain new social links when they find themselves facing the vicissitudes of old age.

Social networks are closely related to the quality of life, to the ability to deal with the stresses of everyday life, and to health and longevity. The greater life expectancy of women, their solid social networks and personal capacity for dealing successfully with the changing circumstances of life, ought to be recognised as closely interrelated feminine strengths.

6.9 Finally alone

Solitude is one of the great discoveries of maturity, at least for those who possess sufficient health and emotional support networks to enjoy it. Dreaded when we are young as a

symbol of abandonment and lack of social participation, with the passing of the years it turns into a challenge, a personal space of liberty and happiness. In the first stage of adulthood, women are often so caught up in various central aspects of their own and others' lives that there comes a point in their later lives when solitude ceases to be something feared and turns into a happy meeting with oneself. Solitude is a temptation for persons who have lived with too much company and thus have scarcely enjoyed time and space to themselves. Heilbrun (1997) describes it as a pleasure for those who have managed to give meaning to their lives, as an opportunity to live in the present, as a gift that they do not wish to allow to escape. Solitude enables us to hold the reins of our daily lives, to organise our time.

Living alone is not usually a problem for most women. Used as they are to organising their own and others' lives, they suddenly find themselves on their own stage. Living alone brings a meeting with long-postponed desires that had become unrecognisable. Now they have all the time and space they need to organise their environment as they wish. All in all, they can embrace personal freedom and make room for their own desires.

The trends in gerontology that emphasise activity as a tool in successful ageing assign a value to 'doing' over to 'being', leaving little room for more quiet life choices, and obliging elderly persons to maintain family, leisure and care-giving activities and responsibilities that they have not chosen themselves. In the lives of elderly women, active ageing frequently implies yet other obligations: to remain active, to go out, participate, provide care, to show that one is bursting with life and activity. In reality, so-called productive and successful ageing imposes totalising ideals about the meaning of a 'good old age' (Minkler & Holstein, 2008).

6.10 The 'single' culture

If their predecessors were wives, mothers, daughters and neighbors, the new elderly women of the 21st century are partners, lovers, mothers and step-mothers, sisters, colleagues, cyber-girlfriends and, above all, divorcees. The elderly women of the future, i.e. women who are currently in their fifties, are twice as likely to be divorced as the elderly of today (Thomas & Fogg, 2000), to the extent that the current generation of the 'emerging elderly' has launched the practice of the 'single' life. On the one hand, they divorce and separate when the contradictions of equality in daily life become too obvious, while on the other, many of them opt much earlier to live a life that does not have room for heterosexual marriage.

It was this generation that deconstructed the old concept of 'spinster' that tormented and influenced the options of its mothers and grandmothers. The old women of the 21st century have continued to live with the specter of spinsterhood, although now only half-voiced, within a society that no longer believed in it. They do not wish to burden themselves with conventional marriage, while the convent is no longer an interesting option, so they have launched themselves on the paths of a profession and the control of their emotional life under new parameters. Whatever the reason, they have learned to live alone much earlier than their mothers, who only did so with the blessing of society when they had become widows, although the group of divorcees who had not made provision for the state of separation tends to find themselves in a poorer financial position in old age. In this way they can control all the threads of their life (economics, sexuality, independence), albeit not without difficulty, given the lack of models by which to view themselves.

In the face of the transitoriness of emotional relationships and the fragility of the ties of love, the new generations of elderly women have begun to practise forms of relationship and support that we might call 'families of choice': usually networks of women, spiced up with a few men, that make up a powerful support organisation and offer an antidote to solitude and isolation. Sources of cultural knowledge, of social support, of exchange of knowledge, of connections and emotional security, these new forms of family life enable elderly women to enjoy life alone in the security of knowing that nothing bad can happen to them, thanks to the efficient functioning of the structural networks of such 'families of choice'.

