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Call to Action To Elders Worldwide: The Need to Highlight Their Abilities, Wisdom, and Compassion as Citizen Diplomats, and Leaders for Social Change

Abstract

Excerpt

Kofi Annan (1999), the Secretary-General of the United Nations, noted that, "A Society for All Ages is one that sees elders as both agents and beneficiaries of development. It honors traditional elders in their leadership and consultative role in communities throughout the world." Older persons are among the world resources most often unseen and overlooked. It therefore becomes necessary to raise the consciousness of older people to their changing role in American and global societies to ensure fulfillment in their eldering years. Prior prejudice against elders has prevented inclusion of their enormous potential, of their accumulated experience and wisdom. This paper is directed toward determining how best to utilize the talents, wisdom and life's experience of these elders to add meaning and substance to their lives, while affording them the opportunity to continue to contribute their talents and abilities as political activists and leaders directed toward peacemaking and social change.

Keywords: *citizen diplomacy, consultation, demographic changes, elder peacemakers, elders, environmental preservation, intergenerational contact, leadership, life expectancy*

Author Bio(s)

Florence Ross is a Citizen Diplomat from birth, with subsequent experiences as the President of secular, political, and religious organizations, an organizer of Human Relations Workshops for youths and adults, a lobbyist to Congressmen, a cancer researcher and an administrator, all performed in recognition that the world needed repair and transformation. From these attempts to build bridges between people of different ages and cultures, in an atmosphere where peace could grow with moral and spiritual ideas dominating, I learned that actual change comes from grassroots activism, nurtured relationships that become trusted ones and from direct dialogue. As a grandmother and great grandmother with a loving biological and extended family in countries the world over, I have seen the effectiveness of my elder status as a source of security, inspiration and example to emulate. Functioning as a participant in the Peace Summit of 1986, called by President Reagan and Secretary Gorbachev, the titles of "Grandmother of the World" and "Best Citizen Diplomat" were conferred upon me for chastizing the alienating policies of both countries. A little old lady taught that Citizen Diplomacy works! Entering Graduate School at age 73 to pursue a Masters Degree and graduating with a Ph.D at age 81, I was able to share intimate knowledge of unique events of the 20th century in which I had been a participant with fellow students and teachers. Of significance was that courageous aging recaptures the life potential of the older adult and challenges the younger person toward multicultural and intergenerational partnerships.

**CALL TO ACTION TO ACTION TO ELDERS WORLDWIDE: TO HIGHLIGHT
THEIR ABILITIES, WISDOM, AND COMPASSION AS CITIZEN DIPLOMATS,
LEADERS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Florence Ross

Kofi Annan (1999), the Secretary-General of the United Nations, noted that, "A Society for All Ages is one that sees elders as both agents and beneficiaries of development. It honors traditional elders in their leadership and consultative role in communities throughout the world." Older persons are among the world resources most often unseen and overlooked. It therefore becomes necessary to raise the consciousness of older people to their changing role in American and global societies to ensure fulfillment in their eldering years. Prior prejudice against elders has prevented inclusion of their enormous potential, of their accumulated experience and wisdom. This paper is directed toward determining how best to utilize the talents, wisdom and life's experience of these elders to add meaning and substance to their lives, while affording them the opportunity to continue to contribute their talents and abilities as political activists and leaders directed toward peacemaking and social change.

Demographic Changes

Demographic changes in life expectancy are startling now exceeding eighty years worldwide. The twentieth century has witnessed greater control of prenatal and infant mortality, a decline in birth rates, improvements in nutrition, basic health care, and the control of many infectious diseases in many regions of the world. This combination of factors has resulted in an increasing number and proportion of persons surviving into the advanced stages of life (Atchley, 1997). In the developed countries, smaller families are due to a growing desire for a healthier life, accumulation of greater resources, and opportunities for leisure.

According to United Nations estimates (1998), in 1950 there were approximately 200 million people 60 years of age and over throughout the world; by 1975, their number had increased to 350 million. By the year 2000, that number had reached 590 million and it is estimated that by 2025, it will be well over 1100 million, which represents an increase of 224 percent since 1975 (Kinsella, 1998). Older persons are an untapped resource in all societies with a wealth of knowledge, skills, diverse cultural heritage and lifelong experiences that need to be utilized if countries are going to be able to accommodate this unprecedented population shift. A steady stream of one million persons a month now crosses the threshold of age sixty. As grandparents begin to outnumber grandchildren, the eldering population, as a majority force, will require full integration into their society, reversing the prior marginalization of this group.

