

Gender Perspective of Population Ageing in India

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Abstract: In recent decades, human civilization has gone through a slow but deep transition from world with more young population to one with more elderly population. This poses a serious demographic challenge to the world. Population ageing and the new emerging phenomenon of feminisation of ageing are becoming major concerns for the policy makers all over the world.

Gender is a powerful and dominating factor affecting the quality of life at all stages of life, even at old age, more or less in all the societies of the world. Gender based stereotyping, discriminating and exploitative attitude towards women has led to undernourishment, food restrictions, early marriage, multiple pregnancies and less attention to health and education. High illiteracy, negligible presence in employment market combined with low wages, improper property rights and subordinated status in family further leads to elderly women stand in an unambiguously disadvantageous position in comparison to elderly men. In reality the concerns of the oldest old must be viewed largely as the concerns of elderly women in India.

In the present paper, the endeavour is to analyze the demographic transition of population from young population to more elderly population and examine the emerging phenomenon of feminisation of ageing in India.

Key words: Population ageing, Gender perspective, Exploitative attitude, Demographic transition, Feminisation of ageing.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1991 recognising the significance of the ageing population had adopted certain principles for older persons¹. These Principles emphasized on so many entitlements for the elderly to make this world a happily living and enjoying place for them. Indian Constitution, under article 41 (i.e. the Directive Principle of State Policy) commands the State to make optimum provisions for its citizens irrespective of their age. Obviously we were not talking about problems related to population ageing at

that time. Even at present India is a youthful nation with 55 percent of its population below the age of 25 years. However, the situation will change very quickly and very alarmingly in coming decades.

Population ageing is a phenomenon which is known as relative reduction in the share of people in the prime working ages to the population of older adults. The process of population ageing primarily involves a gradual demographic shift in the population age structure as it moves from high mortality/high fertility to low mortality/low fertility with increased life expectancy and consequently an increased share of older people in the total population² (James and Satyanarayana, 2011).

Population ageing is defined by the United Nations as 'the process whereby older individuals become a proportionately larger share of the total population'³. Also the United Nations defined a country as ageing/greying nation where the proportion of people over 60 years reached 7 percent of total population.

Human life span has been considerably lengthened due to scientific advancement, particularly in the medical and nutritional fields. At present, numerous life saving devices are there resulting in increased global life expectancy from 46.9 years in 1950 to about 70 years during 2010-15⁴. The latest edition of the United Nations population projection indicates that global life expectancy may reach up to 81.8 years (varying from 88.9 years in economically advanced regions to 77.6 years in the economically backward regions) by the end of this century (UN, 2012). Therefore, the number of older persons is rising steeply and alarmingly and studies tell us that this phenomenon applies to all the countries of the world. In 2012 the elderly population (60+ years) accounted for about 23 percent of the total population in the more developed countries, which was projected to reach about 32 percent by 2050. Many developing countries, including India, are also experiencing the problem of population ageing at a rapid pace as older population, who accounted for 9 percent of the total population in 2012, are projected to reach 19 percent by 2050 (UN, 2012).

Population ageing is the most significant result of a process known as demographic transition. The shape of the population pyramid

is gradually changing from a wide based and narrow topped form to a barrel shaped in recent future (Chakravarti and Sarkar, 2011).

Elderly or old age consists of ages nearing or surpassing the average life span of human beings. The boundary of old age cannot be defined exactly because it does not have the same meaning in all societies. Government of India adopted ‘National Policy on Older Persons in 1999. The policy defines ‘Senior Citizens’ or ‘elderly’ as a person who is of age 60 years or above. In Indian context, the life expectancy at birth has moved up from 37 years in 1950 to 65 years in 2011 and projection says it will rise to 74 years by 2050. Resulting in a steep rise in the share of the elderly in India’s overall population from 8.6 percent in 2011 to a projected estimate of 20 percent by 2050 (UN, 2013b). The proportion of the elderly population has been rising consistently from 5.6 percent in 1961 to 7.47 percent in 2001 and to 8.6 percent in 2011 and is expected to reach 12.69 in 2025 (Chakravarti and Sarkar, 2011).

Table 1: Projected Population Aged 60+ years in India From 1st March 2001-2026, in million

Years	Persons
2001	66.38
2006	81.02
2011	97.24
2016	117.07
2021	141.82
2026	171.66

Source: Office of Registrar General of India, 2006

Ageing has an unsounded impact and conditional implications for all aspects of human life in all the nations of the world. Not only on economic aspects such as savings, investment, consumption, labour markets, taxation etc. but it had effects on social and political sphere of the globe also. Voluminous supportive socio-economic and emotional infrastructure will be needed for this fast growing population and it is going to be a big challenge before the planners and governments in the years to come.

