

WOMEN AND AGING: AREA OF CONCERN

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ABSTRACT

Population aging is an obvious consequence of the process of demographic transition. The developed regions of the world have already experienced its consequences, while the developing world is facing a similar scene. The combination of high fertility and falling mortality during the 20th century has emerged large and rapid increase in elderly populations as successively larger cohorts enter the span of old age. India's elderly population has already crossed 100 million mark during 2011. India is the second largest populated country in the world, with 72 million elderly persons above 60 years of age as of 2001, compared to China's 127 million. Aging population is the most challenging demographic phenomenon worldwide in the 21st century. India is one of the few countries in the world where males outnumber females. This phenomenon among elderly is of prime importance because female life expectancy at ages 60 and 70 is slightly higher than that of males.

Keywords: Elderly, Elderly Female, Demography, Global aging, Social change, Theories of aging, Socio-Cultural factors, Globalisation.

INTRODUCTION

To a society and culture that has long prided itself in its veneration of the elderly (witness the popularity of the Shraavan Kumar story), the existential reality of the aged may come as a surprise. Our older citizens, on a daily basis are reminded both of their expendability as also of the deepening coarseness society displays towards them. Modern industrial and post industrial culture foreground the vitality and energy of the youth as against the wisdom and experience of the old. It is likely that in earlier times ageing as a social problem did not preoccupy societies because life expectancy was in any case low.

Population aging is an obvious consequence of the process of demographic transition. The developed regions of the world have already experienced its consequences, while the developing world is facing a similar scene. The combination of high fertility and falling mortality during the

20th century has emerged large and rapid increase in elderly populations as successively larger cohorts enter the span of old age.

India is the world second largest populated country after China, with 72 million older persons above 60 years of age as 2001, compared to China's 127 million. In the 21st century demographic phenomenon of aging population is the most challenging globally. According to the United Nations, world population will increase from 6.5 billion to 9.1 billion in 2050 as World Population Projection predicts. The persons above 60 years in India, were only 1.9 crores in 1947 whereas their number went up to 10 Crores by 2001(10% of the total population) and is expected to go up to 15 Crores by 2020(Census of India, 1991).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Old age is a natural part of the life-cycle. It is a process of regular changes that occur in mature and genetically representative organism living under representative environmental conditions as they advance in chronological age. These changes can be anatomical, physiological, psychological and even social and economic. Biological Aging refers to anatomical and physiological changes that occur with change. Biologists are of the opinion that aging begins when growth and development stops. Psychological aging consists of a general decline in the mental abilities that accompany old age. Generally, physical aging precedes mental aging though this is not always the case. The sociological aspect of individual aging is concerned with changes in the circumstances or situations of individual as a member of the family, community and society.

Women's biological, psychological, and social development across the life span is compromised by cultural, political, and economic factors creating long-long lifestyles, habits, expectations, and roles that place women at risk. The first step in reducing the risk is to understand it(Gannon, 1999). As discussed by Bagchi in his book *Elderly females in India*, the ratio between female and the male elderly increases in favour of females as the age segment over 60 years increases. Among the centenarians, the number of females will be much higher than males in all countries (Bagchi, 1997). Females have a longer life expectancy than males. Elderly females are increasing rapidly in numbers throughout the world, and this trend is magnified many fold in India.

Aging: A Global Scenario

The population of the world in 1995 was 5.7 billion, and it is expected to reach 10.8 billion by 2050. Between 1950 and 2150, the world population will have increased fourfold. Interestingly, between 1995 and 2000, it is estimated that 81 million people have been added to the world population each year (United Nations, 1998). Although the number of children below 15 years in 1995 was estimated to be 3.3 times higher than the aged 60 and above, the elderly are expected

to surpass the number of children by 2050. Among the elderly, the number of the oldest old—those aged 80 or over—will increase more rapidly. According to the projections, the number of those aged 80 and over will multiply by a factor of 17 between 1995 and 2150; from 61 million in 1995 to 320 million in 2050 and to 1054 million by 2150.(Rajan et al., 2003)

The two most populous countries in the world, China and India, will share the major proportion of the world's elderly. Currently, one in 10 Chinese is an elderly person, and this ratio is expected to reach one in four by 2050; similarly, one in 12 Indians is elderly, and this ratio is likely to be one in five in 2050. In absolute terms, India's elderly population is expected to increase from 76 million in 2000 to 327 million in 2050, and that of China is expected to increase from 127 million to 397 million during the same period (United Nations, 1998) (Rajan et al., 2003).