A notable challenge is the emergence of women elders as a majority force. Gorman (1999) sees the older persons' world as an increasingly female one in the twenty-first

century. Older women are outnumbering older men in significant numbers. With their increasing majority status, women have become active citizens discovering the power of organization and giving leadership on issues of common interest to their societies. Older women are known to experience a “power surge” at a time when the culture puts them out to pasture; many older women possess a menopausal zest to reach out for compassionate solutions to complicated problems (Mead 1978). These activists, or Citizen Diplomats (Montville 1981), are models for the future who will eliminate the structural discrimination against women and elders, pervasive in the past.

The aging boom can serve as a catalyst for change. Every country will be challenged to devise ways for elders to be activated to utilize their abilities. It will be potentially advantageous to all societies to have a highly skilled and knowledgeable work force that only experience can deliver.

A broad range of programs that engage elders as civic citizens can include:

1. The establishment of senior advisory groups to work with local governments on community matters, especially those concerning aging.
2. The development of a senior’s bureau to establish and maintain a directory of seniors according to talent and expertise, along with a parallel directory of paid and unpaid opportunities in community development.
3. Expansion of on the job training and retraining opportunities for new technologies, community service, and income security in old age.
4. Programs to demonstrate the enormous diversity that exists in old age, to educate the public about contributions elders have made to our society based on their lifelong experiences, creativity in a variety of fields, organizational skills, courage, and experience in facing poverty, violence, wars, disease and death. The media can place emphasis on the impact of aging to create better understanding between the generations.
5. The study of gerontology as a core subject for students in the social sciences, journalism, and will help to create greater acceptance of the increasing elder community as it documents changes in biological, social and cultural aspects eventually applicable to most humans.
6. The encouragement of exchanges between retired elders in developed and developing countries will support greater appreciation of each other’s culture, create relationships through sustained dialogue and will reveal similarities and differences that may be dealt with satisfactorily through negotiation and without violent encounters. Information may also emerge that is helpful to governments in the long struggle for a culture of peace.

The aging revolution calls upon us to see that older people as a distinct group require recognition, that they are not redundant, and that we need to remove any barriers that segregate them. Elders inform us that the process of aging is a life-long marathon, requiring preparation and pacing. Characteristics of elders that were valued in the past such as healing, counseling, cultural transmission of traditions and values, volunteerism, leadership, and the strengthening of intergenerational relationships will require us to rethink and redesign old age if we are to retain these valuable attributes (Jones, 2000).

Implications of Longevity

Elders bring a sense of permanence to their environment. They are the strongest exponents of environmental preservation. They plant fruit orchards as a legacy for future generations. Elders give youth a past, a way of modeling themselves for a life of integrity, of taking a broad perspective to events and persons, of courage to overcome adversity and to reach a period of control in their own lives. Carl Jung (1965) described this period as “individuation”, achievable only after age forty, the beginning of a period of self-renewal and self worth. Elders focus on experiences, memories and feelings that make for stability in society. Governments and civil societies will need to call attention to the elderly as agents of social and sustainable development. This is a new age for elders and they need to be convinced that their reinvigoration into a new stage in life is an opportunity to participate fully in society (Zalman, Schacter-Shalomi, 1995).

Rosenbaum and Button (1993) found that intergenerational contact will become mandatory if the *perceived* attitudes of elders as promoting their selfish interests are to be accurately evaluated. The *actual* behavior of older people tends to be much less age-centered than their public image gives them credit for. Rosenbaum and Button (1993) and Atchley (1997) argue that the inaccurate stereotype of the self-centered older voter has the potential to fuel intergenerational animosity because it is based on *beliefs* about older adults’ voting behavior, not their *actual* behavior. Elders as Citizen Diplomats are urgently needed to counter the current political conservatism. Since politics is the route to political power, elders need to organize and strengthen their power bases and coalitions with other organizations, the private sector, and government agencies (Saunders, 1999).

Elders have a greater capacity than young people to see all of life and how it is connected. If we restore elders to positions of respect within the family, we could profit from their wise council. Bronfenbrenner (1961) informs us that if the institutions of our society continue to remove parents, other adults, and older youth from active participation in the lives of children, and if the resulting vacuum is filled by age segregated peer groups, we can anticipate increased alienation, indifference, antagonisms, and violence on the part of the younger generation.

