



# New Attitudes Women and Aging

By Marielena Zuniga

Cynthia Rich, 72, of San Diego, California, was working out at the gym one day when she ran into a 30-something man she once knew. Rich, a retired college teacher and activist for half a century, had done some political work with him in the past. They chatted and caught up on their lives. Then, as they were parting, the man said, “I’m so glad to see you’re still up and around.”

His comment shocked her. He meant well, she says. But his patronizing comment was typical of society’s views on old women. “He wasn’t seeing me as this political woman, but as a woman with white hair who was about to keel over. People really say bizarre things to you when you’re 70 or older.”

Ageist comments were nothing new for Rich. She had started hearing them in her 60s. So, she, with two friends, Mannie Garza and Janice Keaffaber, decided to do something about it. They founded the Old Women’s Project (OWP) <[www.oldwomensproject.org](http://www.oldwomensproject.org)>, a San Diego-based, non-membership group working to change attitudes about old women and raise consciousness about women and ageism.

“We wanted to use various kinds of actions to make visible the fact that old women are directly and personally impacted by all issues of social justice ... actions that would combat the ageist attitudes that ignore, trivialize and demean us,” Rich says. “There is incredible contempt out there for old women, when we’re visible at all.”

Visibility is a challenge women face most of their lives. But when they start aging—sometimes as early as their 50s—they get a double whammy of negligence and stereotypes. Women are portrayed as either selfless grandmotherly women, who bake, or as crabby, mean old witches, Rich says.

These opposing stereotypes are common among groups that are marginalized, she adds. “It’s like on one hand, Mexican-Americans are really lazy. Or, they’re willing to do any kind of work that Anglos would never do.”

But why is aging a woman’s issue at all? After all, everyone ages. For many reasons, say the experts. Today, women live longer than men; still earn less income than men; are primary caregivers and as a result, are out of the workforce, losing pensions and retirement savings; and often are widowed. All play key roles in how women experience the aging process.

And most experts agree that there is no “one old woman”—one aging size does not fit all. A woman’s lifelong circumstances often dictate how she experiences growing older, as does her attitude. There are positives and negatives to aging and today’s woman, if anything, is seeking new definitions and images of how she ages.

### The Ups and Downs of Aging

At the turn of the 20th century, most women lived to be only 48. Today, many women will live to be 85, if not older, and live an average of five years longer than men. Some of that longevity is a good news-bad news scenario.

On the down side, if a woman is widowed and doesn’t plan ahead, she may end up living in poverty. Today, 75 percent of the elderly poor in the United States alone are women. And the poverty rate of women is highest among those over age 65.

In part, women suffer poverty because of two major factors: pay inequity and caregiving responsibilities, says Laurie Young, Ph.D., executive director of the Older Women’s League (OWL) <[www.owl-national.org](http://www.owl-national.org)> in Washington, D.C. Even though it’s been 40 years since the Equal Pay Act was passed, women still earn only 73 cents to the dollar that a man earns, she explains. That number drops to 52 cents to the dollar for women of color.

Second, women are still the majority of informal caregivers in society, caring for sick parents and spouses, among others. On average, a woman loses 11 to 14 years out of the workplace, Young says. Because of those caregiving duties, women take jobs that give the most flexibility, often part-time or low-wage jobs without pensions.

“The real truth is that women are providing a huge uncompensated labor force in this country and suffering the consequences, not just financially, but in terms of their own health,” Young explains. “Put all those pieces together—the years women are out of the workforce completely, not investing, not earning Social Security credits—and that’s a recipe for women not faring well at all.”

On the plus side, as women live longer today, those who have the means to do so, are taking better care of themselves. They have access to health care that their mothers or grandmothers didn’t. They are eating more healthfully and exercising. And they also “look” younger by design with hair, clothes and makeup.

In a 2002 poll conducted by the Program on Women and Aging at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, one woman put it this way: “As a woman in today’s age, I have access to a lot more things to keep myself healthy. I don’t have to worry about

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### Here’s to You Mrs. Robinson...

“Harold and Maude.” “The Graduate.” “How Stella Got Her Groove Back.” For years, film and literature have explored the theme of older women pursuing younger love interests. More recently, the women of pop culture have been seen stepping out with younger men in real life. Just recently, actress Demi Moore, 42, and Ashton Kutcher, 27, tied the knot. They join the growing list of older women-younger men couples, which includes Sheryl Crow, 43, and Lance Armstrong, 34 and Susan Sarandon, 59, and Tim Robbins, 46, to name a few.

These couplings are not confined to the celebrity world. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that these relationships are on the rise. This trend can be attributed to older women having more financial freedom than they have had in the past. They’re looking and feeling better than ever before, and want vibrant romantic partners that can compliment them.