India: Emerging concern

India's elderly population has already crossed 100 million mark during 2011. As per analysis of census data and projections, elderly population sex ratio is in favor of female elderly. As per the census 2011, whereas for total Indian population sex ratio is in favor of male population in ratio 940:1000, for elderly at (60+) population it's in favor of elderly women by 1022:1000 (Age well foundation Report). India is one of the few countries in the world where males outnumber females. This phenomenon among elderly is of prime importance because female life expectancy at ages 60 and 70 is slightly higher than that of males. However, at any given age, there are more widows than widowers. Reasons for this unusual phenomenon need to be identified in the wider context. Since the beginning of the 20th century, life expectancy at birth among Indian males was higher than that for females until the first half of the 1990s. Besides this unusual demographic pattern of excess female mortality at infant and childhood ages, the analysis is further hampered by the phenomenon of age exaggeration among the aged.

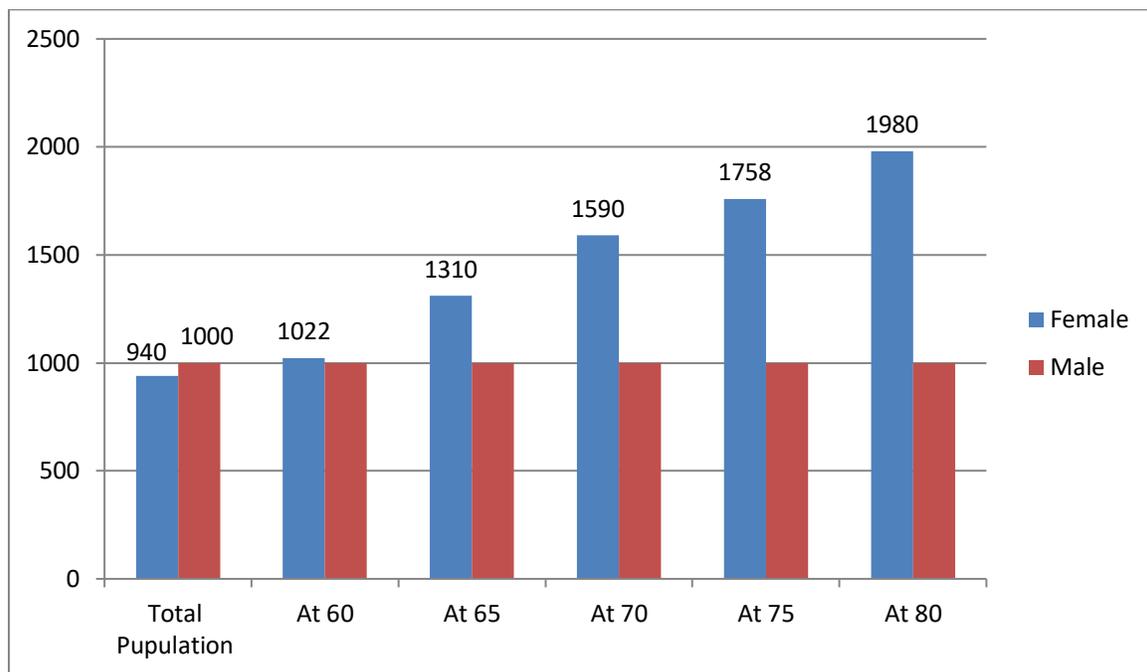


Figure 1: Elderly Female and Male

Elderly population analysis shows that in upper age groups, population of older women is increasing remarkably. At the age of 65, 70, 75 & 80 there are 1310, 1590, 1758 & 1980 elderly women respectively per 1000 elderly men.

