

Issue Brief

October 2005

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A Proactive Approach to Women's Concerns: Women's Longevity Groups and Funds

By Myrna I. Lewis, Ph.D.

Introduction

With the exception of ten countries in the world, according to the World Health Organization's 2005 report, women outlive men. In the United States, women outlive men by 5.3 years. Although long life is an advantage, there are major consequences that must be understood and dealt with, especially in these transitional times in the lives of women. Women are still underpaid for comparable positions, uncompensated for their caregiving and kin-keeping activities, including, notably, the rearing of children. Moreover, as is characteristic of both men and women, there is the tendency to defer, if not deny, the issues that confront one as one grows older.

I decided to develop a proactive approach to the issues that confront women growing older and formulate ideas to finance and support old age—through longevity funds and women's longevity groups. Women need to look ahead and make plans for the rest of their lives.

This effort derives from my long-standing professional interest in the health, social, and economic status of middle-aged and older women and from my proactive experience working with women as a psychotherapist and a gerontologist. It is also prompted by my concern over the welfare of my four daughters. While all four are doing fine, life is full of the unexpected, unanticipated, and unpredictable that necessitates our building protections into our lives on both a public basis through such policies as Social Security and on a private basis through our own efforts.

Longevity Funds

First, I encourage women's longevity funds. Every woman should do her best to put aside money in diversified funds to secure her future, segregated in her own name. Each woman should develop a regular habit for savings. Targeted life-cycle funds are available that balance equities earlier in life with bonds later. Further, there are funds that cover many asset classes, including real estate, to ensure diversification.

Taking Control

I asked myself what goes on in the minds of women when they think about growing older. My experience told me that many deny their longevity or approach it with dread, even distaste. In contrast I offer a practical approach aimed at taking control and feeling in control of a period of life that has the potential to be satisfying, interesting, and meaningful. In my women's longevity groups, we explore the following:

- common fears and worries of women as they grow older
- concern with living alone and outliving children, especially males who do not live as long
- avoidance of “invisibility” and “ageism”
- plans for financial security so as not to “outlast” resources
- decisions about continuing to work or retiring
- review ordinary as well as unique housing options as life circumstances change
- actions to protect health and avoid problems that typically plague older people
- help dealing with life-threatening and chronic illnesses
- strategies for helping reluctant partners and other people in one's life to stay healthy
- issues of providing elder care for one's partner, family members, friends, and others who depend on the individual
- questions of how to construct one's own future elder care if or when one needs help
- conflicts and complexities of family life including partners, children, older parents, in-laws, siblings, and others

- discussions of wills, powers of attorneys, living wills, health care proxies, letters of instruction, and similar legal issues
- purpose and meaning through work, volunteerism, philanthropy, and the like
- love and sex in marriage, other partnerships, widowhood, divorce, or never-married status
- fun, life-long learning, career changes, and new experiences
- meeting and exchanging ideas with like-minded and interesting women in a group setting and learning how to form similar groups in one's own professional or personal communities

Longevity Groups

Women's longevity groups could be undertaken by professional psychotherapists in private practice or public clinics. But other informal groups could be conducted on a voluntary basis for free by competent women who would benefit from some advanced training.

A national movement of women's longevity groups is reminiscent of the earlier stages of the modern women's movement with consciousness-raising groups that got together to understand better the particular situation of women.

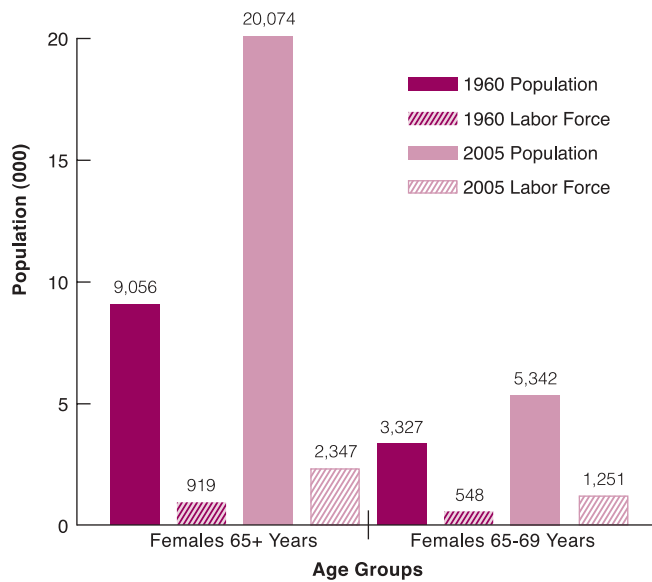
Parenthetically, men, too, might be advantaged by the creation of longevity groups. It is well known that men often are not attentive to their own health and deny the realities of growing older.

