WHO IS OLD AND WHEN A WOMAN IS OLD? CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC MEANINGS

Anisur Rahman Khan
Faculty Member, Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC)
& PhD candidate in Development Administration, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok, Thailand
khanpatc@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
The definition of old age’ is very much problematic since it varies across and within a particular culture and society. It has no absolute definition or meaning. It is difficult to define old age on the basis of chronological and physiological degeneration of a certain person. Different socio-cultural and economic factors should be considered to level someone as old. On the other hand, a woman does not become old at the same time with a man. It is the society where she lives and the culture which she belongs to specify certain parameters for her to be levelled as old. A woman may become older in a number of ways that are different for a man. This paper examines the ways in which we can enrich understanding the definitional complexities surrounding the question who is old and when a woman is old?

Keywords: Old age, Old men, Old women, Chronological and Physiological Meanings, Cultural, Social and Economic Meanings

1. Introduction

Life may be divided into five main stages: infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and elderly or old age. The division of groups of people of similar age is called age-grade. People progress through these age-grades. Each age-grade is associated with different norms and values and an individual is bound to deal with those. Transition to the age-grade called elderly or old age, as a process of aging, is one of the most problematic periods of life since for many people life at this stage is associated with insecurity, poverty, disappointment, disease and loneliness.

But who is old and are there any specific and universally accepted meanings of being elderly? In fact, old age is a problematic construct to discuss since different interpretations of the phrase have hampered the production of a clear conceptual understanding of the term (Arber and Ginn, 1995: 5). Old age may simply be defined as a pattern of structural and functional changes that take place in a biologically mature individual (Harries and Cole, 1980: 10). But beyond the boundary of biology cultural, social and economic factors have a paramount influence on how rapidly we become aged and determine what aging means to us (Colemen and Cressy, 1980: 237).
In this essay, based on secondary sources, I examine how cultural, social and economic meanings address to the question who is old, and specifically when a woman becomes old? Are there any significant reasons in identifying both man and woman differently as old? In order to answer these questions, examples are drawn from both traditional and modern societal contexts in terms of different social, cultural and economic variables.

2. **Who is old: chronological and physiological meanings**

To define old age we commonly adopt two meanings; a chronological and a physiological one. Chronological age is the calendar age and it indicates how many years a person has lived in the world. Chronologically old age may roughly begin at the age of 60 or 65 because in many societies this is generally considered to be the on-set of old age. Such on-set is determined for eligibility of social security benefits. Besides, during this time people often abandon or prepare to abandon their previous occupational roles and adopt new changes. Chronological age has a significant relation with occupational change. Thus, the age of retirement from formal occupation is the benchmark in many countries, now-a-days, for defining old age. On the basis of the current demographic trend, the United Nations (UN) in its World Population Ageing Report 2013 considered 60 years or older as the benchmark for being treated as elderly. UN’s report further states;

> The global share of older people (aged 60 years or over) increased from 9.2 per cent in 1990 to 11.7 per cent in 2013 and will continue to grow as a proportion of the world population, reaching 21.1 per cent by 2050 (UN, 2013).

We can, therefore, provisionally say, chronological old age starts from the age of sixty. With the advancement of chronological age some visible and non-visible physiological changes are noticed such as deterioration of vision and sexual desire and effectiveness, the decline of muscle strength, skin wrinkling, hair greying, stiffening of joints and ligaments, less efficient respiratory system, metabolic change, decrease of sense, memory, taste and many other complicated physical disorders (Victor, 1994: 7). And, in this way, people become physiologically old. However, the notion of chronological or physiological age has little significance in understanding the true nature of aging. A man’s or woman’s hair may become grey at the age of thirty; he or she may suffer from skin wrinkling at this age due to some other reasons. People might look old but remain their vigorous or they might be old in years but not look like old (Thane, 2000: 5). Poor men and women seem to be older much earlier than their actual age but rich men and women who are benefited from better diet, medical service, exercise and cosmetics can easily disguise their age. In the western developed countries the availability of quality cosmetics, cosmetic-surgery further separate people from their actual chronological age (Thane, 2000: 5). Even people who live in amusement, satisfaction and success might not feel old. Life expectancy, on the other hand, was always very unstable. In ancient Greece (500 B.C) life expectancy was around 18 years, it was around 25 in Rome (100 B.C), and there was no remarkable increase to this until the eighteenth century (Harris and Coole, 1980: 30). According to 2014 information, life expectancies in many countries still fall far behind 60 years. s Chad, South Africa, Somalia, Gabon, Afghanistan, Gambia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zambia and so on are some of the examples as such (CIA, n.d.).
In the circumstances, what would be the chronological and physiological age for people of these countries? Do they face common physiological changes as they advance through this short span of life? In fact, both chronological and physiological factors seem to be unable to provide a perfect image of old age; consequently, we must consider other factors such as how socially, culturally and economically the concept of old age is framed in different societal contexts and what its gender based meaning, if any, is.