Table 2: Numbers and Proportions of Elderly in Total Population by Different Age Groups in India, 1971-2011

Census year	60+ population		70+ population		80+ Population	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1971	21375281	3.90	8124272	1.48	3200178	0.58
1981	27681981	4.16	11358638	1.71	4126765	0.62
1991	35607475	4.27	14699654	1.76	6374511	0.76
2001	47323734	4.61	21259861	2.07	8038718	0.78
2011	59051210	4.80	27995334	2.70	9704865	0.80

Source: Various Reports of Census of India

It is clear from the above table (Table 2) that proportion of elderly population in all age groups 60+, 70+ and 80+ is increasing in India. According to the census of India ageing scenario also differs from urban to rural India.

Table 3: Ageing Scenario in Rural and Urban India on Gender Basis (% distribution of 60+ populations)

Year	60+ population			Urban Population			Rural Population		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
1961	5.6	5.5	5.8	4.6	4.4	5.1	5.8	5.7	6.0
1971	6.0	5.9	6.0	5.0	4.7	5.3	6.2	6.3	6.2
1981	6.5	6.4	6.6	5.4	5.1	5.7	7.2	7.6	6.9
1991	6.8	6.7	6.8	5.8	5.6	6.0	7.2	7.2	7.0
2001	7.4	7.1	7.8	6.7	6.3	7.2	7.7	7.4	8.1
2011	8.6	8.2	9.0	8.1	7.7	8.6	8.8	8.4	9.2

Source: Various Reports of Census of India.

Table 3 shows very explicitly that rural elderly outnumbered urban elderly. The table also highlights a typical demographic feature among the elderly population that the share of female section of the older people is higher and increasing. According to 2001 and 2011 census report elderly women has outnumbered the male counterparts considerably.

For most of the nations, regardless of the geographic location or developmental stage, there are two notable aspects of the global

ageing process: one is progressive demographic ageing of the elderly people and the other is about feminisation of ageing⁵. Around the world older women outnumber older men making ageing far more of a female experience. Although women make up half of the world population, by the end of the next quarter century, they will account for more than half (54%) of the people ages 60 and older and 63 percent of very old people (80+)⁶. This phenomenon is referred to as ‘Feminisation of Ageing’. Women are living healthier and longer than ever before and, on average, longer than men. Today just over half of the older women live in developing countries⁷. It is estimated that by the year 2025 approximately 75 percent of older women around the globe will reside in developing countries⁸. One key commonality among older women around the world is that the majority of older women are more likely to be widowed. In the advanced age of 80 years and above, widowhood dominates the status of women with 71 percent of women and only 29 percent of men having lost their spouse⁹. This has been attributed to women’s demographically longer life expectancy and that women often marry men who are more in age than they themselves are. Social taboos inhibit women from remarrying and lesser attractiveness at old age also leads to the low remarriage of elderly women (Gibson, 1996) resulting in an increased likeliness of women ageing alone. Gender discrimination prevailing in normal course of society would aggravate the problems of lonely elderly women in all over the world including India.

At the First ‘World Assembly on Ageing’ (1982) United Nation declared, “the situation of older women everywhere must be a priority for policy action. Recognising the differential impact of ageing on women and men is integral to ensuring full equality between women and men and to the development of effective and efficient measures to address the issue. It is therefore, crucial to ensure the integration of a gender perspective in to all policies, programmes and legislations”¹⁰. Instead of viewing ageing as a common phenomenon and attempting a common approach towards the problem, United Nations has been emphasizing upon member countries that the issues faced by elderly men and women are characteristically different since the very emergence of the population ageing issues.

“To ensure that older women’s concerns and contribution to development are recognized and incorporated into strategies, programmes and policies of the Platform for Action which deals with equality development and peace.” (94th Plenary Meeting of the United Nations, Dec. 1994). This was the appeal made by UN for gender perspective on ageing problems which was endorsed in CEDAW: 2002 (the Convention for Eradication of Discrimination Against Women) by announcing ‘ both men and women face discrimination due to old age but women experience ageing differently..... Good health, economic security and adequate housing are essential requirements of ageing with dignity. But older women in both developed and developing countries face difficulties in accessing these, on the basis of equality with men. Elderly women’s requirements vary according to their age and physical condition. Policy makers need to recognize this reality and take it into account.’¹¹

Table 4: Trends in Sex Ratio in India

Census year	Ratio in Total Population	Ratio in Elderly Population
1951	946	1028
1961	941	1000
1971	930	938
1981	934	960
1991	927	930
2001	933	972
2011	940	1033*

Source: Situation Analysis of Elderly in India, June 2011, Central Statistics Office, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Govt. of India.