In the past two years I have introduced this concept in various settings among women, and the idea has been well received.

A Woman's Worth

Women's lives are characterized by multiple tasks, and in modern times they often work both outside as well as within the home. Still their economic

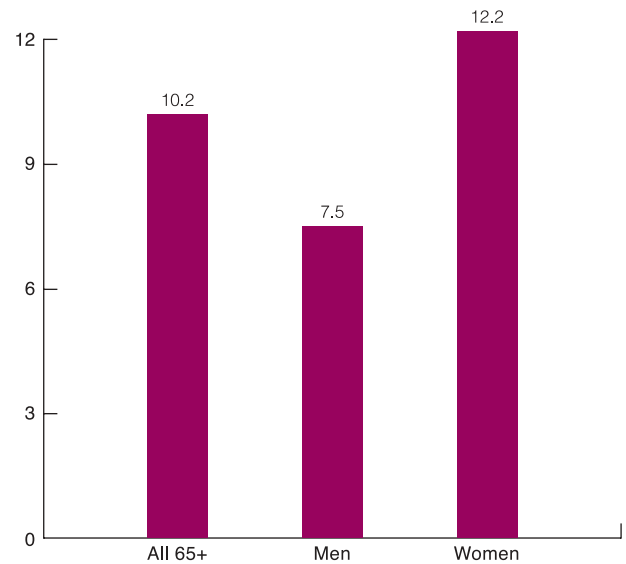
U.S. Female Population and Labor Force Aged 65+, 1960 and 2005



Source: ESOP Database (Economic Status of Older Persons), ILC-USA, 2005.

Poverty Status of Persons 65 Years and Older by Sex, 2000

Percent Below the Poverty Level



Source: Statistical Abstract of US 2001, Table 40.

contributions are not counted in the nation's gross domestic product. Further, older women are at times left alone following widowhood by children and other family members. They find themselves in grievous circumstances. Some 80 percent of the nursing home population is composed of women. Older women experience the greatest poverty. They are more apt to be alone and to be subject to institutional, occupational, social, financial, physical, and even sexual abuse.

The able-bodied, supercompetent woman caregiver often winds up caring for other older women and may be uncared for when she needs help.

Conclusion

A proactive approach to the special challenges in the lives of surviving older women that offers financial and emotional security is in order. Longevity funds and women's longevity groups help to achieve these aims.

Myrna Lewis, Ph.D., is a social worker, psychotherapist, gerontologist, teacher, and writer who has devoted much of her professional life to the issues affecting middle-aged and older women. She serves on the voluntary faculty of the Department of Community and Preventive Medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine. She received her Ph.D. from the Columbia University School of Social Work and is a fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine.

Dr. Lewis has written extensively on women's aging, caregiving, and international aging. She has been a member of the United Nations NGO Committee on Aging.

Dr. Lewis pioneered in understanding the role of social, economic and cultural factors in the evolution of mental illness in old age. She is the coauthor of Aging and Mental Health (1973), the first comprehensive American textbook on the subject, and Love and Sex After 60 (1976). Now in its fourth edition, Time magazine called it a "classic" in 2004. Dr. Lewis received the Hall of Fame Award for her lifetime achievements by the American Society on Aging in 2005.

The International Longevity Center–USA (ILC–USA) is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan research, education, and policy organization whose mission is to help individuals and societies address longevity and population aging in positive and productive ways, and to highlight older people’s productivity and contributions to their families and society as a whole.

The organization is part of a multinational research and education consortium, which includes centers in the United States, Japan, Great Britain, France, the Dominican Republic, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Argentina. These centers work both autonomously and collaboratively to study how greater life expectancy and increased proportions of older people impact nations around the world.

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