

# **TODAY'S WOMAN : LOOKING FOR NEW PROJECTS. VOCATIONAL/OCCUPATIONAL COUNSELLING FOR MIDDLE-AGED WOMEN**

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## **Foreword**

The present work has been prepared taking into account the nature and development of the programme “Today’s Woman: looking for new projects”, that is being carried out by the Centre of Vocational/Occupational Counselling within the Secretary of Extension Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences at the National University of La Plata.

This programme, which was started in 1999, is one of the permanent activities of the Centre, which is under the Directorship of Dr Mirta Gavilán, constitutes an innovative step in the field of Counselling, insofar as it addresses the situation of women in the 45 to 60 years-of-age group.

Given that this group of women requires a particular search which must be associated with better future perspectives, specialized counselling is required as well as group follow-up treatment to share, elaborate and redefine the situation they are going through and thus, to generate the changes that are needed for the realization of new projects and enterprises.

For the development of this issue, we present a descriptive abstract of the programme and its development, as well as some conclusions and reflections that may be used as a basis for new proposals

This issue about women, which is in constant evolution, makes it impossible to be conclusive, but must be construed as a starting point for new lines of thought and interpretations within the framework of vocational/occupational counselling and the targeted population.

The consulted bibliography encompasses a variety of Works concerning the subjects of counselling, women, and current social contexts. It is a bibliographic selection

that may be used as a reference in the theoretical and practical development of a Women's Workshop.

## **Introduction**

In any Vocational Occupational Counselling task for today's woman, it is necessary to consider the economic, political and cultural changes that are taking place in the social World. These changes have an effect on women's subjectivities and generate diverse feelings, emotions, and thoughts that enter into a dialectic interaction with current ways of life. Changes in family, in the socio-cultural environment, bio-psychic and evolutionary changes are some of the elements that have an impact on women's ways of life.

The world in which we live has seen life expectancy increase substantially – at least for a group within the population. This increased life expectancy is a quantitative measure but is also qualitative, insofar as it shows a growing need to think about the quality of life in the years that have been added.

Within the framework of this reality, woman's life, her roles in society and her new definition, appear as an important subject-matter for Vocational Counselling. It becomes important for counsellors to watch women as they assume and play new roles, and the vital attitudes that they show at this stage of their lives.

Reference to a shared context, is essential when we must think and reflect on the way it impacts on the different moments of personal lives.

The self-inquiry regarding who someone is, who one wants to be, and how to achieve one's ambitions under these circumstances, becomes imperative not only to young people who must elaborate their life projects amidst uncertain and variable scenarios. It can be found, ever more frequently, in other age groups, confirming in practice the concept of Vocational Counselling at all stages of life...

Nobody chooses once and for ever. It has never been more apparent than it is today. The need to choose again and elaborate new projects is imposed on personal and social reality, not only because of practical reasons but also because of psychological reasons. These reasons turn into a personal drive to reflect on the circumstances which require new searches and rethinking about them.

On this point, professional experience shows that receiving support in moments of change is eagerly sought by women, insofar as they participate spontaneously and willingly in specific spaces of work with others ...

Generally, women who are in their 50's or beyond, belong to a transition generation in which some have developed non-traditional roles while others have fulfilled the mandatory roles of Woman/Mother/Wife ..., of which the latter have not been able to disentangle themselves from.

The situation women find themselves in, necessitates the revision of changes within the family – in the case of a woman who has made her “career” in the family; changes that are impending because of proximity to, or effective retirement – for the woman who has made a career in environments outside the family context; changes of a bio-psychological nature related with the body, sexuality and health in every woman's career.

These are some of the situations we are confronted with when we work and they serve as a starting point for counselling. The possibility to revise her own history, conceived in laborious – sometimes painful – ways, leads her to reconstruct it and to think about how to go on, in a specific process of Vocational Occupational Counselling.

### **Target of the proposal: Middle-aged urban women**

#### *Their characteristics*

A Middle-aged, urban, middle-class woman, maintains a youthful and carefully looked-after appearance, is communicative and enjoys being in the company of other women, no matter what her former situation was and which she brings to her work in the workshops.

She is far from giving up. She presents herself as a fighter ready for change and renewal. She intends to redefine herself and to redefine her own life project. She shows herself ready to strike a new deal with her life and poses herself different searches.

She is a woman who asks herself questions, who poses herself deep interrogations, maintains an inner world profusely inhabited by dreams and fantasies which have too often been postponed, to wait for a triggering situation that will lead them into action. In vital terms she is courageous.

The condition of self-inquiry, places her in a search situation associated with attempts at satisfactory solutions.

Life as a project is seen as shortened and the need is imperatively felt of rethinking who one is, who one has come to be, and who one can keep being.

She is a talkative woman. The word, gesture, interchange, emotions and affections can be readily recognized by her. Her own feminine condition, seems to constitute itself from this need to communicate with other women and share anxieties.

Her attitude is prospective, expectant, on many occasions hopeful about her potentialities, those that can be recognized in her life's path, if she is adequately supported in this analysis.

