

# INSTRAW'S CONTRIBUTION TO IMPROVING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF ELDERLY WOMEN



UN photo by Bruno J. Zehnder (J)

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## INSTRAW

United Nations International Research and Training Institute  
for the Advancement of Women



The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) is an autonomous organization within the UN system. The Institute's mandate is gender research, training and the dissemination of gender information. INSTRAW serves as a catalyst to facilitate the full recognition of women's contribution and central position in development. INSTRAW's efforts which aim at improving the situation of elderly women, include the following:

## *The Situation of Elderly Women: Available Statistics and Indicators*

In 1990, the world's elderly population, herein defined as those persons 60 years and older was estimated at 488.8 million, nearly equivalent to the combined 1950 populations of Latin America, North America and the USSR. One out of eleven global inhabitants is at least 60 years of age. Of the close to half a billion elderly, 44 per cent are male, underscoring the greater inroads of mortality among the males as compared to their female counterparts. The ageing process currently observed and projected for developed countries (and for developing countries in the coming century) is therefore characterized by a disproportionate growth of the very old and of widows due to higher male mortality.

Moreover, while the feminization of the ageing population is increasingly becoming a universal concern and the total aggregates indicate the situation in which the ageing society contains a larger number of women who may have a remaining life expectancy of more than 20 healthy years, the prevailing statistical indicators are still found limited to describe and project how those elderly women spend and/or would prefer to spend the remaining 20 years of their lives. They are most of the time stereotyped as social burden or traditional caregivers, further limiting their opportunities to contribute and participate in society in other meaningful ways. They are often seen more as social problems than as partners in addressing the socio-economic issues of the society which, to a certain extent, creates further frustration and stimulates the feeling of disability among the elderly. Attempts to address the real circumstances of elderly women in today's rapidly ageing societies require more specific and disaggregated data which may not be available at the present time owing to similar and longstanding conceptual and methodological problems with the statistical data available on women in general.

Recognizing the paramount importance of statistical data in addressing systematically the socio-economic, cultural and political consequences of ageing to women, INSTRAW developed a pragmatic approach for improving the use and quality of data on elderly women.

Questions about statistical concepts and the quality of data available on elderly women have been given a considerable focus in INSTRAW's programme on statistics and indicators on women since the last two years.

In collaboration with the Statistics Office of the United Nations Secretariat, INSTRAW carried out a research which reviewed and analysed the situation of elderly women (both in the developed and developing countries) based on available statistics and indicators. Difficulties encountered in identifying elderly women within the existing statistical concepts and in disaggregating data to cull information most important to elderly women were highlighted in the result of the study.

A technical report entitled "The Situation of Elderly Women: Available Statistics and Indicators" was prepared based on the above study. It was reviewed by the Statistics Office, other United Nations bodies and experts in the field of ageing during the INSTRAW/Statistics Office Consultative Meeting on Improving Concepts and Methods of Statistics on the Situation of Elderly Women, 28-30 May 1991 in New York. The meeting in an in-depth appraisal of the technical report made concrete recommendations for its revision prior to finalizing as a United Nations publication and forwarded substantive suggestions for further work at the national, regional and international levels in the future.

Both the technical report and result of the consultative meeting will soon be made available and are envisaged to provide guidelines on how to address the problems and issues concerning elderly women.

Drawing on the results of the above study, INSTRAW and the Statistics Office of the United Nations Secretariat plan to undertake a follow-up study on methods of compiling and analysing statistics on elderly women, an attempt to provide specific techniques to improve the use of available data.

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