

When Is Old Age A Problem?

By Rose Ghurayyib

I once met a middle-aged bachelor at a summer resort whose customers were from various classes and creeds. When asked why he was still un-married, he replied with a frown: "marriage is a very difficult problem!". He kept repeating "marriage is a very difficult problem!" until he finally decided not to marry at all. This man is one of a minority group of men and women who refrain from marriage because they are afraid of the responsibilities and problems.

Recalling the reasons that induced him to get married, an old neighbor of mine told me that he decided to take a wife in order to conform with tradition and comply with public opinion. In other words, he was moved by the "herd instinct", which dominates most people and makes them afraid of deviating from the norms.

I clearly remember the verdict of Mr. Stoltzfus, President of BUC (1940-1958), himself a happily married man: "Every way of life has its advantages and disadvantages, its pros and cons. Both married and never-married people have problems which may be similar or different in nature. Handling these problems successfully directly related to their happiness and welfare."

The examples mentioned above give us an idea about the difference in attitudes that people have about marriage. This difference should warn us against the use of generalizations and sweeping statements. Hence, drawing a parallel between married life and singlehood, Miss Randa Abul-Husn, Editor of *Al-Raida*, considers old age a major problem for never-married women. She says that "these women end up alone in their lives, when they find themselves with limited material reward from retirement and with no private nucleus to rely upon." (1)

This statement seems to be based on traditional thinking instead of actual experience or positive inquiry. It is a well-known fact, nowadays, that the extended family, the backbone of the tribal system, is gradually disappearing in developed and underdeveloped countries like Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. Today's couples refuse to live with their in-laws under the same roof, and insist on buying or renting a house of their own before marriage. There is a Lebanese proverb which says: "People of the same generation should share life together." This proverb is equivalent to the English saying: "Birds of a feather

flock together." You cannot expect the young to enjoy the company of the old and vice versa. The gap between the two is much too wide to bridge. Even if the children accept to live with their parents, they are so busy with full-time jobs or activities for planning and preparing their future, which keep them away from home most of the time and, in any case, unable to take care of aging or disabled parents.

Old people, whether men or women, married or never-married, sharing life with a family or living in a single apartment, are bound to lead an isolated life and to secure their own means of recreation. From experience, I know that people who have led a busy life and acquired rich experiences, do not feel lonely in old age. On the contrary, they may enjoy a peaceful, restful life in a well-accommodated rest-house here or elsewhere. Resorts for the aged are being set up in all countries, including Lebanon, because they have become a necessity. Some of them fulfill the conditions required to insure the comfort and well-being of old people. They are considered first class homes and they charge high prices. Other resorts, particularly the free ones, are poorly accommodated and require government supervision or assistance from benevolent organizations. In most cases, these resorts provide the aged with the care, which their families are unable to provide. In our Arab tradition, people generally follow the habit of saving face by pretending that "all is well within their homes." Since nobody has thoroughly investigated the real status of senior citizens in this region, proper care remains a matter of doubt, regardless of whether they stay with their families or take refuge in a retirement home.

Women who voluntarily accept celibacy are usually characterized by an independent spirit. They engage in a lifelong profession or in a vocation that provides them with financial independence and security in old age. They can afford a comfortable rest-house or a nursing-home in case of disability, unless some unexpected catastrophe, like war, shatters their lives and destroys their plans. Women who are retired professionals or widows and have a permanent income, enjoy more economic security than housewives. Housewives are unable to have savings because their housework has no monetary value. As a result, they have to depend, on a small share of inherited property or on the dubious help of their children who are usually burdened with the sustenance of their own families.

Therefore, if they feel lonely or bored in their retreat, single women may occupy themselves with knitting, the favorite pastime of Lebanese women. They may play cards, listen to music or to the radio, watch television or drama. If their sight is still good, they may read books, write memoirs and so on. For people seeking rest, well-accommodated old people's homes seem like ideal places. Like social life, solitude has its lovers.

The old Latin adage attributed to Horace : "O blessed solitude, O sole blessedness !" still applies to our hectic days, which require a quiet abode for tired souls, away from the noise and hubbub of modern life.(2) •



(1) Editorial, Never-married Women, *Al-Raida*, Vol IX, # 53, Spring 1991.

(2) "About Women and Old Age" *Al-Raida*, # 20- 22, 1982.