

WOMEN AND AGEING: SOCIAL REALITIES OF AGED WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the socio-cultural and situational analysis of aged women in India. It examines various forms of violence against aged women particularly in India and it analyse how the Government of India is taking initiatives to improve that status of aged women. This paper tries to critically question the existing gender inequalities and social stigma towards aged women in India. In addition, the study examines violence against elderly women in India. Government intervention to support the elder women population is also a part of this paper.

Key words: *Aged women, ageism, violence against women, gender, domestic violence*

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INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a lifelong process and it varies from one person to another. It concerns more biological and psychological, though ageing has a socio-cultural, political and gender dimension. All human beings are undergoing with this process of aging. Hence, in a patriarchal social system, gender roles and the approach towards aged women makes them in a difficult situation. They are excluded from the social system, marginalised by the mainstream society, skills are unemployed for national development. An aged woman's life receives varying treatment within the male-dominated family. In Indian society, women are considered, they should be part of the family as mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, sister and so on. Once the women become aged, she experiences the problem of identity in her own domestic sphere. Most of the family considers the older women as a burden. This neglecting attitude of family members towards older women pushes them into a more vulnerable position.

An old Indian woman is always burdened with the problems like illiteracy, poverty, widowhood, health problem and psychological distress. Moreover, the special features of the elderly population in India are: (a) a majority (80 per cent) of the elderly live in the rural areas, thereby making service delivery a challenge; (b) feminisation of the elderly population (51 per cent of the elderly population would be women by the year 2016); (c) increase in the number of the oldest-old (persons above 80 years) and (d) a large proportion (30 per cent) of the elderly live below the poverty line. A combination of these features makes the elderly very vulnerable.

This paper attempts to explore the socio-cultural and situational analysis of aged women in India. It examines various forms of violence against women particularly in India and it analyses how the Government of India takes initiatives to improve that status of aged women. This paper tries to critically question the existing gender inequalities and social stigma towards aged women in India.

GENDER DIMENSIONS OF AGEISM

Robert Butler in 1968 defines ageism "a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour

and gender” (Butler, 1975). He explained that, ageism creates a dangerous tendency to classify the old people as “the other”. It drags them into an inclusive life pattern rather than mainstream living condition. It is observed that old people are depicted as comical figures, the butt of jokes. They are excluded from public images, as if this segment of the population did not count. Some of the stereotypes are self-reinforcing: the elderly people may tend to adopt negative views of themselves and thus either conform to these stereotypes and they make special efforts to counteract them.

Ageism effects against women more vulnerable than men. Traditional gender roles of women trained them always engaged with childbearing and childrearing and other related work. Menopause stage represents their decreased status, even they themselves feel that they are hopeless or useless in the family. Mostly, society prejudice that beauty associates with youthful appearance and the traditional society enforces womanhood with these components. The premium placed on good looks may also have a greater negative impact on women, many of whom have internalized the prevailing social value placed on beauty, and particularly the association of beauty with a youthful appearance.

GLOBAL SCENARIO OF AGEING

The demography of aged population makes heated discussions in the world today. Developed countries are having sound policies and programmes to support senior citizens from economic and social crisis. Third world countries, especially South Asia is already in the path of managing the crisis of growing number of elders through appropriate policies and schemes. However, the growing number of elder population is significantly effects the entire demography of glob. Table No.1 draft a picture of future of elderly population in global.

Table: 1 **Future of Elderly Population in Global projected by UN**

	<i>Total population (in billion)</i>	<i>60 years and above (per cent)</i>	<i>65 years and above (per cent)</i>	<i>80 years and above (per cent)</i>
2005	7.3	10.4	7.4	1.3
2025	8.1	15.1	11.2	2.4
2050	9.4	21.7	15.8	4.3
2075	10.1	26.5	19.5	6.0
2100	10.5	29.2	22.5	7.5
2125	10.6	30.2	24.1	9.3
2150	10.9	31.8	25.6	10.8

Source: United Nations, 2005

In global, the total population is 7.3 billion. Out of 7.3 billion of total population, 10.4 percent of them are in 60 and above years. 7.4 percent of them are 65 years old and 1.3 percent of the elders are above 80 years old. It is expecting that in the year of 2125, the total population will increase as 10.9 billion and 31.8 percent of people will be in the age group of 60 and above, 25.6 percent of them will be 65 years and above and 10.8 percent of them expected to be 80 and above years. The table shows that, the magnitude of ageing population is rapidly increases in global.