6.11 Habitat

One of the important conquests in the lives of elderly women is the possibility of deciding where and how to live, as much in terms of space as in forms of living and relationships. Present-day elderly women often find themselves living in old people's homes or in the homes of their children; perhaps even subjected to a peripatetic life, moving from the house of one child to the next, deprived of all intimacy, memories and mementos. The new generation of elderly women have considered how they are to be lodged in old age, about the design and features of the space in which they want to live, looking at it from their own perspective, and including in the balance the necessities that they may have in the future.

One's own house is the space that we have in which to live, to relate to the persons with whom we live, to receive our friends. It is also one's own personal and intimate space, in which we can enjoy freedom, but it is also the physical space in the city that enables us to participate in the community, maintain relationships and connections beyond the domestic circle, as active participants in the neighbourhood. The new generation of elderly women thus realise that they need a sufficiently intimate and private space that also provides for contact with the community and allows for relationships, avoiding dependence on the goodwill of other people.

In old age, we have to live in proximity with women and men of all ages; young people must not be deprived of the experience of relationships with elderly people, but nor can we grow old without participating in the interests and projects of younger generations. We are part of a community of care, with obvious mutual benefits (Tronto, 2000). If old people could maintain good connections with younger generations through participation in community life, they would retain an idea of themselves that was not fragmented by age and would contribute to a stimulating intergenerational continuity, in which reciprocity and interdependence would create a mutually enriching style of exchange. There would be fewer complaints, fewer aggravations, fewer misunderstandings. We would function as tribal chiefs, standing up for the interests of the future and preserve the valuable continuity between generations (Woodward, 1999).

6.12 A community of care

Caring is a crucial activity in human development; it configures us as emotional, empathetic beings, sensitive to the needs of our congeners. Caring activities comprise everything that we do to preserve life and wellbeing; our bodies, our souls and the environment, i.e. everything that enables us to sustain life on earth and makes us complete human beings. Caring is not a simple task. It produces internal satisfaction and peace of mind, but it costs

us effort, and requires us to renounce alternatives. It generates internal contradictions and with them, feelings of guilt and frustration; it can also make us angry.

The ethics of care, as discussed by Carol Gilligan, assumes a moral virtue that goes beyond the simple assumption of responsibility like an obligation or a routine (Gilligan, 1982). It involves a personal commitment, internal and freely assumed, regarding the wellbeing of other persons. And precisely there lies one of its fundamental problems, whose crux is rooted in the differential traditional socialisation that has exempted men from this moral responsibility, to such an extent that, as Tronto (2000) claims, they have enjoyed the 'privilege of irresponsibility' in the care both of themselves and of others.

The unrewarded efforts of women on behalf of their children, partners and/or older members of the family is a public and social good that permits the economic development of society, thanks to the savings made by the state and the practical and emotional benefits that fall to individuals. Women find it difficult to set limits on the care they provide, just like the historical problems that they have experienced in offering their time gratis; in spite of this it is still the subject of contradictory feelings.

We live in a society in which the fall in the number of children per family reduces the proportion of the members of the group available to look after old people. Furthermore, caring for an old, dependent person does not offer the same pleasure as the care of a baby, whose day-by-day progress is obvious and stimulating. Care of the elderly is not a highly regarded activity, because the persons who receive such care are little valued by society (Calasanti, 2006). On the other hand, the realisation of dependence and the loss of capacities of a loved one force us to confront our own existence, precisely at the moment of our life cycle at which we are performing our own personal evaluation. This leads to clear physical and emotional wear and tear and generates many personal, partnership and intergenerational conflicts.

The new generation of elderly women may regard care-giving as an ethical and emotional opportunity that many of them assume, beyond the stress involved and the call of duty, which mixes feelings such as the need to protect the dignity of the loved one, company, and the desire to help the person involved to maintain a sense of self that protects their integrity. On the other hand, the experience of caring for a loved one offers an opportunity for emotional exchanges, for pardon, compassion, and is accompanied by an interesting and necessary reflection on dependence relationships. These also include those who perceive the necessity to liberate themselves from the oppression of care as a social demand that falls upon women, maintaining the right not to care for others and not to receive care themselves in the future, thus liberating the family from this responsibility and delegating it to the social services.

