

# Gender Ageing: Concept and Approaches

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On an average, women live longer than men, and some researchers have categorized 'very old' as primarily a female experience. This article is an attempt to analyse the concepts of 'ageing' with special reference to women.

## Understanding Ageing

Ageing is a continued process and 'the aged' is a category. The word 'ageing' has been defined by researchers in different contexts. Tyagi says, "Ageing means the effect of age i.e. the deterioration in physiological capabilities"(1997: 20). Becker defines ageing in the broadest sense "as those changes occurring in an individual, as a result of passage of time"(Khan, 1997: 21). According to Stieglitz (1954), "Ageing is a part of living. It begins with conception and terminates with death". Obviously, ageing is a biological process, experienced by the mankind in all times. But, at what age people become old in their life-cycle is not clear. There is no single point at which people automatically cross a magic line and become old (Natrajan, 2000: 25).

'A man ages biologically as a continuing process, socially as perceived by the members of the society, economically when retired from the workforce and chronologically one grows older with time' (Benyaklef, 1991 cited from Devi, Santhosh, Asharaf and Roy, 1999: 2). The review of literature in general, and this statement in particular, highlight two main points. First, there are four basic approaches to define the 'aged' or 'old age'. Secondly, these approaches were laid down keeping in view the male life-cycle. Prakash was, in fact, right in mentioning that 'much of human psychology was psychology of man' (1994: 187). This is hardly surprising because for a very long time social scientists were guided by a blind assumption that men are more representative of the human race than women are. 'The failure 'to build' women into social science research has impaired the accuracy and comprehensiveness of conceptual models and empirical findings. Even in psychology, female of human species, especially the ageing

variety is a relatively new entrant on the research scene' (Prakash, 1994: 99). Given below is an attempt to analyse the approaches to define 'the aged' or 'the old' from the gender perspective.

## Approaches to Old Age

Different researches have mentioned different approaches to define 'the aged'; for example, Kasthoori describes biological, psychological and philosophical aspects of ageing (1996: 2-3). Hooyman and Kiyon view ageing in terms of four distinct processes viz. chronological ageing, biological ageing, psychological ageing and social ageing (1998: 3-4). Khan (1997) and Tyagi (1997) look at the phenomenon of ageing from three major but somewhat overlapping perspectives: anatomical or physiological perspective, psychological perspective and socio-cultural perspective. Sharma and Agarwal identify biological, psychological and social factors of ageing (1992: 14-15) while Prakash emphasizes three ways of defining old age in women: 1. Biological markers (menopause), 2. Social roles and 3. Self-definition (1994: 187). According to Kumar, the major types of ageing are: chronological ageing, functional ageing, psychological ageing and social ageing (1999: 16). Tandon emphasizes four ways of defining 'old age' as (1) Physical ageing, (2) Social ageing, (3) Cultural ageing and (4) Psychological ageing (1996: 2). The above description clearly indicates that the four perspectives to ageing may be: (i) Biological or physiological or functional ageing, (ii) Chronological ageing (iii) Psychological ageing or 'self-definition' and (iv) Socio-cultural ageing.

### (i) Physiological or Biological or Functional Ageing

According to Gray and Mobery (1962) "physiologically a person is old when the signs of wearing out of the body appear". Handler regards ageing as the "deterioration of mature organism resulting from time dependent and irreversible changes intrinsic to all members of that species. With the passage of time, they are increasingly unable to cope with the stresses of the environment and head towards decay and eventual death" (1960 as cited from Khan, 1997: 20). "Becker (1959) views ageing as those changes occurring in an individual as a result of the passage of time. Ageing consists of

two simultaneous components: anabolic building-up and catabolic break down. The first two decades of life, according to him, are predominantly anabolic, during which there is growth and development. In contrast, the last few decades are largely catabolic, during which atrophy and degeneration dominate. In the middle years, there is essentially a balance between expansion and decay. In other words, while growth predominates in youth, degenerative changes, which originate in early life, predominate in the later life-span” (Khan 1997: 21).