3. Cultural, Social and Economic Meanings of Old Age

The term old has a distinct cultural, social and economic meaning, and of course, it may vary over time and even within a country since different classes, ethnic groups and families view the elderly according to their own perceptions and ideologies. However, for my convenience, I have made a short list of some cultural, social and economic notions, and on the basis of those notions the concept will be elaborated.

3.1 Females outnumber males in society

This demographic fact is prevalent everywhere without any significant variation except only in a few countries where males have a longer life expectation (Victor, 2005: 99).1 The improvement in life expectancy world-wide has led to rapid increases in the number of older people but women in particular. According to the UN there are 81 older men per 100 older women. The ratio of men to women at older ages is lower in the more developed regions (71 men per 100 women) than in the less developed regions (88 men per 100 women). This is due to larger differences in life expectancy between the sexes in the more developed regions (Anonymous, 2002). Women’s majority in later life has made aging a feminist issue and feminists have started to campaign to improve the situation of old women (Wilson, 2000: 36). Therefore, such demographic fact has a significant social meaning since on the basis of this fact people define old age as a period when females outnumber males in life expectancy.

3.2 What is the right label?

The result of a cross-cultural survey carried out on different elderly populations in 12 EU countries regarding their preference as to what names to be called shows 30.9% opted for senior citizen, 15% as retired, and 10% for aged/old-aged people. It is noteworthy that the term ‘elderly’ that is commonly used by policy makers, the media and gerontologists is firmly rejected by them (Walker and Maltby, 1997: 16-17). This statistics is referred because it indicates how the individual image is reflected in the cultural image. People who want to be seen as senior citizens or retired want to retain their worth. They long for a separate entity in society and do not want to be forgotten. On the other hand, in a South Asian traditional culture of Bangladesh older people feel honoured by the ways they are called. They prefer to be called commonly (outside kin group) as uncle or aunt if young old;2 and grand-father or grand-mother, if medium

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1 Victor used the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) statistics. According to that statistics only in four countries males have slightly longer life expectancy and the countries are Zimbabwe, Namibia, Eritrea and Botswana.

2 To identify the life span of the elderly on the basis of chronological age a distinction is drawn between young old (65-74 years) and old old (aged over 75 years). For details, see Victor (2005) The Social Context of Aging. I think, since life expectancy has increased significantly, old age may be categorised in a number of ways. A uniform
or old old. Interestingly, a young old person may not like to be called grand-father or grand-mother because it indicates absolute oldness. Young old aged people think they have not been old enough, hence should be addressed by specific terms whose social and cultural meanings are neither oldish nor youngish. Other groups think they have been grown-up enough and should be addressed by the respectful old-aged terms. It means people at certain stages consciously or unconsciously refer them to the society and culture to label them old.