But could it be that women involved with younger men know something that everyone else doesn’t? According to a study conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. National Center of Health Statistics, women who marry younger men usually live longer than those with husbands older than themselves. The research showed that among the women whose husbands were between 6 to 14 years younger, 30 percent lived longer than expected, while among those whose spouses were 6 to 14 years older, 67 percent died sooner than expected.

Whatever the reason more women are engaging in December-May relationships, one thing is for sure: women today have more options than ever before, and that includes pursuing relationships with younger men.

## Help for Aging Women

As women age, they face a unique set of challenges and pressures. Fortunately, there are many organizations that aim to assist women with the aging process.

### OWL (Older Women's League)

As the only national (U.S.) grassroots membership organization to focus solely on issues unique to women as they age, OWL strives to improve the status and quality of life of midlife and older women. OWL is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that accomplishes its work through research, education, and advocacy activities conducted through a chapter network <[www.owl-national.org](http://www.owl-national.org)>.

### Women's Association for the Better Aging Society (WABAS)

WABAS, based in Japan, focuses on strengthening women's status by raising issues related to the aging society. The organization researches problems affecting aging women, and works to develop solutions and offer suggestions to the general public and the Japanese government <[www7.ocn.ne.jp/%7Ewabas/](http://www7.ocn.ne.jp/%7Ewabas/)>.

### National Center on Women and Aging (NCWA)

The U.S.-based NCWA works to draw national attention to the special concerns of women as they age; to develop solutions and strategies for dealing with these concerns; and to reach out to women and organizations across the country, promoting the changes necessary to improve older women's lives <[www.heller.brandeis.edu/national/](http://www.heller.brandeis.edu/national/)>.

### Older Women's Network (OWN)

The Canada-based OWN works to achieve a caring society in which older women have the opportunity to live in security and with dignity; to participate in the choices affecting their lives; to give mutual support and share creative interests and activities; and to realize their potential. OWN is a voice for older women in the diverse Canadian society, which challenges discrimination on the basis of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnic origin, religion or disability. OWN is an advocacy organization working within a feminist perspective that empowers older women to overcome injustices and inequities in the home, the workplace and the larger society <[www.older-womensnetwork.org](http://www.older-womensnetwork.org)>.

### HelpAge International

Based in London, England, HelpAge International is a global network of members and partner organizations that work in more than 80 countries on practical and policy work to improve the lives of disadvantaged older people <[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)>.

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stereotypes and I can be my own person. And generally, I'm healthier than my grandmother and even my mother at my age, and I'm delighted."

### Speaking Out

When Nancy O'Reilly, Psy.D., of Springfield, Missouri, was about to turn 50, she wanted to learn more about women and the aging process. But when she began researching, she found little or nothing of worth, a telling fact in itself.

"At that point, everything out there was cute, or how to stay young and beautiful and there was a lot of humor talking about women and aging," she says. "I felt insulted; it was not helping me."

So O'Reilly started informal surveys. Eventually, she gathered comments from 1,000 women, ages 18 to 70-plus, specifically asking them about their perceptions of aging. Many women were relieved. No one had ever asked them before how it felt to grow older.

As a result of her work, the five-year WomenSpeak research project was born <[www.womenspeak.com](http://www.womenspeak.com)> as well as a book in progress titled: *You Don't Scare Me: WomenSpeak About Growing Older*.

The clinical psychologist discovered that half the sample surveyed feared getting older. Health problems were the concern most often cited by women. Invisibility was another, starting with women in the 50s age group. O'Reilly says, "Women were saying, 'I had the feeling that 10 years ago people noticed me. Now I know when I come into a room, I become invisible.'"

The other half of O'Reilly's survey, however, viewed aging as positive. As women grew older, they realized they had more experience, knowledge, character and self-esteem. They also knew what they wanted in relationships, including companionship, stability and understanding. "And more women wanted to be more involved in the spiritual community," O'Reilly says.

Younger women surveyed also sought advice from their older counterparts, O'Reilly discovered. They wanted mentors to help them, not only with professional programs and goals, but with life skills.

As to what younger women should be doing now to prepare for their older years, O'Reilly recommends they become more aware and knowledgeable about their health and their bodies. "They also can learn a lot from older women about relationships in general. And finances are key. Women should get a business background, no matter their field, and start investing early."

### Is Aging All That Bad?

Marital status, or lack thereof, also impacts women as they age. Married women do better in some respects, says Young of OWL, because they have the benefit of their spouses' savings and income. But when their spouses die, women's incomes drop dramatically.

“The most women at risk are those over 70 or 75 who are widowed, single, or divorced and faced today with incredibly inflated costs for health care and prescription drugs, because most women over 65 are managing more than one chronic illness,” Young says.

Results from Brandeis’ poll back that up. According to that survey by the Program on Women and Aging, married women are significantly more likely to report aging “better than expected” than previously married (widowed or divorced) and never-married women.