6.13 A social movement toward visibility

Finally, after so many years of playing an externally dictated role, the new generation of elderly women feel that they are entering a period of authenticity. In the second half of their lives, they may become what they have been building up in the course of time and they possess a full repertoire of knowhow that they can validate via participation social, neighbourly, political, cultural and leisure activities. The wisdom that accompanies the process of ageing enables them to distance from many of the preoccupations that in other

periods had dominated their lives, and now they can create a space for the development of other persons; they have more time available, they enjoy collective activities as though they were a personal project and in this context can offer their experience, knowhow, and tricks and strategies learned in the course of their previous everyday lives.

The participation of middle-aged and elderly women in cultural, political and social organisations, in NGOs and women's associations has become a transforming element of great importance, for the psychological wellbeing of both the women themselves and for community, which benefits from the free, disinterested and wise richness of resources that the voluntary efforts bring to it.

Social participation and an active lifestyle are important elements of personal satisfaction throughout our lives. They generate pleasure, raise our self-esteem, and help to blunt the stressful and traumatic events that occur in the course of our lives. Nevertheless, not everyone feels the same necessity for interaction and social and community participation and, now and again, silence and solitude are essential, beyond the well-meaning prescriptions that would bring the elderly out on the streets at all times. Many women wish to combine activity with enjoyment of serenity and silence. To live occasionally parked by the wayside may also be a source of happiness; a necessity.

6.14 Citizens and pioneers

The passage from a fundamentally private life to the participation of this generation of women in public life is one of the key changes in the configuration of the ageing process in the women of the 21st century. Their personal position as 'citizens' with the experiences resulting from this concept and their refusal to be excluded from the practices of citizenship for which they have sacrificed so much as a generation demands a serious discussion. Citizens, women who participate in public life which, in the case of our future old women, does not usually begin in old age. Frequently, in earlier time, they were involved in other fields of neighbourhood, social and/or political activity. Some of them came from careers of social involvement in the public sphere and it is impossible to say whether their participation derives from their new situation as retirees or because they now have more free time. They are activist women who have grown old. In fact, such continuity in social involvement and participation is linked to high levels of education, independent of age or sex (Milan, 2005). We can say that we are faced with a 'culture of militancy' or of participation in its various forms, in elderly women.

Elderly women are active in many sectors of social life, as well as playing important roles in family care and voluntary work and in democratic and political life (Magarian, 2003). In their eagerness to combine different worlds; family, work, community, they have maintained a delicate balance between these public spheres and their family life, in which negotiations in terms of time and desires have often not been easy (Charpentier et al., 2008). The family and the needs of their loved ones have shaped the social commitments of these women, who have demonstrated a sustained willingness to reconcile their social, political and neighborhood connections with the needs of their families. This generation has left the house for the city; it has ventured to occupy new spaces, assumed new social roles and created new models of women in the public world, of committed citizens, beyond the frontiers of age. In the course of their lives, they have gained civil rights (the vote), personal

and social rights (education, paid work, money of their own), and are convinced that 'the personal is political' (abortion, divorce, birth control, control of their bodies and of their sexuality).

They have been pioneers in many fields: in politics, in the universities, in trade unionism. They have fought for coeducational schools; they were the precursors of all the legislative changes that permit the access of women to the control of their sexuality, have gained contraception and the depenalisation of abortion. They were the first university women, the first lawyers, doctors, architects, scientists, philosophers, educators, the first female politicians to achieve power. Their valour has helped to ensure that women of subsequent generations enjoy better and easier access to civil rights, to their own bodies, to culture and the labour market, thanks to their participation in the tasks of political representation, the defence of their rights and in social activities and voluntary work. Although many of them do not define themselves as feminists, their lives and the personal and social victories for which they have struggled have clearly contributed to the improvements in women's lives.

