



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

Ageing with Dignity and Spirituality

Statement for the

United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing

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Our world is ageing as never before. Among the many changes and forces for change that are at play in our globalizing world the current demographic revolution is likely to have a worldwide impact as ubiquitous and significant as that of any other. Better healthcare, education, improved nutrition and the control of diseases and infant mortality are combining with other factors to yield increasingly lower birth and death rates. With fertility rates in many countries below replacement levels, and other countries experiencing a dramatic slow-down in population growth-rates, there are more and more older people and they make up an ever-greater proportion of the world's inhabitants.

The statistics and predictions are striking: in the last fifty years the overall average human lifespan has increased from 46 to 66 and is expected to rise to 76 in the next fifty years as the total number of persons 60 years or older doubles, increasing from one in ten to one in five, pushing the average age of the world population up from 26 to 36 years. The oldest old, those aged 80 or more, are the fastest growing group of elderly and are expected to quintuple in number over the next fifty years. This grey-shift is already recognisable in developed countries, in some of which as much as half the population may be over 60 within the next fifty years, leaving its full extent and pace to be felt now in developing countries where the older population is expected to quadruple in that time.

The situations vary enormously from one country to another but the ageing trend is nevertheless universal and while higher life expectancy is a tremendous achievement it is one that has been happening too fast for its effects to be fully absorbed and prepared for by societies and economies. At present, both policy and practice often marginalize or exclude older persons rather than enabling their integration, participation in and contribution to society. Older women are often particularly vulnerable. Pension and social security systems begin to creak, strained by an imbalance between receipts from the workforce and obligations to dependents, including retirees. Already over-burdened healthcare systems are only going to see a growth in demand by an ever-larger number of old people living longer. Socio-economic models that assumed education in earlier years only, an adult life that revolved around employment followed by a short period of often inactive retirement need to be radically re-thought as they are increasingly out of touch with present-day physiological realities.

Individuals, families, communities and world society as a whole will need to adjust, if not radically change course, if we are going to fulfil the legitimate rights and needs of older

people. Yet if the challenges and demands of an ageing society are undeniable so are the benefits and potential that this phenomenon offers in a world sorely in need of the wisdom, maturity and insight that can be gleaned from years of experience. To realise this potential it is essential that humanity now come of age in terms of its spiritual development.

A Society for all Ages – a Society of the Whole Person

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University strongly supports the ideal of a society that accommodates and values all people, regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status. Offering a specifically spiritual perspective of the individual, the human family and world affairs, it believes that there is a place in our global community for everyone and that all are deserving of society's support and care, including the elderly who are often in particular need of it.

In developing the architecture of a society that is truly for all ages a variety of social, political and economic policy changes will need to be made and implemented but underpinning the success of all such measures will be their foundation. The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University believes that the foundation of an inclusive, respectful and integrated society that lives by a culture of peace, dignity and caring is the awareness of the inherently spiritual nature of the human being. There is more to each of us than just the physical body. It is the spirit within our body, whether that be frail or sturdy, young or old, that gives value and worth to our lives and is the basis of the rights accorded to the human person. It is the soul that is the repository of our conscience, principles and values and of the eternal inner beauty that transcends the passing of years and the decay of the mortal frame. And it is on the basis of our common spiritual identity that all people of the world comprise one human family. If society is to include all humanity, it must first include the human spirit.

Thus in the quantitative process of our physical ageing, the qualitative content of the inner being must not be forgotten. Biological facts need not blind us to spiritual truths and the ultimately spiritual identity of every human being. A spiritual understanding of the self will help empower us to see beyond the biology of the body, and its inevitable ageing, to the divine qualities and strength of the soul and the rights and responsibilities that we all have regardless of our age.

The Treasure of Well-being

Just as the individual must be viewed as whole, so too the well-being which we all seek must be viewed holistically to include a state of physical, mental, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual well-being – and not just the absence of infirmity. Provision must be made to ensure that older people, while remaining integrated in society, are protected from physical, emotional, psychological and financial abuse, neglect and discrimination, and have proper access to healthcare, an age-friendly living environment and basic social services. There is also much that each individual can do for their own well-being and, with the right preparation, the later years in life offer not just freedom from the worries and stress of work, career, bills, raising a family and other responsibilities of life but also a sovereignty over time and activity that significantly boosts happiness and well-being.

While dignity, self-respect, and indeed self-help, are not the exclusive domain of the young and independent so also self-expression and striving for self-fulfilment are the right and responsibility of young and old alike. Our well-being at any moment of our lives, but particularly in older age, is influenced by our well-being in earlier years. Starting from a

young age, individuals need to structure their lives accordingly towards an overall concept of well-being in which life too is viewed as a whole. Life can then be seen as being woven of a continuum of vertical threads that run through different cross-sections rather than a succession of separate and self-contained horizontal strands, or time zones. Nurture, family, education, financial security, social involvement and leisure, or time for the self, are all important throughout life rather than being consecutive areas of predominantly exclusive focus and dedication. The golden years of life, however, very naturally lend themselves to the dedication of time to inner well-being, the cultivation of the mind and the achievement of a state of spiritual well-being, fruition and completeness.

