

THE ELDERLY WOMAN AND HER HOME

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Dans quelles conditions d'habitat, en milieu urbain et rural, se trouvent les femmes âgées et invalides des prairies de l'ouest canadien? Le but de cette recherche était de déterminer les besoins de ces femmes en matière de logement, pour ceux qui établissent les politiques et créent les programmes. Bien que la situation actuelle soit positive, la condition physique de la femme âgée et de son logement continue à se détériorer. Les planificateurs devraient prévoir l'éducation, le travail et l'aide financière aux programmes de logement, et tout particulièrement des programmes éducatifs sur le processus de vieillissement et d'invalidité.

The purpose of our research was to document the housing and environmental needs of the elderly and disabled in urban and rural areas of Saskatchewan. We included males, females, and couples in the study, but for this report, we are emphasizing the female population — the single, divorced, or widowed woman who lives independently.

Method

Social and health agencies working with elderly or disabled persons and senior-citizen organizations in church or community, as well as Saskatchewan Home Care, provided lists from which we drew a random sample. We made contact by tele-

phone in the urban area (Saskatoon) and by letter in the rural area (a hundred-mile radius around Saskatoon).

Our questionnaire, adapted from S. Faulkner's book (1979), had sections on general housing, lifestyles, interiors, and demographics. Two student research assistants administered it in personal interviews, after pilot testing with agency personnel and female faculty members.

Limitations

One of the limitations to the study was a postal strike, which made it difficult for us to contact the rural population. We obtained only 55 interviews, compared with the planned 100 in the urban area, making a total of 155 interviews. The rural subjects were more sceptical about participating in the research. Vacation plans sometimes made it necessary for us to postpone appointments. Subjects' loss of hearing and inability to speak English were barriers in some cases.

Demographic

The 155 interviews included 98 with women living alone, 37 couples, and 20 males. In this report, statistics will deal with the 98 women living alone, plus the woman of a couple, which makes a total female population of 135.

Of the 100 urban residents, 88 per cent were female, with 67 per cent living alone. There were fewer women in rural areas, 85.5 per cent, with 56.4 per cent living alone. From the total interviews, 56 per cent were with urban females, 30 per cent with rural females, and 14 per cent with males.

There were 116 elderly subjects over sixty-five years of age. Of these, 88 per cent were female, with 63.8 per cent living alone. The major group of women were between sixty-six and seventy-five years (44.4 per cent) and seventy-six to eighty-five years (29.6 per cent).

A group of seventy-five persons were both elderly and disabled. Of these 89.3 per cent were female, with 65.3 per cent living alone.

In the total female group, 40.7 per cent had an income of \$300 to \$500 per month. Only 8.1 per cent had incomes above \$1,000 per month, while 11.1 per cent received less than \$300 per month.

The educational level was not high. In the total female group, 57 per cent had public-school education. Another 28.8 per cent had achieved high-school graduation. Approximately 25 per cent had higher education, most frequently of a technical nature.

The Home

From the means (averages) for the variables, we can describe the Saskatchewan home for elderly women in the eighties. The scale was 1 (high) to 6 (low).

The number of occupants in the dwelling was 1.7. However, the mean for the value "sharing the dwelling" was 4.0, interpreted as "seldom." The mean of the value "self-sufficient" was 2.0 or "very important." The women seldom felt lonely (mean of 3.8).

The home had been built between ten and thirty years ago. However, the length of time spent in the home was between one and nineteen years. An average number of subjects (2.5) preferred not to move. It was unimportant to the subjects to make structural changes in the home (4.5).

Most of the women living alone rented their accommodation. However, most of the couples and rural

residents owned their own homes.

The home was usually of one or two levels with the main floor a rectangular shape. The homes were small, between 85m² and 90m².

Efficient kitchen planning is needed for independent living. Most of the women had a corridor-style kitchen, with a small work-triangle area below 6600mm (22 feet). The women were satisfied with the resilient sheet-goods covering most often used. Storage provided for food, pots, and dishes was acceptable. Meals were most often eaten in the kitchen, in an informal manner but not on the run.

The temperature of the home was maintained between 70 and 71 F (21.5 C) in daytime and slightly lower (69 F, 21 C) at night. Subjects were very well satisfied with the temperature but slightly less satisfied, at a rating of "good," for daylight (2.68) and artificial light (2.79).

Most often-used floor coverings in the other areas of the home were resilient sheet-goods in the bathroom, carpets in the living room and the subjects' own bedroom, and a hard surface in other bedrooms.

Subjects most often did laundry in a home washer (2.9), occasionally in a wash basin (3.3). They seldom used commercial-laundry services (4.0), and the elderly women never took laundry to a launderette.