“The findings challenge the stereotype that aging is an unpleasant experience. Yet, we still have to be concerned about the plight of women who aren’t married, more of whom say aging is worse than expected,” says Phyllis Mutschler, the program’s director.

Women who reported aging as a positive experience stated that they had more freedom and time; took life in stride; were more confident; had less stress because their children were raised and out of the house; and had financial stability and more money than expected.

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## The Aging Enemy is Us

Do negative attitudes about old women start in childhood? Yes, according to a few studies. Experts say people begin to internalize those attitudes when they’re very young. As a result, women become their own enemies.

“Old women today have not always been old and we have internalized many of the stereotypes about ourselves,” says Cynthia Rich, one of the founders of the Old Women’s Project in San Diego, California. “When we were young, we were often contemptuous and patronizing of old women ... it’s a remarkable transition to find ourselves in, as we grow old, not only confronting the ageism of others, but becoming the person we ourselves used to hold in contempt.”

Ageism disempowers all women, Rich says. “As long as younger women gain false power by distancing themselves from older women, the 35-year-old loses power by not being 25.”

To be more aware of ageism against women, here are some suggestions from OWP:

- **Speak up.** If someone is making an ageist remark, notice it and talk to them about it.
- **Think it over before arbitrarily limiting ages for events.** One of the OWP founders received an e-mail inviting her to enter a women’s art exhibit. It was for women under age 54.
- **Say the word “old.”** Just say it. Old. It initially might feel rude, but that’s because it has such a loaded connotation. All of the alternative terms—elderly, older, senior—seem like silly ways to get around saying the real word—old.

— M.Z.

## Taking Action

Since most women work and earn less in their lifetimes, they often have small or nonexistent pensions. Many do not have high-paying jobs, savings and investments, or other resources they need to build economic security for their later years. By hosting financial planning seminars and participating in the Women's Opportunity Awards program, clubs can help women enhance their financial status, and improve their quality of life as they age.

Women make up the majority of the aging population, have a higher poverty rate, and live longer than men. Clubs can improve life for women at all stages of their lives by working to end gender disparity. Support the initiatives of agencies like the World Health Organization (WHO), which recognizes how social and economic roles and access to resources affects the status of women as they age. For more information visit <[www.who.int/en/](http://www.who.int/en/)>.

In the United States alone, six million people age 65 and older suffer from depression, but only 10 percent receive treatment. Older women run a greater risk of becoming seriously depressed, since women in general are twice as likely as men to experience depression. Due to a lack of awareness about depression among older women, quality care, services and treatment are limited. Clubs can help by educating local communities about the importance of recognizing and treating mental illness among elderly women. For more information visit the Geriatric Mental Health Organization at <[www.gmhfonline.org](http://www.gmhfonline.org)>.

Research shows that lifestyle habits are critical to healthy aging. Clubs can prepare younger women for their later years by showing them the benefits lifelong fitness can have on their quality of life. Hold seminars and workshops for women and girls that focus on topics such as healthy eating habits, the value of regular exercise, and the importance of routine physical exams. For more information and resources visit the Healthy Aging Center at <[www.infoaging.org](http://www.infoaging.org)>.

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One woman stated: "I expected to be dead a long time ago but I'm still living. I'm healthier than I expected to be at 81."

On the other hand, women who said aging was a negative experience pointed to health issues, inability to do what they used to do, the high cost of health care and drugs, financial insecurity, isolation, loneliness and depression. One woman shared: "I am divorced. I used to have two incomes, but now, I have to try to make it on a female's income, which is a lot smaller than a man's. Plus I have to do all the maintenance on the house by myself."

The bottom line of the study, Mutschler adds, is that married or not, women had satisfying lives as they aged if they had four things: good health, financial stability, independence, and if they were active or involved in various activities.

### Women and Aging Worldwide

If women in the U.S. and developed nations have difficulties with aging, women in other countries, especially in the Third World, fare even worse. By 2025, it is estimated there will be 1.2 billion people over age 60 in the world, the majority of them women.

While Britain, the U.S., Australia and Canada have had more than 100 years to deal with increased longevity issues, Brazil, for example, has only had 20-30 years to deal with the same rate of growth, and with fewer resources.

Some countries and policy makers set 60 as a benchmark, but age is a relative concept and varies from country to country and place to place. Regardless of what

constitutes "old," women, always the poorest of the poor, bear the brunt of aging.

In Third World countries, half of all women live on less than \$2 a day, according to HelpAge International <[www.helpage.org](http://www.helpage.org)>, based in London. Lower education levels and their need to combine work with child care means they work for lower wages. Land and property laws also favor men. So, as poor women age, their poverty deepens.

"Poorer women in Chile, Peru and Bolivia have problems accessing benefits for various reasons," says Faith Mall of HelpAge. "They include not having correct documentation stating their age. In addition, literacy levels are low amongst poorer women."