We may find them in every civil status: just a few who are single, most of them married, some who are divorced and some who have become widows.

Some are single-child mothers. Some others, most of them, with two, three and four children. Small children, teenagers, young and adult sons and daughters and those that have been jokingly named as "late adolescents". Children who study, who work. Disabled children. Independent children. Children that leave home, children that come back, children who stay home, who do not want to leave home or who do not know where to go.

Children, as a subject for special attention, their growing up and evolving independence as a subject of analysis and reflection. Many of them feel their "nests" are empty, some on the other hand feel their "nests" are full, in both cases there is space for profound reflection

Men and husbands that bear them company, others who do not. Middle-aged men, coping with unemployment, facing firing and retirement, adapting to new challenges or failing to do so. Communication and support for the couple is another subject for reflection. Cases in which their men are absent, due to separation or widowhood, women facing new challenges in this predominantly macho society.

Women with secondary- and tertiary-level studies, with unfinished studies, with university degrees. Women who have had a working career, that still have one. Retired women, housekeepers, "madrazas" as some choose to be called, filled with artistic religious and spiritual quests, with working knowledge of computer science and modern languages, interested in literature and writing, handicrafts, social conscience and feelings of solidarity that some transform into real things through voluntary work in hospitals and centres dedicated to children.

Women who have not been able to develop their own vocation, others who feel thwarted by social context. Women who are committed to their own families and who show great social sensitivity which makes them acquire an even deeper commitment to their feminine roles.

In the case of women who have chosen to develop into more traditional roles, having fulfilled her roles as housekeepers, providing for their children and husbands or mates, one can perceive a strong conviction that the time has come for them to think about themselves and for themselves, in the face of deferred personal projects for the sake of family projects.

In the case of women who have played other roles, working away from their homes, the imminence of retirement from work, or of women who have already retired, place them in a situation of high uncertainty regarding the organization of their future.

This programme attempts, then, to collect all these anxieties, with the object of opening a space where it should be possible to delve deeper in the analysis of these life situations, and enable the elaboration of new projects for their careers.

Starting to tackle these women's problems within the institutional context of the Vocational Occupational Counselling Centre, is clearly tantamount to materializing the concept of Continuous Vocational Counselling with which we work and increasing the possibilities for intervention as counsellors.

### **Birth of the programme**

The Project of thinking about a programme for middle-aged women within the activities of the Vocational Occupational Counselling Centre of La Plata Nacional University, is based on criteria of a theoretical nature in the field of Counselling. But it has been born mainly out of observations we have made in our daily contacts with adolescent mothers that come to the Centre for help. The presence of many of them at the moment of enrolment of their children in the Counselling Workshops, enabled us to establish a dialogue in which they spontaneously expressed their doubts, voids and worries about starting new personal educational and work searches.

These informal contacts allowed us to carry out a characterization of the situation which these women found themselves in; they looked restless, vital and uncertain concerning their personal situations.

At the Counselling Centre an exclusive intimate space established and reborn in the course of the past few years. A woman's voice says: "...I began to wonder about what to do at 52 years of age. And it is not easy, every path seems to be blocked for someone who is over 35. One day I came to the Counselling Centre by chance with my daughter

who wanted to obtain some Vocational Counselling, then I saw the Woman programme and I became interested, I enrolled and today I feel that my life has changed..."

### **Objectives of the programme**

This space is supported and upheld by women's own needs as they begin to consider new projects, what to do and the consequential search of social reinsertion. The objectives of the programme are born out of these needs:

- \* To reflect on and share experiences related to the problems faced in middle- age.
- \* To reconstruct the past and to integrate it to projects in the near future.
- \* To re-elaborate deferred projects and to redefine them according to the current situation.
- \* To recover and re-evaluate acquired experiences to shape other life projects...

These are the objectives of our proposal and the challenges women at the workshop must face.

### **Working Methodology**

The programme has been conceived with a group work methodology, in the of workshop modality, with the aim of creating a space for the construction of new social learning and experiences, self-knowledge and their own possibilities.

Sessions take place in the course of two months, through weekly two-hour meetings with a maximum of ten participants.

Within the institutional context of the Counselling Centre, groups come alive. With diverse schedules, women who are different and unique come to us with inquiring looks and expectant attitudes.

The most interesting aspects are related to the questions (in the sense of the search)...

"How should I face this stage in life when my children leave home?"...

"Should I go on waiting for them to come home so that I can look after them?..."

"What shall I do after I retire? How can I prepare for the future?"...

"How should I face this moment in my life?..."

"Will I have time to fulfil any of the dreams I had to put off for my family's sake?..."

"How can I tell them that I want to live, to change, to do something else?"...

"I feel I have still a lot of things to do, but I must be sure what I want the most..."

In this sense, the group proves to be an extraordinarily rich support for the expression of their inquiries, to unfold feelings, to enunciate achievements and declare dissatisfactions. A profound dialogue is established where gestures become words and discourse enriches individual perspectives.

## **Work Development**

Sharing common problems with others help women to feel accompanied and supported in the "daring" that some feel at first when facing the decision to take a new look at their own lives. Information and new ideas turn up along the process and, while the group grows up as it consolidates interpersonal bonds, perspectives that were not even thought of at the start of the process, become apparent.