3.3 Representation of Aging

Every society and culture has its particular representation of aging. Such representation varies significantly for man and woman. Though women live longer than men they tend to be older much earlier than men. Both Aristotle and Hippocrates stated that men aged more slowly than women (Botelho, 2001: 51). Even today, there has not been any significant change in such attitude in representing women. Ironically, a woman in society is widely dependent on her physical appearance, reproductive ability for status and self-concept. A man, on the other hand, is dependent on his earning ability, occupation, position, power and leadership. Men’s abilities diminish slowly as well as increase throughout middle age. But when a woman reaches at her middle age she not only starts losing her attractiveness but also the respect in self-esteem and self-concept (Harries and Cole, 1980: 57). Thus, in a male-dominated society and culture women are learned to represent themselves as the way men like. They are thought of being old much earlier than men. Their efforts to retain their spirit, power and capability might be disregarded by men. Child-bearing by a post-menopausal woman through artificial method is viewed quite negatively; but an older father is thought of differently (Victor, 2005: 157). If an old woman marries a young man it becomes a subject of humour. When the famous actress Liz Taylor married men a couple of times quite a lot younger than her, it became the talk of the media; while if an old man gets married to a woman his age half it is viewed positively as showing that he is capable, vigorous, productive, engaged with life and as such, young. Hence, we find a lot of instances of old men’s marriages and old fathers, but few for older women.

A woman may become older in a number of ways depending on the values of her culture e.g., by marrying of a daughter, by reaching menopause or being a grandmother. It is a common western fear, particularly for a woman, to become a grandparent at the age of 40 or 50 when she still views herself as young (Wilson, 2000: 22). In western countries it is said that life starts after 40. Up to 70% girls in South Asian traditional societies marry by age 18 or 20 (Sushila and Samara, 1996: 148). Compelled by the cultural norms, girls in Bangladesh usually sit for marriage well before their eighteenth birthday (Burket et al., 2006: 2). It is because women are seen to become older much earlier than men. There is a proverb in Bangladesh kurity buri; means a girl becomes old at the age of twenty and she must be married by that age otherwise her family will be in deep trouble with that aged lady (!). Simultaneously, in the typical Hindu culture, and sometimes in Muslim culture too, a widow cannot be re-married; once widowed, she becomes socially and culturally old. 3 It is noteworthy that factors like education, categorisation might be: a) young old (60-65 years); b) medium old (65-85 years) and old old (above 85 years). But 60 or 65 as a determinant of the last limit might not be representative for all the countries and it is only applicable for the countries where higher life expectancy is phenomenal. However, such categorisation is of no use in the countries where the life expectancy is lower than 60 years.

3 Widow Hindu remarriage is now legally permitted and widow Muslim remarriage is both legally and religiously permitted; but widow remarriage is a difficult process. Society normally does not accept it.

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modernisation are now making some impacts in delaying age of marriage, and some grounds have also been created for widow remarriage. But such practices are yet to be institutionalised. Even in western societies the opportunities for remarriage for older widows are very limited (Harries and Cole, 1980: 232). As Arber and Ginn say (1993: 42) women’s value in society is sexualised, positively in the first half of life and negatively in the second. Hence, as long as they retain their sexual attractiveness they are treated by men as sexual objects. And the sexual objects are always the young, not the old ones. In this way, social or cultural representation determines who is young and who is old.

3.4 Old people are non-productive

It is assumed that old people are invariably a non productive group and are continuously discriminated in the job market and economic activities. The following myths stated by US Department of Labour vividly depict the economic meanings of old age:

a) Older workers are too slow—they cannot meet the production requirement; b) Older workers cannot meet the physical demands of our jobs; c) You cannot depend on older workers—they are absent from work too often; d) You cannot depend on older workers—they are hard to train because they cannot accept change; e) Hiring older workers increases our pension and insurance costs (cited in Harries and Cole, 1980: 245).

Work provides a sense of identity, a sense of belonging to the individuals but the widespread prejudices about the capabilities of older workers undermine their potentialities. However, one of the arguments of compulsory retirement in modern industrial societies is that, without this system the workforce would become ‘clogged up’ with old workers and there would be fewer opportunities for younger people to join the labour force (Victor, 1994: 134). In 2010, the labour force participation of persons aged over 65 years was 31% in less developed region and 8% in less developed region. There were, proportionately, more older women was working in less developed region than in more developed regions (UN, 2013). Specifically, in the EU, elderly male labour force participation in the age groups 60-64 years and 65+ are 37% and 6.7% respectively while for females they are 14% and 2% only (Walker and Maltby 1997: 83). Does it mean women are forced to become older as well as non-productive much earlier than men in developed region?