In countries like Japan, families and societies consider caring for the elderly to be a woman's job, and particularly the duty of the eldest son's wife, according to the Women's Association for the Better Aging Society based throughout Japan. Again, this impacts women who must leave the workforce and aren't able to save for their own retirement years.

Whether in the U.S. or other countries, old women often find themselves in the same circumstances they have experienced most of their lives. If they were poor, in ill health and overworked while young, those conditions likely stay the same or worsen as they age.

Many contend that to improve the quality of women's lives, especially in Third World countries, policies should

**Dressed in red and purple, members of the Red Hat Society get together to enjoy life and celebrate aging. The group, which started with a few women who decided to greet old age with humor, aims to add fun to the aging process.**

Photo credit: Kevin Farrington



start in youth and at middle age, providing women with education, jobs, the ability to buy land, and access to better nutrition and health care.

HelpAge points to women like Dona Victoria of La Paz, Bolivia, who had nothing in her later years of life. After raising 10 children, surviving her husband's death and going blind, she was forced to live on \$235 a year. Before she died at 92 in 2003, she had saved \$156 for her funeral.

As Rich of the OWP says, "There's a lot of talk of respect of elders in other cultures, and to a certain extent, that's true. But in many cultures the respect that the woman gets is borrowed from the respect the old man gets. It's not in her own right. If she becomes a widow, sometimes her status changes dramatically."

### Boomers Growing Older Their Way

Are Baby Boomers, especially women, aging any differently than past generations? In some ways, yes, the experts say. They're educated, demanding, want to stay healthy, and in America, have the means to do so.

In 2011, the first "boomers" will turn 65 and by 2030 there will be about 70 million people in the U.S. 65 and older, more than twice the number in 2000. The generation that once protested trusting anyone over 30, is once again doing aging "their way"—going back to school in their 50s, training for athletic events in their 60s and, yes, even having sex into their 80s. To them, 60 and over looks and sounds like Mick Jagger and Cher.

If anything, today's boomers want to stay active, involved and upbeat about growing older. And that's a good thing, according to a Yale University study in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. People who have a positive perception of aging tend to live seven-and-a-half years longer than those who don't.

"We've always had good health care and a mind of our own," says O'Reilly. "I want to be able to stay healthy and I've

got all the things out there to help me do that. Boomers are also thinking of ways to stay young and creative. We can reinvent ourselves. We can be in a job for 20 years and go out and do something else."

That's exactly what O'Reilly did. In a high-powered position with a large health-care system, she decided to get out and start her own consulting business. Young of OWL also shifted to a new job. After caring for her sick mother, she opted to help older women find a voice and accepted the position as the organization's executive director.

If anything, women today are making growing older what they want it to be. And more than ever before, they have myriad options—changing careers and jobs, joining gyms, going back to school and buying sports cars.

Even with those positives, however, what's needed now, say experts, is a model of womanhood that moves beyond simple categories of young and old. As feminist/author Betty Friedan writes in her book, *The Fountain of Age*: "It's time to look at age on its own terms, and put names on its values and strengths, breaking through the definition of age solely as deterioration or decline from youth. The problem is how to break through the cocoon of our illusory youth and risk a new stage in life, where there are no prescribed roles, no models nor rigid rules or visible rewards—how to step out into a true existential unknown for these years of life now open to us and to find our own terms for living them." 🌐

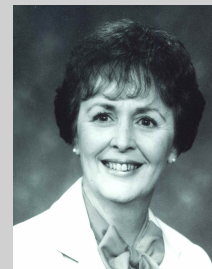
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In the next issue: **Cultural discrimination against girls. Please email Associate Editor Jessica Levinson <jessica@soroptimist.org> with relevant information.**

## IN MEMORIAM



After a long illness, SIA's 1986–1988 president, **Betty Jean "B.J." Cook**, died this past August at the age of 73. A member of SI/Bel Air, Maryland, USA, B.J. first joined Soroptimist in 1961. During her tenure, B.J. served Soroptimist in many ways including various committee chairs at the federation level, region governor and region board member. In addition to her Soroptimist activities, B.J. served as co-chair of the Harford County Women's History Week, caucus member of the Harford County Commission for Women, Harford County Coalition for Women member and 4-H leader. B.J. was a retired employee of Metpath Laboratories. She will be remembered as a delightful, generous and witty woman who endured many hard times in her life with grace, dignity and compassion.

Memorial donations can be made in B.J.'s name to the organizations listed below:

Stella Maris Hospice  
2300 Dulaney Valley Road  
Timonium, MD 21093

SI/Bel Air  
P.O. Box 313  
Churchville, MD 21028

Harford Hospice  
8003 Corporate Drive  
Suite G  
Baltimore, MD 21236