In societies where close family ties are strong, and cultural traditions cherished, elders’ influences serve as a cohesive leadership force. In the past, these elders were the backbone of their societies. Now they suffer a loss of prestige and influence, particularly when viewed as assets or liabilities to the rest of society. Gerontologists have alerted us to the need to become an experimental society that tests new policies in this age of demographic change (Atchley, 1997).

Significance of the Aging Revolution

The experience factor is not to be minimized in bringing about changes in the political and social life of this country. Aging is not a chronological stipulation (Atchley, 1997). Many elders are only too pleased to begin life anew, becoming mentors, leaders of social change,

following roles that they were unable to pursue in earlier years. While elders are often an overlooked resource (Lederach, 1997; Byrne & Keashly, 2000), they are less defined by biology than many suppose; they seek power with others, and empowerment in their own lives to pursue an existence that has purpose. Elders are ready for honest communication, for the opportunity to discuss their views and place a searchlight on matters in the social system that they question (Ross, 2002). Psychologists and gerontologists have consistently confirmed these goals in that the greatest potential for growth and self-realization exists in the second half of life (Erikson, 1986; Moen, 1996; Stone & Griffith, 1998).

Citizen Diplomacy

Citizen Diplomat is a term coined by Montville (1981) while he worked at the U.S. State Department. These are persons concerned about world and local affairs. They are activists who say, I have one life and another chance to make it count for something. How do I make a difference? How can my special talents and resources be employed? The elder Citizen Diplomat is a person who is still searching for meaning, for sharing accumulated wisdom, seeking to serve as a political agent for social change. Citizen Diplomats are reformers, organizers, advocates, innovators, mediators, members of NGOs, collaborators, empowered grassroots, peace makers, peace managers, and more (Montville 1981).

These are men and women who, as private individuals, have assumed a deliberate responsibility to serve as conduits to improve conditions for peace, non-violence, the environment, and the development of national and international relationships. They also have worked for the pursuit of intergenerational programs, human rights issues, matters of legal aid and political freedom, and for the improvement of educational opportunities for the poor. Further, they were active in the global campaign against apartheid and in defusing the Cold War. They enjoy public deliberation and are willing to assume responsibility for their decisions (Montville, 1991).

Citizen Diplomats represent middle range citizenry, who seek to create and sustain peaceful relationships with neighbors and nations, advocating non-violent solutions to political problems (Lederach, 1995; Byrne & Keashly, 2000). Citizen Diplomats seek to engage in meaningful dialogue in their non-governmental diplomatic deliberations. They understand that negotiating for economic, social and political advance is about more than traditional diplomacy and new markets. In the process of any negotiation, they place emphasis on developing human relationships for trust and mutual benefit (Saunders 1999). Their developed sense of priorities and experience in political matters has given them an ability to build bridges between diverse organizations and individuals. Citizen Diplomats provide lines of communication during dangerous periods when official discourse is close to non-existent. They seek to be alert to the cross-cultural challenges facing all global societies in racial, ethnic, religious, civic, and social matters (Lederach, 1995; Netter & Diamond, 1996).

Elders, as Citizen Diplomats in this era of longevity, are aware that they can lead by their majority voting power to have more attention placed on keeping the peace, building a

culture of peace, developing new ties of friendship with their foreign counterparts and generating creative solutions for economic opportunities instead of spending enormous sums on war (Galtung, 1996; Lederach, 1997). Serving as a citizen diplomat is a form of mentoring, being an empowering, non-judgmental participant, of helping people move into the future, into peace, wherever they may find themselves (Rabic, 1994).

As activists in numerous organizations, they are not timid and their need is to keep challenging themselves to explore their capabilities to the maximum as effective social change agents. Elders who were activists in their youth continue to believe in peace as an action verb, that one must do it to be it, that only empowering young and old can preserve our societies (Atchley, 1997). Elders who have a developed sense of responsibility to others are aware that in the process of doing useful work together, they find their greatest satisfactions in a sense of interdependence and community. They have learned that true knowledge is the result of contact with other minds. These elder activists are not easily discouraged, as their life's experience has taught them that seemingly hopeless situations can become the greatest impetus for change and transformation (Ross & Rothman, 1999).

What are Elder Peacemakers Doing?