Although there is still considerable debate about the precise biological definition of ageing, Strehler suggests four criteria to distinguish ageing from the other biological processes. These are: 1. Universality (must happen to each member of the population), 2. Internality (must come from within the organism), 3. Progressiveness (must occur gradually over time) and 4. Harmfulness (must have a deleterious effect upon the organism and its ability to cope with its environment) (1977, cited from Victor, 1987: 4). All areas of the body are affected to some degree. But the various systems of the body do not deteriorate at the same time and at the same rate, and neither is the similar pattern of decline followed for all persons. Furthermore, the sum total of age associated changes are also affected and enhanced by the disease process which inflict individuals and this contribute to what has been called as ‘disease ageing’ as distinct from ‘normal aging’ (Sharma and Agarwal, 1992: 14).

Though ageing is universal, some researchers consider ageing and old age as the functional and not chronological concepts. Functional ageing, according to Kumar, “reflects the relationship between biological maturation or deterioration and how an individual can perform physical, social and/or cognitive tasks” (1999: 16-17). Sharma opines that “in old age, person’s competence – physical, mental and social is reduced and becomes dependent, to a great degree, on the environment” (1998: 54-57).

Ageing is, no doubt, the post-reproductive phase in a person’s life. But the biological changes that seem to herald the onset of ageing are more apparent and occur earlier in women as compared to men. The popular image of an aged woman is often that of a frail, senile,

hard of hearing and in need of help with routine activities of living: bathing, eating, dressing, etc. and gives the impression of ageing as a period of mal-adaptation, which is not true in the majority of the cases (Sharma, 1998: 54-57).

But, ‘Menopause tells a woman in no uncertain terms that her reproductive function has come to an end. The physiological truth is more obvious in women than in men. In societies where a woman’s reproductive function is overvalued, a post-menopausal woman is considered old. In cultures, where menopause is equated with loss of vitality, sexuality and femininity, this event may be taken as a marker of ageing’ (Prakash, 1994: 187). Ganesh views that reproductive senescence sets in women at menopause, which is earlier than 60 years; and is the basis generally used to define the ‘aged’ (1997: 65-78). ‘Despite increase in longevity, the mean age for menopause has remained almost constant at 51 years in developed countries and a couple of years lower in developing countries. Thus, the average age for menopause is between 47-50 years’ (Sahi, 1998: 11-13). However, menopause is experienced differently by women in different cultures. Yet, Bavadam emphasizes that the women have a more complex phase of old age (i.e. the post-menopausal phase) (1999: 119-120). Menopause also markedly accelerates bone loss (Caroline et al., 1998).

The ageing is more threatening for women than men because it has more negative implications. Cockerham points that men tend to report more decline in their hearing and greater hair loss than women, whereas women tend to report more decline in their eye sight and energy as well as in the quality of their skin and figure (1991: 136-37). Women do also tend to be more obese. White (1988) suggests, accordingly, that male-female perception of ageing are largely different because of the differences in the ageing process and that when all signs of ageing are appeared, there is really not much difference between the sexes in recognizing the onset of old age. Gray hair, dry skin, wrinkles and loss of energy – along with the fact of chronological age – provide indisputable evidence of ageing. The impact of that process, however, may be somewhat greater on women when it comes to special consequences and connotations to beauty and sexuality. But the struggle against the inevitable change in one’s

looks most likely peaks in late middle age rather than old age. Once they are old, there may be little or no difference about the effects of ageing on their appearance in comparison with old men. In fact, old age may be the time of life when looks matter the least (Cockerham, 1991: 135-36).

Except for certain limited purposes, it is not yet practicable to use any physical criterion as the basis for determining whether or not an individual is old. Harell (1969) expresses somewhat similar view while stating that “no biological parameter has been detected which will clearly indicate when an individual person has become old” (Tyagi, 1997: 20).

### **(ii) Chronological Ageing**

Chronology or calendar age is frequently used to define the onset of old age. This index has given increasing importance in modern society, specially where legal definitions couched in terms of chronology have become important in defining particular phases of life-cycle such as the age of legal responsibility, majority, marriage or retirement. Chronological age is, in fact, a good criterion for demarcating ‘the aged’ as it is an important indicator of health, functional capacity, labour force participation, life-cycle stage and income.