Storage in the home was acceptable, with food-storage facilities the best and clothing and keepsakes the least.

Subjects were only fairly satisfied with gardening facilities and outside storage. They found bedroom dressing space good. They rated sleep surroundings between "good" and "very good."

In summary, although the prairie home for elderly women is small, those women living independently were generally satisfied with the house and interior. The houses, like the occupants, were aging.

Significant Differences for Sex

There were few significant differences for sex. The only one for urban or rural area was with regard to parcel-post delivery. For elderly and/or disabled, significant differ-

ences related to drug-store transactions, accessibility to school, participation in sports activities, and difficulty with sewing. Formal meals, meals served in the dining room, and satisfaction with daytime temperatures were also significant.

Recommendations

Although the subjects were satisfied, from observation by the research assistants and from responses to probing questions, we recommend that policy makers be concerned with housing programs, especially for the disabled and the rural elderly resident.

Attitudes of all citizens need to be positive toward the processes of aging and of disability. Media could assist by providing positive portrayals of the elderly and disabled.

Some topics for programs and for policy include the use and application of technology in the home, safety features and home-accident prevention, efficient kitchen planning, task lighting, and elimination of hazards and barriers to accessibility.

Improvements such as accessibility, adjustment of counter heights and of base-counter lowest-shelf height, and central vacuuming could be provided for the elderly and disabled. This assistance might take the form of education (media programs and literature), labour (home-handyman service of Saskatchewan Home Care), and financing. Older homes, especially in rural areas, may need remodelling. Elderly women are not always aware of the assistance programs available to them. Urban planning for the elderly could incorporate the sense of space, the effect of greenery, and the orientation of the building toward the sun which are more often found in the rural environment.

Future Research

Action programs such as "store-front" counselling on housing and home financing could be initiated.

A review of literature and a survey of programs of government, educational institutions, and communication systems could be made to determine the need for publications, scripts, storyboards, guest speakers,

and interactive software about attitudes and needs.

A study could be conducted of the housing needs of elderly native women in urban and rural communities and on reserves.

Studies could be made of tenancy problems and of institutionalized women.

Conclusion

Many elderly women are at the poverty level. Although the above description is positive, the elderly women, like the homes in which they dwell, are aging. The future disabilities of the women and the deterioration in the quality of the housing are considerations that policy makers should not forget.

Further Reading:

S. Faulkner. *Planning a Home*. Montreal: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.

W. Young and D. Hasell. *Housing Needs Assessment of the Elderly and Disabled in the Saskatoon Area of Saskatchewan*. Final Report CR 6585/Y1. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, 1981.

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Femme

Irène Pagès

Suis une femme
Sans "je"

Je suis *elle*
Toujours pour eux

Et censée reproduire
Le parfait à l'image du parfait
Le petit d'homme
Par dessus le marché.

Mais produire?
Jamais,
Ça,
Ça ne m'aura pas été *donné*.

Suis une femme
Sans "je" aux cent jeux,
Histoire d'O
Rond d'ovules
Et de vulves,
Dont le discours du Savoir
Et du Désir appropriateur
Fait son ob-jet

A jeter,
Bien entendu,
Après usage.

(Je) n'ai pas droit au sujet
Les mots ne m'appartiennent guère
Ni le solide, ni le ferme,

Le fluide seul est mon être
Paraît-il

On fait de moi
La mer
Infinie
Indéfinie
Dans son non-être
L'absente, enfin,
De tous les bouquets

Or toi, navigante errante
Ma soeur, sans matrice
Au coeur du monde qui t'emporte,
Souviens-toi
De ne plus accepter
De n'être
Que ce que l'homo sapiens
Réprime en soi
ou
Son complément spéculaire.

Souviens-toi
Que tu es toi,
L'Oméga,
Cercle de l'éternité
Une
Indivise incontestable,
L'Oméga
Du mot de la fin

Et sache, enfin,
Te regarder comme toi-même.

Not to be alone
One lives with a pet
Which gives the illusion
Of not being lonely

Not to bear the loneliness
One walks aimlessly with a crowd
Which gives the illusion
Of not being lonely

Not to be alone
One escapes with dreams
and fantasies
Or lives with some one
And tries to grow old together
Which gives them the illusion
Of not being alone
As no one has invented
A two-place coffin

Not being lonely
One sleeps hugging a pillow
Or a teddy bear to maintain
The illusion of being with someone

As for me
I keep on searching
And asking questions
Thinking of the many souls
And that gives me the
Illusion of not being alone.

Gisele Dominique
Toronto, Ontario