Kofi Annan (2003) cited global aging as a potential pool of untapped resources that societies must learn to use in a productive manner. He urged member states of the United Nations to take advantage of elder skills and wisdom while placing these demographic changes high on their national agendas. Even in a nation as ravaged as Afghanistan, for example, he noted that tribal elders have gained respect and recognition for their efforts to promote peaceful solutions to the country's problems.

Currently, elders are participating worldwide in diverse activities on behalf of peace, justice, the impoverished elderly, care-giving services for and by elders, and inter-generational partnerships for dialogue and mentoring. Elders have recently become aware that many foreign assistance projects have excluded them. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, warns that leaders who ignore the needs of their growing eldering voting population do at their own peril (2003).

In November, 2002, 110 delegates from 47 nations met in India to organize a standing "Peaceforce" (FOR 2002). A trained nonviolent army is being formed to intervene in conflict areas and help create safe space for local groups to struggle non-violently and seek peaceful solutions. Elders were prominent in attendance and leadership.

The United Nations Second World Assembly on Aging (2002), which was held in Madrid, Spain, highlighted the programs of both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Ross (2002) advocated programs that would best utilize the talents, wisdom and life experience of elders to add meaning and substance to their lives, while simultaneously affording them the opportunity to continue to contribute their talents, shared visions of freedom, justice, and peace, and abilities as political activists. Leadership roles assumed by elderly populations in many countries of Africa and Asia on behalf of peace inspired the Assembly delegates to pursue acceleration of their own efforts in their respective countries. In addition, the NGO on Aging at the United Nations conducts active year round programs and interacts with NGOs on Aging worldwide, sharing new ideas that have shown successful application for the elderly. Since elders, like people everywhere,

yearn for a better future but have become aware that the world is not anything it was expected to be, an innovative leadership program is has been proposed by the United Nations NGO on Aging that would nurture individuals, groups, and communities to function in independent and interdependent ways (Atlee, 2003).

Recommendations for the Future

Since it will shortly become apparent that the eldering community represents a vital majority component of the population, the encouragement and development of a pro-elderling society should be undertaken by government, NGOs, universities, legislators, and all interested community organizations and individuals. The promotion of intergenerational dialogue and joint activities to achieve connections can promote ways to learn respect for each other's opinions, ideas, culture, and aspirations.

Universities will benefit as they encourage the eldering community to partake of such innovative courses and projects by promoting:

1. Teaching the development of communities for the future.
2. Leadership training to promote the richness of lifelong activism.
3. Conflict analysis training to elders for community application.
4. Multi-ethnic conciliation programs for long-term cross-cultural relationships and a global perspective, with activities to include peace parades, and United Nations international food festivals, etc.
5. Retraining courses for elders who seek to complete former careers or who seek to embark upon advanced education or new careers.
6. Human Relations Workshops for young adults and teens with elder trained facilitators.
7. Education of elders and others to engage one another in peace building efforts.
8. Organizing a national service elder corps to provide opportunities for service for those aged persons who can assume active roles in community volunteer efforts.
9. Sponsoring a Council of Peace Making Elders to be of service in conflict saturated communities.
10. Cooperating with, or sponsoring, the aging-to-saging model in communities to achieve spiritual empowerment on personal and community levels.

Expanding research on variables of religion, ethnic identity, race, and women of color.

Conclusions

As the fields of conflict resolution, peacemaking, diplomacy and gerontology move forward into the twenty-first century, it is clear that older women have, and will continue to have crucial roles to play in the development of a tolerant, peaceful future. In the global arena, programs that encourage older women to mentor and teach younger women in particular, and younger people in general, must be initiated and pursued aggressively. All indigenous elders of first and second world countries have seen the devastation of the past, and can help create a better and lasting vision of the future—a future in which people of all ages are valued and allowed to contribute in productive, and meaningful ways. As NGOs and governments assume responsibility for building a culture of positive aging, then mining the experiences of elders who have been through the cross-cultural challenges that most societies are facing will become essential. In Eastern cultures, elders are venerated and respected because they have much to teach; even if younger people do

not want to emulate their ways, they have valuable lessons to impart about the mistakes of the past that should not be repeated and transmitted into the future. This is the appropriate role of the Citizen Diplomat everywhere—to engage, to teach, to advocate, and contribute their vast wisdom of experience to all those who have the wisdom to listen, to hear, to learn, and to teach.

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