But assigning a particular age at which a person becomes aged is a difficult proposition. Victor opines that the use of chronological age as a criterion for the definition of ageing (or any other phase of the life-cycle) has two distinct dimensions: the first is based upon the cultural ascription of the society and the second dimension relates to the response of the state to the perceived problems of old age (1988: 9-10). According to Devi, Santhosh, Asharaf and Roy (1999) and Tyagi (1997), the cut-off point to define the aged relates to the longevity of the people. When the life expectancy of the population was 40 years, a person aged 40 was considered as aged. In the least and less developed countries of today the expectation of life at birth is hovering around 60 years and hence the 60 years demarcation is accepted for the aged (Devi et al., 1999: 2). Majority of people believe that in developed countries the aged are those who are 65 years or above (Tyagi, 1997: 21). The life expectancy is also comparatively longer in the developed countries.

Divergent views exist regarding a particular age at which a person becomes aged. For example, at the World Assembly on Ageing at Vienna in 1982; and in the United Nations Conference on Ageing and Urbanization (1991), the term elderly is defined as the population aged 60 years and above. Kart (1981) writes that “available data in the United States define the elderly as those 65 years of age and above” (Tyagi, 1997: 21).

The confusion and contradictions prevail even if we consider the age of retirement/pension or getting old age concessions as a cut off year for the aged. In Germany, earlier the retirement age was 70 years but later on it was changed to 65 years. In USA, the retirement age of male and female is 65 and 60 years respectively. But generally 65 years of age and above is considered as cut off point for the aged in USA. In India, the retirement age varies from 35 years (for soldiers), 55 years (for a few government employees e.g. state government employees of Kerala; and Jammu and Kashmir), 58 (in Central and State governments), 60 (government employees including IAS and IPS), 60 (scientists and academicians) and 65 (for judges and few professors). A few state governments give old age pension to those who are 65 years of age or above. Sometime back, Indian Railways has started giving concessions to senior citizens (those 65 years of age and above).

### **(iii) Psychological Approach**

Psychological ageing consists of a general decline in the mental abilities that accompany old age. Psychologists take various mental abilities such as memory, intelligence, changing emotional reactions and attitudes etc. as the base for demarcating the aged (Tyagi, 1997: 20).

‘Age is a state of mind’, is a widely held notion. From psychological view point, ageing expresses itself in typical perception and awareness as of limitations, handicaps and problems, overall dissatisfaction and difficulties of adjustment on account of advanced age and typical strategies adopted by the aged to cope with them (Sinha, 1989: 17). Bhatia, on the similar lines, mentions that “the psychological changes in respect of an individual’s conception of the self, his ideas about his

worth as an individual and as a member of social groups, his feelings about the attitudes and behaviour of others towards himself and his general view of life and the world, including his own place therein, play significant part in the process of psychological ageing” (1983: 5).

Is psychological ageing voluntary or involuntary? Scientific evidence is convergent on the latter. The psychological perspective has it that the process of ageing sets early in age but it is not rapid or strong. This stage in one’s life may be called ‘senescence’. It is succeeded by the phase of rapid decline in mental and emotional health and is called ‘old age’ or senility (Khan, 1997: 22). With ageing, fluid intelligence or ability to acquire new knowledge and to assimilate it decreases (Ramamurti and Jamuna, 1993). Comfort (1957) considers ageing as a change in behaviour of the organism which comes about with the increase in chronological age and which leads to a decrease in adjustment and hence in fitness, so to say, for survival (Khan, 1997: 22).

Bernice Neugarten described the major conflicts of old age as related to having to give up one’s position of authority and evaluating one’s former competence, achievements and pleasures. For both sexes, there is reconciliation with significant others: resolution of grief over the death of self, maintenance of sense of integrity in terms of what one has been rather than what one is (Sharma and Agarwal, 1992: 15). Thus, it is assumed that ageing processes can be accelerated due to the stresses and strains of life. A positive state of mind, interest in life and things around oneself help in reducing the ageing process. On the other hand, an unfavourable and negative attitude towards the changed physical and social conditions proves not only a hurdle in better adjustment in old age but brings about psychological ageing more quickly (Bhatia, 1983: 5 and Tandon, 1997: 3).

Elderly women, especially in the third world countries like India, suffer from malnutrition and debilitating symptoms as well as report higher psychological distress (Prakash, 1997: 396-408). Due to neglect and discrimination in younger ages, women are more likely to develop negative attitude towards life and face depression and mental illness.