The Dignity of Participation

Having and exercising control of one's own life is a fundamental expression of the innate worth and dignity of the human spirit. For as long as possible, older people must accordingly be allowed to maintain their own independence and participate in the taking of decisions affecting them, including those relating to the care and facilities they receive. Self-reliance and mutual self-help within a local community, or an older persons' organization or community of interest, should be encouraged and supported as it respects the dignity and abilities of the ageing, bolsters solidarity and can raise their profile in society. Greater participation in society, freedom and control over one's life perpetuate self-esteem and help prevent or postpone disability and dependency while also banishing the sense of hopelessness, helplessness and loneliness that too often leads to depression and suicide.

Ensuring that older people can participate in society is not just a matter of doing what is right. For example, retirees, frequently subject to compulsory retirement requirements, may put their time to good use as consultants, advisers or volunteers and constitute an overlooked resource for many needy economies, particularly rural ones afflicted by human desertification as a result of urban migration.

Education is a basic human right and one which young and old alike should be able to enjoy throughout their lives. The fruits of time spent in education include not only more significant participation in society but also the tools with which to help eradicate the poverty that afflicts so many older people, especially women, and both results from and contributes to barriers to participation in society. In particular, the elderly can be educated with regard to self-care, health preservation, ways of mutual self-help and technological developments. A society that involves and invests in all its members will be well served by them. When older people are part of a learning society other members of the community may benefit from their wisdom, values and experience. Such intergenerational exchanges can facilitate the traditional role of elders in the transmission of skills, tradition, values and cultural heritage. Perhaps more so in this area than in any other, old people are not just recipients of protection and services but also contributors to society as providers of spiritual support, mentoring and guidance. The values, principles and wisdom that older persons can hand down to the next generation are a spiritual, moral and cultural capital at least as important and valuable an inheritance for its future as any more tangible legacy.

The Attainment of Self-fulfilment

Ageing is a continuing and natural process within the overall cycle of life. It will bring an increasing dependency and vulnerability but decades of experience can also be the threshold to wisdom while the autumn years offer a natural window in time to reflect back

on life and harvest from the field of youthful action the ripe fruit of contentment and fulfilment.

Self-fulfilment can seem like an elusive or mystical phenomenon but ultimately it largely depends on such familiar and fundamental aspects of life as doing something worthwhile or meaningful and the giving and receiving of love. Both of these aspects are powerful agents for a life worth living, regardless of age, and can help ensure that quality and meaning are part of the added years. It is in their twilight times in particular that older people may be able to do some of the things that they had no time for in the hustle and bustle of the noonday of their lives, with all its time-constraints, responsibilities and commitments. While fulfilment may be facilitated by the externalities of an enabling environment and physical capacity it primarily comes from inside, hinging on individual initiative, self-development and the realization of one's potential. It has its roots in the purposeful expression of the best of oneself, in remaining true to oneself and in sharing and experiencing higher values.

Old age then need not be a dark backwater in the river of life that neither deserves nor can cope with the bubbling ebb and flow of mainstream society. Broadening and deepening our focus on life to encompass not just a state of doing but also more spiritual notions of becoming and being can help ensure from the start that the autumn of life is a mature season of rich and vibrant colour, full of significance, self-respect and a sense of accomplishment.

The spirit of the Age and an Age for the Spirit

While not itself a dedicated older persons' organization, the history and approach of the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University give an interesting illustration of some of the above ideas. The founder of the Brahma Kumaris, Brahma Baba, was aged 60 when he established the University and while he remained a pivotal and active figure for the remaining 33 years of his life, much of the management and running of the organization was shared with others more than 40 years his junior. This intergenerational approach recognized that we are human beings with potential and strengths to offer before we are young or old with limitations and dependencies. Society today, more than ever, is multigenerational and our attitudes and awareness must model this. Today, the University's two Administrative Heads are aged 80 and 86; embodying the older person's right to participate in and potential to contribute to society, they oversee some 5,000 centres in over 80 countries worldwide and in which activities involve people of all ages, whether a few years old or 90 years young.

Thus on the one hand we must take steps to ensure that we are able to meet the needs of a growing number of older people and offer them the support, protection and involvement that are their right as members of the human family. On the other hand, in a world that is resplendent with wonderful possibilities but also marked by tremendous challenges, we need inner resources and a quality of being more than ever before. A society for all ages is one that enables all to benefit from it and to contribute to it and so no one must be denied the opportunity to participate in society and enjoy the fruits of its development. As we continue turning the pages of the human story we need the wisdom, insight, guidance and calmness of our elders as much as the energy, enthusiasm and idealism of our youth. If it often seems as though we are losing our way on our journey to tomorrow it is because we have forgotten our own spirituality. It is time for us to remember who we are, as

individuals and as members of one human family. Demographically we are coming of age and reaching maturity and it is now time for us to mature and come of age spiritually.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.
The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.
It has been affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1980.

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