We reserve a special place within group work to recognition of personal interests.

We recover expressed interests so that projects are based upon the richness of competences that were displayed and developed throughout their lives. A point is always found where they can articulate and integrate themselves to new motivations.

We work during these sessions using different techniques and resources, such as the analysis of graphic materials, communication exercises, dramatizations, the RO technique adapted to the needs of each new group that is formed, occupational images that facilitate the elaboration of projects. They are tools that allow us to jointly organize an information map touching on educational, labour or recreational aspects. The diversity of detected interests covers a broad variety of topics mainly associated with humanistic, social and artistic issues.

The resources we use are only instrumental to the process in order to follow new paths to rediscover aspects of the educational and work reality and to foster a creative dialogue between all the participants. We make a good use of what we call Tours (visits, attendance to conferences and exhibitions, cinema, visiting institutions, etc.) and we work to make certain that exploration and incorporation of new experiences – outside the sessions – are instances of shared learning and work.

Each group, each workshop accomplishes its own cycle, generated by the individual characteristics of each participant and the circumstances surrounding the session.

Different modalities are encountered in each group history, even if the objective is the same. Differences and likenesses between women enrich the task, providing a particular hue to each workshop.

Adequate ambience for interchange is created where personal histories abound, cravings, frustrations, fears, desire. Hope and hopelessness combine to establish a reciprocal dialectic relationship among the participants.

As the work evolves, project possibilities start to come up. Women begin to feel their projects are at hand. The dialectic of what is external and internal, the inner world and the external world, of reality, desires and the possibilities lying before each one of them, constitute the basic elements in this search for a project.

### **A few conclusions**

This work makes re-orientation possible at this vital point in life.

To choose from deep inside, from a particular and unique condition, with full knowledge of the external world and of oneself. Also to choose for oneself and not for the sake of someone else, opting for individuation and not for individualism, bearing in mind and as a reference, the implications of the current socio-cultural demands.

The sessions are carried out. Women participate actively and interchange of opinions and proposals becomes ever more fluid. Every woman becomes aware her own reality, what she wishes, what she can do, the feasibility of her own objectives... the group listens to and reaffirms her proposals. Individuality and group fuse, choice is always individual/personal. The group contains/supports; it becomes clear that what was thought impossible is possible and the challenge of something different is assumed.

Many of these women manage not only to elaborate new projects but also to carry them out, by starting higher or university studies; others attend courses, seminars and/or reflection groups that articulate with other programmes of the Extension Secretary of our Faculty. Other women make new friends, based on common interests; some of these women organize enterprising ventures which they share and weave a net that shows the richness of the experience and the legitimacy of the proposal for new challenges yet to come.

## **Final Reflections ...**

Personal histories speak about fears, lost or confused personalities, dreams that have been put off, the need to recognize themselves in their new beings, to permanently ask themselves about past experiences.

The presence of every one of them, be they shy or challenging, expectant or fearful, plays a fundamental role at a time when it is necessary to actively build a renewed life project, that may be different from or identical to their former one but with an added meaning, which is critically accepted, showing their strengths, predisposition to cope with a different situation, with great possibilities for self-evaluation and the renewed chance to come to terms with themselves

Beyond the personal environments for realization that as a matter of fact all of them get to rebuild and recognize – some of them with greater conviction than others- an inexhaustible drive poses other needs that are taken up without guilt, which become powerful engines for transformation.

Learning to choose or even daring to do so. Acquire the competences to do so, recovering the instances of earlier choices to contemplate them under the light of the present they are living, building other development alternatives for a life career. Everything turns into a true challenge for group production.

As the process evolves, women assume a critical conscience of themselves, of other people, of the social world, analysing the problems of daily life, the duties, the invisible veils of the future, creating conditions to be met to face future projects.

Powerlessness/power combine also permanently. The experience of taking themselves as objects of desire and knowledge deepens as sessions go by and one can appreciate the process of acquisition of new images of the self.

In some cases, the future appears under a new shape insofar as it is given the possibility of becoming real. In others, a relationship that is fraught with powerlessness. Finally we witness the transformation of these self-perceptions, giving rise to a healthy attitude given that it is critically attained. Of difficulties to overcome them. The strategy to do so with other women is unsurpassable, and in the group ballet-like interactions, individual resources and possibilities become richer.

Being at their side when they revise their past experiences, adding new meanings to their past experiences, resolving aspects of their identities, strengthening their self-esteem and encouraging the quest for their own ideals, sets forth, through the work that is

done, the renewal of the continuum of choices and decision making in an autonomous way.

The field experiences that are made validate largely the task as far as heterogeneity and diversity are concerned, as well as the importance of this space in the field of counselling. The dynamics brought about between what is vocational and what is occupational, takes up different modalities in terms of feasibility and viability of new projects as a function of personal histories and what our society has to offer. These are the challenges faced by Vocational Occupational Counselling... They are the challenges facing today's Woman in her search for new life projects.

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