*Elderly in India- Profile and Programmes 2016, www.mospi.gov.in

India is a member of CEDAW and ‘UN Declaration on Ageing’ still NPOP (National Policy on Older Population, 1999) document do not speak of the deeper concerns of elderly women in social, economic and health aspects. The reason behind it may be to treat the older population as a homogeneous group and to assume that what is good for elderly men is equally good for elderly women the attitude prevailing in all over the world, especially in the developing countries like India.

The sex ratio among elderly people was as high as 1028 in 1951 but subsequently dropped to about 938 in 1971, but has finally increased again to about 972 in 2001. Another feature is a relatively higher ratio of females to males in the elderly population than in the general population for all the years since independence.

India is one of the few countries in the world where men outnumbered women at all ages even till old - old age. However, this trend is changing and we can see in the table 4 that the sex ratio in elderly population is as high as 1033 in 2011 census and share of elderly women population in total population is 9.0 percent in comparison to 8.2 percent share of elderly men in total population. (Elderly in India- Profile and Programmes 2016 www.mospi.gov.in)

The projection for 2021 says that the sex ratio will be 135 per 100 elderly men in India which will be in conformity of the feminisation of ageing seen in almost every part of the globe. This implies that it will be largely those elderly women who may be in more need of social, health and economic support. The demographic projection says that overall Indian population will grow by 55 percent whereas elderly population (60+) will increase by 326 percent and more alarmingly those in the age group of 80+ by 700 percent. From 180 thousand in 2000 to 3219 thousand by 2050 would be the number of centenarians according to the projection estimates¹² (Table 5).

**Table 5: Population Projection for India in 2050
(In millions)**

years	Total population	60+ population	80+population
2000	1008	76	6
2050	1572	324	48

Source: World Population Ageing: 1950- 2050, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division UN, New York, 2002.

In India, gender perspective can be seen in different fields of population ageing like demographic, health, social and economic areas separately. Demographic factor, as discussed earlier, depicts that outnumbering of women over men in Indian context is not so visible phenomenon yet (table 3); population projections project the seriousness of the problem in coming decades.

**Table 6: Sex Ratio of the Elderly in
Different Age Groups in India, 1991-2021**

Age Group	1991	2001	2011	2021
All elderly (60+)	94	102	105	103
60-69 years	94	104	98	96
70-79 years	92	98	114	106
80 and above	92	108	116	135

Source: Registrar General and Census of India, 2006

Table 6 presents the sex ratio of the elderly population since 1991 to 2021 indicating a growing trend from 94 older women per hundred older men in 1991 to 105 older women in 2011. If we will see the age group 80+ it is clear from the table that the ratio increases from 92 in 1991 to 135 in 2021. This clearly depicts that there will be more need of all type of support and assistance for elderly women in coming decades. Living longer may sound like a boon, but not for elderly women, especially in country like India where women are socially marginalized and exploited in normal course of ordinary life time. Much of their old age is spent in widowhood, poverty and morbidity.

**Table 7: Distribution of the Elderly Population by Current
Marital Status and gender, Census year - 2011**

Age Group	Never Married		Currently Married		Widowed		Divorced/Separated	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
60+	2.9	2.0	82.1	49.6	14.6	47.9	0.4	0.5
70+	7.9	4.5	61.9	26.1	30.1	69.0	0.4	0.4

Source: Census of India, 2011

Widowhood is another serious problem of elderly women. From table 7 it is clear that sizeable proportions of elderly females were widowed as compared to their male counterparts, particularly among the 80+ elderly. The population census 2011 data tells us that after the age of 70 years more than 60 percent of women become widows. The majority of elderly women would be extremely vulnerable as most would be leading extended years of life in loneliness, ill-health and largely be dependent upon family members/others for financial support and care giving. There is nearly total absence of old age security for women. In India, though some contributory pension

scheme for the people who work in the formal sector of the economy exists, the majority of the elderly people, especially elderly women are not covered by any form of formal old age security programme or not eligible for retirement benefits. India implements Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme for old people belonging to below poverty line households. However, the amount is too small to meet the consumption needs of the elderly and coverage of the scheme has been modest (Rajan, 2006; Joshi, 2006).