DEMOGRAPHY OF AGED WOMEN IN INDIA

Since Indian Independence in 1947, the life expectancy has doubled from 33 years to 64 years. India currently has the world's second largest population of elderly persons, with over 70 million persons are aged sixty or above. The absolute number of the over 60 population in India will increase from 76 million in 2001 to 137 million by 2021(Prakash, Indira, 1999).

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Table2:

Crude Birth Rate (CBR), Crude Death Rate (CDR) and expectations of life at age 60

Census year	CBR	CDR	Expectation of life at age 60 Males	Expectation of life at age 60 Females
1961	41.7	22.8	11.8	13.0
1971	41.2	19.0	13.6	13.8
1981	33.9	12.5	13.8	14.7
1991	29.7	10.7	14.5	15.5
2001	23.7	8.4	15.2	16.4

Source: Chanana, H.B. & Talwar, P.P. (1987) 'Ageing in India: Its socio-economic and health implications'. *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*. 2(3), 24.

Table two (2) shows the gradual rise in the elderly population in India. From 5.4 percent in 1951, the proportion of 60 plus people grew to 6.4 per cent in 1981 and is projected to be close to 8.1 per cent in 2001. The decadal percent growth in the elderly population for the period 1991-2001 would be close to 40, more than double the rate of increase for the general population (Prakash, Indira, 1999). Government of India had adopted National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP) in January, 1999 with the propose to assure the wellbeing of elder persons. This policy has foreseen to ensure economic and food security, health care, shelter and other basic needs of elderly people to improve their standard of life.

CHANGING GENDER ROLES

Ageing is a universal phenomenon. There are several factors makes an aged person's life vulnerable sometimes valuable. Their race, gender, class, caste, social and marital status determine the situation of an aged women and her status. It is a well known fact that, old age lessens the role of aged people. Gradual shifts in gender roles are quite common among old women and men. In fact, family considered as the primary social institution and in Indian situation it is more valuable. Because, in India, most of the people are concerned about their family, family relations and family roles. Aged women face more problems in the changing society connected with financial crisis, dependency, loneliness change of society and so on.

Family is one the means of supporting system for aged people. However, the institution of family faces multiples changes in Indian society. Those changes are not helpful to support the aged members of the family.

VIOLENCE AGAINST AGED WOMEN

Violence against aged women can be in any form as neglect, abuse, unfriendliness, emotional torture and so on. The most common form of violence against aged people is known as elder abuse. According to the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, it is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person. It includes physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse as well as neglect and occurs in families at all economic levels.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST AGED WOMEN

Domestic violence is considered as one of the severe form of violence against women and aged women are not free from this. There is no definite data about the extent of domestic violence against aged women. Because, most the research on domestic focuses the age of victims as 19 to 49 or 20 to 45. It caused the lacunae of missing data on domestic violence against aged women. Another dangerous tendency generates that domestic violence against older women always categorise in the account of 'elderly abuse'. That itself marginalise and gives less importance to the issues against aged women. In Hightower's words "reflects a societal predisposition to homogenise older people by not taking into account individual differences, including gender" (Hightower: 2002).

The natures of domestic violence against aged women are so far equal with the nature of other domestic violence. Hence, poor economic condition, health issues, widowhood, unemployment, dependency to the abuser all these factors makes their life more vulnerable than other victims. Mostly, aged women are feels embarrassed about violence against them and they dare to take legal actions against the abuser. Conflict with children, property and partition issues, adjustment problems are more common factors or reasons behind the domestic violence.

CONCLUSION

The status of aged women in India shows different issues associated with health, economy, social status, livelihood etc. Aged women are undergoing the problems of isolation, dependence, powerlessness and negligence from the intimate relations. Therefore, aged people are task group in the society, they may get the bad effect of stress and depression and it reflects in their health. The roles changes in the family and the society creates the difficulty to accept the reality. Hence, the intellectual functions of aged women is higher than aged men. They are capable enough to take decisions and manage the family functions. Hence, health, economic and social problems largely effects women. Loss of health, death from their spouses and friends, lack of economic power and separation from familiar places are universal issues among the aged population. In some extent, through the government schemes as widow pension scheme helps them to get financial independence. There is a need of holistic approach through government to solve the problems of elders. In addition, the living conditions of elders are different from one region to another. The other factors like age, sex, region, marital status, socio cultural situation, educational and livelihood status of elders has to be considered while implements the policies and schemes.

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