

October 1, 2012

The feminisation of old age

Frederika Meijer

ALONE IN THE CROWD: An old woman, surrounded by images of youth and beauty. Elderly women living in metropolitan cities are more likely to feel socially alienated than their rural counterparts.

Photo: K. K. Mustafah

The nation has to ensure an enabling and supportive environment to elderly women who often face social alienation and deprivation

According to the World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision, the current youth bulge in the country is expected to last till 2025, after which, the growth rate of the elderly is likely to take over. It is imperative that the current needs of the youth and the emerging needs of the elderly are addressed simultaneously within the diverse demographic fabric of the country. In 2009, there were 88 million elderly people in India. By 2050, this figure is expected to soar over 320 million. Between 2000 and 2050 the overall population of the country is anticipated to grow by 60 per cent whereas population of people of age 60 years and above would shoot by 360 per cent. The ratio of the dependent population to that of the working population is defined by the dependency ratio. Investment in the elderly population is no longer a question of choice.

By 2050, women over 60 years would exceed the number of elderly men by 18.4 million, which would result in a unique characteristic of 'feminisation' of the elderly population in India as is being experienced in many provinces of China. In fact, the two most populous nations will together contribute to 38 per cent of the global elderly population.

Ageing differently

The predicament of elderly women is aggravated by a life time of gender-based discrimination. The gendered nature of ageing is such that universally, women tend to live longer than men. In the advanced age of 80 years and above, widowhood dominates the status of women with 71 per cent of women and only 29 per cent of men having lost their spouse. Social mores inhibit women from re-marrying, resulting in an increased likelihood of women ending up alone. The life of a widow is riddled with stringent moral codes, with integral rights relinquished and liberties circumvented. Social bias often results in unjust allocation of resources, neglect, abuse, exploitation, gender-based violence, lack of access to basic services and prevention of ownership of assets. Ageing women are more likely to get excluded from social security schemes due to lower literacy and awareness levels.

Angst of ageing

While narratives may vary, the stories of ageing women are those of loss and loneliness. During my interactions with residents of an old-age home it was evident that many are forced to either live in a house uncared for or leave their homes with nowhere to go to. Consumed by isolation, Radha Sanyal confided that she decided to walk out with dignity before her family could actually propose the

same. But living in temple premises, public parks and pavements deprives her of the dignity that she wrestled to preserve in the first place.

Although the degree of isolation may vary, with urbanisation and nuclear families on the rise, elderly women living in metropolitan cities are more likely to feel socially alienated than their rural counterparts. Challenges of health security get aggravated by the fact that elderly women often tend to underplay their ailments. Pre-occupation with nursing an ailing spouse, lack of awareness, nutritional deficiencies or simply neglect are some of the reasons that often take an adverse toll on their health.

While investing for old age is important it is equally critical to safeguard ownership of assets. Religious dogmas on liberation serve to allay the brutal contours of existence. That explains why widowed destitute elderly women seek refuge at pilgrim spots. The promise of salvation after death helps them in embracing the hardship that dominates the last years of their lives.

'Longevity' dividend

Just as all things end, so would the effects of India's youth dividend. When people live longer, it offers society a chance to reap a 'longevity' dividend. This implies that the elderly continue to contribute significantly for an unprecedented period of time.

In order to address this unprecedented demographic shift it is necessary to to understanding the challenges of an ageing population. A joint study by the United Nations Population Fund and Helpage International called 'Global Report on Ageing' seeks to fill the knowledge gap. It is to be released nationwide on October 1, 2012, on the International Day for Older People.

It has been a decade since the adoption of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (Mipaa). Its bold agenda focused on three priority areas: older persons and development; advancing health and well-being into old age; and ensuring enabling and supportive environments.

As a signatory to Mipaa, India has the responsibility to formulate and implement public policy on population ageing. Issues of poverty, migration, urbanisation, ruralisation and feminisation compound the complexity of this emerging phenomenon. Public policy must respond to this burgeoning need and mainstream action into developmental planning. Gender and social concerns of elderly, particularly elderly women, must be integrated at the policy level. The elderly, especially women, should be represented in decision making. Benefits of social schemes must percolate to the grassroots. Increasing social/widow pension and its universalisation is critical for expanding the extent and reach of benefits. Renewed efforts should be made for raising widespread awareness and access to social security schemes such as National Old Age Pension and Widow Pension Scheme. Provisions in terms of special incentives for elderly women, disabled, widowed should also be considered.

Innumerable reasons add up to make ageing women in India one of the most vulnerable segments of the population. Their social and health security can no longer be compromised. In a country of ageing women, India must step up to the challenge to offer more than just the solace of promises. —

Courtesy: U.N. Information Centre for India and Bhutan

(Frederika Meijer is UNFPA Representative, India/Bhutan)

Name has been changed to protect identity