All of the above they have done in the conviction that there has been a path not all of whose turnings they knew, and which lacked images that would show them alternative futures. There has been a debate regarding the necessity to build models of elderly women on which to base themselves at a distance of 15, 20 or 30 years, versus the wide range of possibilities that precisely the lack of such models open up for them, with the liberty that this situation offers to devise new forms; diverse, plural, contradictory, which would destroy the homogeneity of the images of the older person that has been available to social and family settings, and in which most of them do not recognise.

The new generation of elderly women requires personal models to live up to. Just now, they are the protagonists in a historical and demographic situation that lacks precedents. Never before so many women have lived for so long, in possession of so much freedom, knowledge, culture, financial independence and good health. The result is that life presents itself as an adventure in which it is possible to discover new territories that guide one's own path and that of coming generations, who will be able to feel that to grow old is not so bad after all. The new generation of elderly women now enjoys a consciousness that enables them to design their own future.

6.15 Useful or exploited?

The work done by women through all the ages, for low or zero remuneration and in many cases, as an obligation resulting from personal or family circumstances, must not be confused with civic commitment or citizen participation performed on a voluntary basis. The participation of elderly women in the life of the community can be regarded as a voluntary effort, although in many cases it has not been chosen by the women themselves. Often, civic commitments are "targeted at the privileged few who have the time, good health, resources and prior experience that allow them to engage in significant volunteer activities" (Minkler & Holstein, 2008: 199).

Too often do we regard elderly people in terms of their potential for voluntary work, taking care of a series of social necessities that no-one would otherwise cover. Elderly women have been trained in renouncing their own free time and their own desires, which makes it

difficult for them to say 'no' and to set limits. They wish to be involved in the community and in society, but they occasionally feel that they are being exploited. Through their participation, they want to ensure continuity of the causes that they had earlier adopted (feminism, citizenship, society, family, etc.), and are proud of having paved the way for new generations. They are generative (Erikson, 1950), and wish to pass on their knowledge and their efforts to younger generations. They like to be regarded as active persons, forever learning, open to new trends and trying to change the world for the better (Charpentier et al., 2008).

However, the growing tendency to discuss elderly people in utilitarian terms also implies a form of ageism that is beginning to be questioned by the elderly themselves, as some of the traps that lie within the culture of participation are uncovered. Many societies have regarded old people as a vast and largely underutilized resource for meeting the needs of the community. On the other hand, certain feminist thinkers also demand the right of women to be 'non-productive' in their old age, to use their time for pure enjoyment or leisure activities (Minkler & Holstein, 2008).

7. Old women of today and tomorrow

Many of the vital, professional and relational transformations that women have achieved in the course of the 20th century were noted by the visionary writers of the late 19th and early 20th century; Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, etc., who had the historical acuity to write stories and novels in which they advocated a new epoch of relationships and traced the paths of these great changes, proposing models of women who would be professionally, politically and emotionally independent. These are authors whose works have been a lighthouse that has illuminated the life of women, orienting the new life cycle of the women of the future.

If gerontological feminist research wishes to encourage interpretations of ageing that display the variety and complexity of lives and realities, if it wishes to suggest and invent new ways of ageing, overcoming the traditional ideas that restrict, limit and circumscribe the lives of old women, that is, if it wishes to alter the reality facing elderly women, it will need to be capable of generating an idea that, used as a motor, will result in an adequate explanatory framework. An idea that will enable old age to imagine and create and, what is more important, an idea that will help to destroy other beliefs that are currently being involuntarily sustained. For this, it will be necessary to recognise and name the changing contexts in which the women of today live their lives, which will in no way resemble those of their mothers and probably not those of their daughters either. The fact is that everything is simpler when it enjoys the support of a close community of empathetic beings that will allow the resolution of the dissonance that can be perceived between the manner in which old women perceive themselves and their image in society