Just to illustrate, widowhood in Indian women induces psychological and physical distress (Prakash and Anuradha, 1988). Psychologically, rural women appear to be at a disadvantaged position compared to urban women. Both middle and old aged women from rural areas report multiple somatic complaints, display symptoms of emotional distress, report low satisfaction in several domains of life and consider themselves ‘worse off’ than others. Rural conditions characterised by illiteracy, poverty, and the absence of material comforts act as an ‘environmental press’, leading to depression in older women (Prakash, 1994: 102).

Menopause, the biological symptom of ageing in women, is also generally accompanied with various psychological problems. Neuro-endocrine symptoms like mood changes, anxiety, irritability, insomnia, cognitive deficit, depression, poor confidence and low self-esteem are common problems in a large majority of post-menopausal women (Dass, 1998: 8-10 and Khetarpal, 1998: 14-15).

Now, since “the psychological causes of ageing when combined with the physical, accelerate the ageing process by speeding up the rate of decline of mental and physical capacities” (Bhatia, 1983:5); the ageing process is likely to be faster or quicker for women as compared to that for men.

The above point gets strengthened if we analyse the ‘self-definition’ of ageing. One important way of defining ‘the aged’ is the seemingly unproblematic self-definition: an ‘old person’ is someone who regards himself or herself as such (Hazan, 1994:16). But, it is to be remembered that a woman’s self-definition of ‘the aged’ is likely to be influenced heavily by her sex role stereotypes, her socialization, cultural practices etc. Hence, one has to take into consideration all socio-cultural variables so as to analyse this ‘self-definition’ of women.

Society’s standards of female beauty and physical appeal are, more or less, related to youthfulness. Therefore, women may be more aware of the ageing process than are men because the physical signs of ageing produce graver social consequences for them. Denial of ageing has therefore been considered more of a female trait. A double standard seems to exist in the popular culture also, in that

elderly men may be thought of as “handsome” or “distinguished” but elderly women are not as likely to be considered “beautiful” (Cockerham, 1991: 135). And women have been taught for centuries, to define themselves in terms of largely patriarchal beliefs and expectations.

Thus, there is a difference between men and women as to when they consider themselves “old”. ‘In terms of ‘social age’, women consider themselves old at a younger age than men. Some of the researchers suggest that women consider themselves old at the age of 50 while for the men it is 60+. Similarly, as per the younger people’s perception, for women a younger age was indicated as the threshold of ageing’ (Prakash, 1994: 188).

In a nutshell, ageing seems to occur earlier and appears to have more negative implications on women as compared to that on their male counterparts.

Yet, the indices of psychological age differ from woman to woman and from society to society. Hence, it is not practically feasible to use psychological criterion for determining who is old because the problems of measurements have not yet been surmounted (Gay and Mobery, 1962 cited from Tyagi 1997: 20).

#### **(iv) Socio-Cultural Ageing**

The socio-cultural ageing, as distinct from biological or psychological ageing, refers to the stage in the life span of the individual that is regarded as old by the social group or community.

There are a number of social events in the life of an individual that also serve as bases of recognizing oneself as being old. They are: retirement from employment, marriage of children and birth of grand children, avoidance of sexual activity or decline in expression of interest in the opposite sex after a certain age due to social censorship, assuming new social responsibilities, deserving privileges and respect mainly on account of one’s age and the expectations of younger members in the family to share more and more responsibilities in the family affairs.

Some authors consider “social ageing” and ‘cultural ageing’ as identical and interdependent and have used the term ‘socio-cultural

ageing’ to describe the two. Just to illustrate, Tyagi states that “according to socio-cultural view point, a person is termed aged when he distances himself from those roles and statuses which he was performing as an adult. He becomes disengaged from his normal adult roles such as withering away from the family roles and constricting the community of friends etc (1997: 20). On the other hand, the other researchers (like Victor, 1984; Khan, 1997 and Tondon, 1998) opine that ‘social ageing’ is different from the ‘cultural ageing’. Khan, for example, says that “while there is much in common between the cultural and sociological perspectives, these differ mainly in emphasis. The sociological perspective lays more emphasis on changes in behavioural patterns which surface with age. On the other hand, the cultural approach gives importance to life-cycle. In this, age is viewed as the progression of a person through different stages of life” (1997: 23).