Moreover, the aging process is intensified owing to increased survival of elderly persons beyond ages 60 and 70. Males are expected to live 17 years beyond age 60 and 10 years beyond age 70; the corresponding years for females are 18 and 11, respectively, by the year 2021 (Irudaya Rajan & Mishra, 1995). Both young and total dependency ratios have shown a consistent decline over time; however, old age dependency ratios exhibit an increase. In understanding dependency among the old, it is assumed that all those 60 years and older are dependent. But the available data indicate that many Indian elderly are self-sufficient or still working and therefore cannot be treated as dependent. Old-age dependency estimated on the basis of non-workers shows a much lower value than the one estimated on the basis of age only; the ratio drops from 11.8 to 7.42. Further, non-workers in the Indian census include renter/pensioners, beggars, and those in household duties who may otherwise be considered economically productive. Exclusion of these non-workers further reduces the old age dependency to 4.56. (For more details, see Irudaya Rajan, Mishra, &Sarma, 1999.)

Social change and elderly

The process of globalization, modernization and technological advancements, mobility and the explosion in the transmission of knowledge are affecting the life styles and cultural values. That leads to the adjustment issues in changing circumstances. Individuals and families are trapped between tradition and modernity which sometimes it leads to contradiction in attitudes towards the use of knowledge and experience of the past in dealing with problems of the present. In this situation, the old people experience and advises are less valued.

In case of aging women the situation is even more difficult, who are often viewed through the prism of customary paradigms, many of which simply neglect and disregard age relations. The process of migration of younger people also increases the vulnerability of the elderly who stay behind. Gender perspective should be incorporation in all policy actions on elderly as well as there should be no discrimination on the basis of age and gender, it is a great challenge in today's world. The concerns on aging were first recognized by UN in the first World Assembly on Aging, in Vienna in 1982, and there an International Plan of Action on Aging was adopted. United Nations directed countries, in 1983 to offer social security and social programs to elder women. In general assembly in 1990 the UN designated October 1, as the International Day of Older Persons. The United Nations General Assembly in 1991 adopted a set of principles for aging women at its 46th session. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women is a landmark tool for setting out global normative standards of gender equality. CEDAW is a living instrument to protect the human rights of older women as it is mandated to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women throughout their lifespan (CEDAW Convention, 1979).

In India, the government announced the National Policy for Older Persons in 1999 to reaffirm its commitment to ensure the well-being of the older persons in a holistic manner. The government of India has been implementing several schemes/programs for the welfare of women including widows, such as Swadhar and Short Stay Homes, Support for Training and Employment Programme, Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (Soodan, 1995).

Theories of Aging

Biological theories of aging gives emphases on both growing degree of consensus about the role that evolution and natural selection play in the development of senescence and longevity and a sharpening a contentious issue between competing perspectives about how this process might have occurred. Wear and Tear Theories is another theory of biological aging propose that deals with aging in humans and other animals is simply the result of universal deteriorative process, that operate in any organized system. The theory explains that the human body is like a machine and after extensive use individual parts start to wear out.

In Societal Perspective, The Disengagement Theory sights aging as a process through which society and the individual gradually and slowly withdraw or disengage from each other. Power is transferred from the old to the young one making it possible for society to continue to function well. The Activity Theory stresses that in order to be happy in old age, individuals should be active. The theory claims that if present roles and relationships are deteriorated or lost it is important to replace them. Replacement to roles and relationships is important because when activity level drops, there is corresponding drop in level of satisfaction. The Continuity Theory is also known as the Development Theory. It states that older adults or elderly try to preserve and maintain internal and external structures by using strategies that maintain continuity. Continuity theory has admirable potential for explaining how elderly adopt to their own aging process. Changes come as an impact of older person's reflecting upon past experience and fixing goals for the future. Modernization Theory embraces that elderly persons usually fail to change to satisfy the norms of the modernization process like material economy, achievement orientation, technological maturity and mass consumption. The Age Stratification Theory provides a basis for clarifying whatever forms and levels of inequality might exist between the young and old in given societies. According to this theory, the relative inequality of the aged at any given time and in any cultural situation depends upon two types of experiences: their typical life course experiences, due mostly to the physical and mental changes that take place and the historically based experiences they have as part of the age cohort to which they belong(Kohli,1996).