Fundamentally, men and women die due to more or less identical generic issues; even both sexes have same patterns of morbidity, they suffer differently. Elderly women carry more chronic diseases and have higher incidence rate for non-fatal diseases whereas elderly men carry more acute diseases and have higher incidence rate for fatal diseases¹³. Presence of gender specific illness and the fact that most women take their diseases for granted make them least complaining about their illness, lack of financial support and widowhood leads elderly women experience a range of physical and psychological tortures more than their male counterparts.

In patriarchal and traditional social setup like India perhaps an elderly women suffers the most. Owing to gender inequality over the course of their life time, elderly women are more subject to loneliness, poverty and social isolation than elderly men (Age well Foundation: 2012). Older women face triple jeopardy - that of being female, of being old and being poor¹⁴. Elderly women rely on traditional support systems, their children and other members of the family. Woman gets more marginalized in society after the death of her husband. She loses the respect, care and social and financial security as well. (Kumari and Sekhar, 2012; Rani and Suguma, 2001; Dharmalingam and Murugan, 2002). Her movements are restricted to the four walls of the household and this cuts all ties with the outside world. Even within the four walls of the household she is not allowed to meet visitors and, moreover, she has to tolerate all types of abuses ranging from taunts and more aggressive forms of psychological abuses, physical abuses, denial of food, shelter and health care worse still total neglect and abandonment (Nayar, 2013; Sebasteian and Sekhar, 2010). Old age dependency ratio in India is

14.2 percent in 2011 for all India level while the value of the ratio in the same census year was 14.9 percent and 13.9 percent for females and males respectively.

Various studies (Kumari and Sekhar, 2010; Arber and Cooper, 1999; Louge, 1991) have reported greater levels of disability in physical functioning among elderly women in terms of physiological ageing, as a result of which elderly women experience more constraints on their social activities in everyday lives due to the difficulties in mobility.

Economically, women are dependent on their family members due to gender division of labour in the society which assumes that women's primary functions is to involve in giving birth to child, unpaid household work, care giving and unequal power relations at home. Female financial security depends on the willingness of male members of the family. Women inheritance rights are unsubstantiated in India. Ownership and control of the family property is in hands of male members. This financial dependency and less stable economic base is the result of gender differences and inequalities in education and employment opportunities in the normal course of life of women. As a result, elderly women are more likely to be poorer in old age and more likely to face discrimination¹⁵. Labour force participation rate of male and females remained stable during the period between 1983 to 1993-94 and thereafter the labour force participation rate of elderly men has gradually declined. On the contrary elderly female labour force participation rate fluctuated around 20 percent during 1983 to 2011-12. According to 2011 census in rural areas 66 percent of elderly men and 28 percent of elderly women were working, while in urban areas only 46 percent of elderly men and about 11 percent of elderly women were working.

Conclusion

There is no significant empirical evidence to suggest that large population of elderly population would impede the economic progress of a nation¹⁶. But one cannot deny that these demographic and social changes will pose in major challenges before the society, Government, planners and policy makers. For a developing country like India this may pose mounting pressures on various socio-economic - psychological

fronts including pension outlays, health care expenditures and fiscal pressures. On one side, the expenditure will increase to maintain this increasing number of elderly population and on the other side ratio of working population will decrease resulting in shrunk of resources.

The country is already aware of this severe challenge and working towards to face the challenge. The ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is the nodal Ministry for the welfare of senior citizens which is working with close collaboration with State Governments, Non-Governmental organizations and civil society. The Division has been implementing a Central Sector Scheme, 'Integrated Programme for Older Persons' since 1992, which was revised in 2008 and new innovative projects were included for the welfare of senior citizens. National policy for Older Persons was announced in 1999 and also a National Council for older Persons was constituted in the same year. In 2012, this NCOP has been reconstituted and renamed as National Council of Senior Citizens (NCSrC). In addition to this to ensure basic need based maintenance for parents and senior citizens and their welfare in the family itself 'The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act' was enacted in the year 2007.

With all these initiative taken by the Government there is need of enhancing the understanding of the problems of the senior citizens in the country by planners and policy makers as well as by the researcher. There is an emerging need to pay greater attention to ageing related issues and to promote holistic approach in making policies and programmes for dealing with the ageing society.

Notes

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