In the Indian social context, starting of family life by one’s progeny may herald the onset of his old age. In the traditional societies where joint family system existed or exists even today, a woman is deemed old when her eldest son marries and brings home his wife. At this stage, there will be major changes in the roles and status of the elder woman. So is the case with her behavioural norms. She is supposed to hand over the responsibilities of the house and withdraw from her position as the mistress of the house. This is symbolically seen in the custom of handing over the keys to the new *bahu* (daughter in law) (Prakash, 1994: 187-188 and Khan, 1997: 23).

But, in the cultural approach, since importance is given to the Hindu life-cycle, the aged are supposed to be in ‘*Vanaprastha*’ or ‘*Sanyasa*’ stage. It enjoins people to gradually withdraw from their attachments (*Sanyas*) after completing their adult roles of making a living, setting-up of house-hold and child rearing (*Grahstha*), fulfilling their social responsibilities and preparing for the final stage of *Sanyas* (*Vanaprastha*).

The parameters of social and cultural ageing vary from society to society and from individual to individual. For example, the family dimension of life-cycle involves numerous transitions including newly married, new parents, parents of teenagers, “empty nesters”,

retirees and widows. Not everyone will experience all these phases of family cycle; there may also be enormous variations in the age at which individuals experience these transitions. For example, some marry at eighteen (18 years) and have three children by the age of 25, others may not marry until well set into their 30s (Victor, 1987: 14). Also, the reported average age of widowhood for an Indian sample was as low as 44 years while the median age of 56 years is reported for American women (Lopata, 1979 cited from Prakash, 1994: 101).

### **The Political Economy Approach to Ageing**

It may be added that the socio-cultural view of old age in industrialized western countries is a little different. Victor has described it as 'the Political Economy Approach to Ageing' (1987: 10-14). According to this approach, old age is defined neither by chronology or biology but by the relationship between older people and the means of production. The social and economic status of elderly is supposed to be related to the institutions of society that are either partly or entirely organized around the concept of production. The old age results in the individual being labelled 'old' and rejected by productive economic markets, simply on the grounds of age. Policies for social security, retirement benefits and pension are fundamental to this approach since they mark the boundary between independent and dependent status.

The aged are seen as a group separate from the wider social context, but as an integral part of society. Old age is often thought of as an extension of life during which paid employment and self-employment get shortened and may eventually lead to total retirement (Khan, 1997: 23-24). According to this approach, the aged should be seen as a reserve 'army' of labour. In times of slump, older workers (50-65 years) are encouraged to leave the labour force to make way for younger workers. Conversely, in period of labour shortage, the justification for retiring and becoming non-productive may be questioned and the older workers will be encouraged to remain in the labour force as long as possible.

The political economy approach to ageing was derived keeping in view the industrially active populations. And, perhaps, that is the

limitation this approach has. This approach seems to be of little use if we try to apply it to agrarian or non-industrialized societies, that too from the gender perspectives. In a country like India, women have always been considered dependent on their male counterparts. They had never been directly or independently involved in production work of market economy. If we consider household work partly as a means of production, we can say that since women never get retired from their household responsibilities, they never become old. On the other hand, if we don't consider household work as a means of production or part of labour economy, then too, this approach becomes inapplicable, since then women will be considered dependent on the society or family or their male counterparts throughout their lives. Obviously, though this approach gives some useful insights into the status of the aged in the society, yet it seems inappropriate in defining the 'aged women' particularly in societies where women don't directly participate in the labour market and economy.

To sum up, chronological age is the most popular criterion (for defining the aged) among the researchers. There are no definite biological or psychological or socio-cultural parameters which, individually or collectively, can demarcate the particular chronological age uniformly. Yet, from 'operational' point of view, chronological age provides the easiest way of defining 'the aged'. And that may be the reason behind the popularity of this criterion. Victor, however, points out that "the use of this measure requires a society to be sufficiently well organized so that its members have an idea of their chronological age" (1987: 9). Grey and Wilcock (1981) suggest that even as late as seventeenth century, people in Britain had only a very rough idea of their age". In India, even today, a large number of people, particularly the women, don't have any idea about their age. But the Census of India does not include any category 'age not known' while categorizing the people on the basis of their age. Obviously, the investigators use indirect techniques (e.g. age of self-marriage, age of eldest son, major national calamities or accidents in relation to life-cycle stages, etc.) to find out the age of such persons. In fact, ignorance about own exact age by the members of a society poses a serious limitation to the 'chronological approach to ageing'.