Although the old age necessarily involves a biological and chronological component, but from a human rights perspective, the most important characteristic is its social construct. The prevailing view of aging people in contemporary society and the issues of concern to them focuses on the idea of old age as a period during which persons will have unmet economic, physical and social needs. As a result of this many of the policies and actions relating to other persons focus on what other groups have that they do not.

Socio-cultural Factors and the Aged

The social environment is believed to exert a strong and remarkable influence on both physical and psychological well-being. Carroll et al. (1993) noted that there is considerable documentation on the benefits of social support: low social support has been found to be related to increased morbidity and mortality and slower recovery from illness and injury. Specifically in elderly women, Mutran et al. (1995) reported that recovery from hip fracture was quicker and was associated with less depression among those women who had strong social support. Carroll et al. (1993) suggest that one way in which social support is beneficial is in promoting health behaviors.

The gendered nature of old age reveals that women tend to live longer than men. Gender relations construct the entire life cycle, from birth to old age, influencing the access to resources, facilities and opportunities and shaping life choices at every stage of life. Good health, economic and social security and adequate accommodation or housing are essential necessities of aging with dignity, but elder women in both developed and developing countries are encounter difficulties in accessing these on a basis of equality with men. Both men and women face discrimination due to old age, but women face aging differently. Gender and age discrimination make the life of an elderly women more difficult, as their rights are often violated.

Many elderly women face neglect as they are considered no longer financially or reproductively useful, and are seen as burdens on their families. Adding to this widowhood, divorce, lack of care- givers for older women, post-menopausal difficulties and absence of geriatric medicine and specialized health care are other grounds of discrimination that prohibit older women from enjoying their human rights. Elder women in prison and older disabled female face neglect and abuse as they age. Discrimination against elderly women is often because of deep-rooted cultural and social prejudice and bias. The impact of gender disparities throughout a woman's life span is obviously reflected in old age, and it often results in unfair resource allocation, maltreatment, abuse, gender based violence and prevention of access to basic services. Their ownership or access to land may be restricted due to discriminatory inheritance laws and practices. Thus, they would need to depend on the family or the state for financial support and living arrangements (Estes and Linkins, 1997)

Socio-economic scenario of the country is changing, fast paced modern life-style & rapid urbanization is taking place in whole world. Younger generations are not interacting with their elderly family members. Popularity of nuclear family system has virtually crumpled strong traditional bond between generations, grand-children & grandmothers. Till the late nineteenth century, the expectation was that these needs would be fulfilled by the institutions such as the family, the community and perhaps religious organizations all of them tended to remain constant throughout one's life. Today, mobility required by employment has increased dramatically as has the divorce rate, interrupting and diminishing community and family sources of social support. As a consequence, instrumental functions are increasingly met by employers and professionals, such as counselors, stock brokers, and social workers, while the affective functions continue to be met through personal relationships, although the form of the personal relationships has changed. Today's adults may go to singles bars, adjust to "blended families," create a social network through their place of employment, or become involved in religious or community organizations. Regardless of the source, today's social network is one that is of shorter duration and less intensity than the traditional extended family (Gannon, 1999).

The joint family system, which used to provide a form of social security, is disintegrating. Even in the villages where approximately three-fourths of India's population live and where the process of change has been slow, changes have been taking place which are not favourable to the elderly. However, despite the increased vulnerability of the aged, it is fortunate that this problem has not assumed serious proportions; nonetheless, it requires attention (Chanana & Talwar, 2000).

A major life transition and significant loss of social support for married women is widowhood. The women's extended longevity, the tendency for women to marry men older than themselves, and the low rates of remarriage among elderly widows necessarily result in a high number of elderly women who are widows. Even today women continue in most instances to be responsible for child care and elder care in the family. Women's compassion, caring and nurturance are compelling forces to get emotionally involved in the lives of others.