The social changes that have transformed the lives of women and men in the course of the 20th century will require us to implement highly creative strategies aimed at living happily and peacefully during the last years of a long life. Although the tide of social change will carry the new generation of elderly women to different beaches than those which hosted their predecessors, they have not been brought there by circumstances alone. For the first time in history, these mature women have chosen their own route and navigated by their

own charts. Obviously this will not eliminate shipwrecks, but it will make the voyage more interesting and more significant.

8. Conclusion

Although it is clear that the coming generations of old women are not going to resemble their grandmothers in almost anyway, they are not there yet. Growing old is a good time for evaluating the past, of successes achieved and of tasks still to be tackled. The difference between successes and the hopes that were their starting point may be a source of dissatisfaction and uneasiness from which the new elderly may have liberated themselves, insofar as they have managed to reject the model by which their grandmothers had been socialised. It is not a simple task to identify one's own desires, validate them and put them into practice, without feeling a certain dissonance.

Change is a characteristic of individuals of all ages, including the oldest of us. The characteristics of the elderly are also in constant flux due to changes in sociocultural, economic and health factors, new ideas, beliefs and social trends. Nothing is static, which means that gerontological research possesses an unending source of renovation and a huge field ahead of itself. New ideas that need to be studied in depth are constantly emerging, and to do so we need to listen to what older people are really saying... nor only to the words but to cries, whispers and silences (Brody, 1985). Although old people are more visible than ever, much research remains to be done in this respect. Evolutionary psychology and critical gerontology face an important task of explaining and understanding these new ages, beyond the catastrophic vision that dominates the theory in current use.

Topics still to be dealt with that are of decisive importance in the configuration of lives and professional careers include the essential redefinition of the central role played by the family in women's lives, in that life options appear to be less marked by the concept of romantic love. A new evaluation of the roles of men and women in the constitution and harmonious functioning of the family unit could ease the integration of women into the labour market, as well as a fairer share of the tasks of sustaining life, placing care-giving at the centre of the organisation of society and sharing responsibility for this task between both sexes (Carrasco, 2003; Luque & Freixas, 2008). All this can be made concrete in the course of time in a healthier and more comfortable old age for women.

Socialised as they are as 'beings in the service of others' it is difficult for them to identify the path of individuality, achievement of individual identity, and balancing the value of relationships with the necessity for silence and autonomy. There are still a number of extremely important topics that wear out the lives of women of all ages, and these topics have still to be dealt with through research and reflection: the definition of beauty on the part of women themselves; beauty at all ages; the redefinition of personal identity, beyond that given by domestic tasks; balancing the weight of love in the course of life; not being perennially available, trying to respect our way of thinking and our pathways; relationships beyond gender-related violence.

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Senescence

Edited by Dr. Tetsuji Nagata

ISBN 978-953-51-0144-4

Hard cover, 850 pages

Publisher InTech

Published online 29, February, 2012

Published in print edition February, 2012

The book "Senescence" is aimed to describe all the phenomena related to aging and senescence of all forms of life on Earth, i.e. plants, animals and the human beings. The book contains 36 carefully reviewed chapters written by different authors, aiming to describe the aging and senescent changes of living creatures, i.e. plants and animals.

How to reference

In order to correctly reference this scholarly work, feel free to copy and paste the following:

Anna Freixas, Bárbara Luque and Amalia Reina (2012). Reviewing the Life Cycle: Women's Lives in the Light of Social Changes, *Senescence*, Dr. Tetsuji Nagata (Ed.), ISBN: 978-953-51-0144-4, InTech, Available from: <http://www.intechopen.com/books/senescence/reviewing-the-life-cycle-women-s-lives-in-the-light-of-social-changes>

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