'The aged' is a relative term and generally used in relation to the young. There is no agreement about the cut off point for the aged even among the researchers. For example, Raigbai (1960), Jaten et al. (1991) and Devi and Bagga (1997) chose 50 years as the cut off point for the elderly. Sen (1991) indirectly pointed that senescence starts after 39 years of age. On the similar lines Anuradha and Prakash (1991) considered the age of 40 years and above for the aged. Achamba (1991) divided the young (30 to 40 years) from the older (50 to 60 years). Darshan, Sharma and Singh (1987), in their study of aged men living in slums of Hissar city; Punia and Sharma (1987), in their study of aged women living in the village for last 10 years; Shah (1991), in her study of aged women belonging to low socio-economic status of Baroda city; and William, Chadha and Kedia (1996), in their study of men and women of the upper middle class neighbourhood of Delhi, considered 55 years of age and above for 'the aged'. Chakrapani, in his / her study of 119 aged migrants in Mehboobnagar district of Andhra Pradesh, took 58 years as the cut off age for 'the aged' (1995: 117-124).

At the same time others like DSSW (1974), Jamuna (1987), Nandon, Khatri and Kadia (1987), Singh, Singh and Sharma (1987), Subhash Ital. (1987), Tandon (1990), Joseph (1991), Pinto and Prakash (1991) and Tyagi (1997) took 60 years as the lowest age to consider a person as aged. The same criterion was used to demarcate the aged by Bhatia (1995), Chakravarty (1994), Hosmath, Gaonkar and Khadi (1993), Khan, Agrawal and Mishra (1997) and Yadava, Yadava and Roberts (1996).

Also, in most of the studies which were specifically done on aged women, the same chronological age (60+ years) was used by the researchers. Below given are some of the examples. Jamuna conducted a study to assess the role of variables contributing to successful ageing on a sample of 300 women in the 60+ years of age in Chittor district, Andhra Pradesh (1994: 18-23). Karkar, in her article on aged, presented the demographic profile of population 60+ (1999: 82-98). Rajgopal and Royce also presented demographic profile of population 60+ (1995: 165-170) while Singh, Singh and Sharma studied health, economic and adjustment problems of 100 women, 60+ years old,

from village KidholiPahladpur of Sonapat district of Haryana (1987: 134-144). But Devi, Santhosh, Asharaf and Roy (1999) and Rajkumar (1995) considered aged persons as those aged 65 years or above.

The above-mentioned authors and researchers have assigned the same chronological age for the aged men and women. But there are the others who opine that women become aged at a younger age than the men. Just to quote, Mahajan (1987) uses 60 years for defining 'aged men' and 55 years for 'aged women'. Hazan mentions that "an old person is someone who has reached the age of sixty (if female) or sixty five (if male)" (1994: 16).

However, defining aged as a single group, as is done in all the above definitions, say 55+, 60+ or 65+ is also not sufficient because it ignores the heterogeneous nature of the aged population, covering a range of at least 25 years (in the case of a less developed country) or more (in the case of a developed country). Regrouping this population into smaller age categories, nonetheless, can solve this problem. Many authors have adopted this strategy of regrouping the aged population into smaller categories. The ICSSR (1972) defined middle years of human life as 35-45 and 45-55 years; and older years as 55-65 and 65-75 years. Randhawa (1991) divides the aged into three categories: 58-65 years, 66-74 years and 75 years and above (Tyagi, 1997: 21). According to Devi et al., "the most commonly used groups are: 65-74 years and 75 years and above" (1994: 2). Neugarten (1974) divides old age into the following three categories: young old age (65-75 years), middle old age (75-84 years) and old old age 85+, (Kasthoori, 1996: 3). However, increasingly, there is a trend to differentiate between young elderly [those aged between 60-74 years or 65-74)] and the "old" elderly (those aged over 75 years) (Khan, 1997: 24 and Victor 1987: 14). Obviously the term 'old old' has emerged to designate those who are 75 years or more (UN, 1991).

In a nutshell, there is no uniform cut off age for defining old age. The criterion of regrouping the aged population into smaller age categories also varies from researcher to researcher. Though the cut off age for the aged is usually considered equal for men and women, there is a general impression that women become aged at a younger age than men.

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