Women are at clear disadvantage in Indian society because most of them live in the shadow of the males throughout their lives – father, husband, son or male relatives like nephew, brother, uncle. In most of the cases they do not earn money and even when they do, their employment is often guided by family considerations. Moreover, their earnings are managed by the male counterpart. Most of the women do not own property and even when they own it they do not manage it. They are completely dependent on the male members of the family for fulfillment of all their basic needs. Besides aging women face specific health problems. They are prone to arthritis, osteoporosis and hypertension, cervical and breast cancer, anemia, and most of all depression. The rich educated women may be self-sufficient but could be facing problems of emotional insecurity and physical vulnerability. Even these women are often to threats of crime and fraud by their own relatives or children.(Dutta, 2005)

Old age as a period is characterized by economic insecurity, ill health, loneliness and resistance to change and failing health. When they lose their spouse, friend, job, income or health that cannot be replaced, this shift in their psychological make up makes their living and adjustment in a society more problematic.

Bali (1997) explains, "Widowhood can be a particularly disruptive experience. First, in addition to emotional loss, it may involve loss of status, economic dependence, mobility and lack of opportunity for social interaction. Simultaneously, it tends to disrupt the established interpersonal and support network that one may have come to depend on for guidance and support in many matters. It also disrupts the major informal support during advancing age."

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Aging and the aged represent a curious phenomenon in human life. Human beings desire to live long, but wish to avoid the consequences of aging. The aged are also the most helpless, deprived of work, depending on charity, old age assistance or the benevolent help of others, suffering from all types of physical ailments, and even becoming victims of robbery, assault, and other crimes. A Human Rights and Community based approach builds or strengthens the capacities and autonomy of individuals and communities. The human rights based approach promotes the enjoyment of human rights by all social groups and therefore helps to ensure that persons who have been denied those rights in the past will now be treated equally and with respect for their human dignity, thereby paving the way for social integration and, on that basis, the construction of a "society for all". Population aging has significant human rights implications because it ushers in new opportunities for implementing this approach and, as a corollary, for building the citizenry of the twenty first century, First, it opens the way for reconciling the needs and interests of all groups within society so that progress can be made towards a fully integrated society in which each and every person, irrespective of his or her age, has certain rights and responsibilities and has an active role to play. Second, it places individual of society in a position which enables them to demand detailed sorts of measures or services on the basis of their age and provides possibility for responding to demands from other stakeholders for the development, specification or intensification of respect for human rights.

One of the main challenges for human rights based public policies is how to initiate building a society that opens to every individual in need. In a society, where people regardless of their age, color, caste, creed or other social differences, have the same opportunity to exercise and secure full respect for their human rights and fundamental freedoms. Government should adopt a rational approach that is a right mix of enterprise and welfare. Women in the age group of 60-75 years, who are willing and able to work should be encouraged and given opportunity to earn their living. Those who are disabled or incapacitated or very old may be considered for immediate help and given financial support. And we need to spread the awareness so that the family does not treat them as a burden. Care should be taken to simplify administrative problems so that the illiterate women are able to take advantage of the schemes.

CONCLUSION

The gender dimension of aging is not only restricted to the population, but has differential implications on the cycle of women and men. Programs for the elderly may create, maintain or reinforce those gender roles and relations that are detrimental to the well being and status of women. A life cycle approach to gender analysis will provide a comprehensive perspective to gender-sensitive planning for the aging population. The full development and advancement of

women cannot be achieved without taking a life-cycle approach, recognizing and addressing how the different stages of women's lives, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age have an impact on their enjoyment of human rights. The laws are only in the letters, these must be put into practice, only then the goal can be achieved. Steps taken by Government, NGOs and security agencies go a long way in reducing threats to older women, but the family still remains the most important institution in an Indian women's life.

As H.Y. Sharada Prasad, in his column in *Asian Age* presciently pointed out, It is not the Government that has elderly parents, but we. It is up to us to take the initiative in protecting them (Seminar, 2000). Therefore one needs to work on the policies and programs that support families to take care of aging women. Counseling of both, the young and the old to adjust to each others' needs and life styles should be imparted and new methods of conflict management should be taught to the people so that they live in their own families without becoming a nuisance to each other.

Scope for further research

This article is based on the secondary data for further research empirical study can present the contemporary and comprehensive scenario of the elderly women and their concerns from the field.

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