The majority of old people including women in South Asia are engaged in agriculture, fisheries and forestry for their livelihood. Agriculture is considered part of life or familial activity; old men and women directly or indirectly take part in this activity. In a traditional agriculture based extended family of Bangladesh an old man plays the role of family-head and does not relinquish his authority or hand over the economic reins until his own death. In most of the cases his wife also heads the domestic realm of this extended family (Elickson, 1988: n.p.). And those who do not have any land work as day labours in the agriculture sector or do other peripheral jobs. On the other hand, it is almost impossible for any old man, particularly for woman to get entrance in the typical economic sector such as in private and government enterprises, mills and factories. Moreover, cultural proscriptions block women’s access to the most remunerative forms of employment in Bangladesh (Cain, 1991: 289). If the majority of old people contribute in the agriculture sector why they are discriminated in the industrial or business sector? The answer is; if production, mobility, spirit are the factors to consider why not to choose an active young one
In lieu of an old one. It means that typical economic sector defines old man and woman as unproductive.

3.5 Lonely and dependent people are old

The image of old people is as lonely, economically or socially dependent and incompetent to live on their own. The social world of the elderly shrinks with the process of aging. Old people find their friends, spouses, neighbours and relatives of similar age dead or ill. According to the Eurobarometer survey in many EU countries there is an increasing trend of number of old people to live alone (Walker and Maltby, 1997: 24). Pat Thane (1998: 180) states that in the west as older people are neglected by their younger relatives and hardly supported by their children, those who are unable to support themselves have to look for whatever relief or support is available.5

In many traditional societies aged people are still respected and enjoy the emotional support of their family members. Farnandes (1982 in Martin, 1990: 105) has depicted Western situation as economic security without emotional support and the South Asian traditional situation as emotional support without economic security. Though caring for the old is a social, religious and ethical responsibility in these cultures but factors like modernisation, economic pressure and social change are bringing rapid change in caring services. Many educated people think of old people as economic burden. Besides, an old woman’s dependence is sometimes quite troublesome. For example, in Bangladesh, the tradition of marrying older men makes women more vulnerable to widowhood, isolation and marginalisation. Once widowed, she is often denied access to the husband’s resources and becomes completely dependent on her sons or daughters. In fact, in both traditional and western societies old age is seen as a state of loneliness and economic burden either on the state or on the family.

3.6 Old age and literature

The culture of a society is reflected by literature. Literature defines the elderly quite ambiguously. Generally, they are not the focal characters in literature and only play the supporting roles. In fact, in many branches of literature they are excluded. They are portrayed as pathetic rather than as tragic for lacking in strength, dignity and purpose which are required for tragedy (Victor, 1994: 83). On the other hand, old women are less visible and surprisingly many of them are stereotyped as evil characters or disgusting ones. In children’s literature women often are personified as witches, nasty biddies and old hags (Arber and Ginn, 1993: 36). It is suspected the story depicted in Hansel and Gretel about an old lady who feeds children may inculcate permanent fear of old women in children (Onyx et al., 1999: 14). Moreover, the characters like the ageing queen witch in Snow White, or the wicked step-mother in Cinderella account for prejudice against old women (Arber and Ginn, 1993: 36). In Bengali literature of India and Bangladesh an old woman’s character is often depicted as bad, witch, notorious or

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4 A survey serious commissioned under the sponsorship of the then European Community; first began in the year of 1970. It is a unique product of cross-national social science research. More at: http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/help/newuser.html.

5 In Western societies different state supports like elderly pension, elderly homes are available and many of them are economically solvent; but such supports are hardly available in South Asian societies. Therefore, they need to depend upon their family members for their caring needs.
constant trouble monger with the daughter-in-law. An old man’s character is rarely depicted as bad rather he is pious, wise and amiable.

3.7 Outfit and old age

In different cultures clothing and decoration can define old age and make a body old. It means certain dresses, ornaments are made and designed for old people. Some implied social restrictions are imposed on wearing glamorous, gorgeous dresses and fittings. These are the signs of sex, power and status, and unfortunately, old people are not expected to manifest these signs. Simone de Beauvoir (1970 in Featherstone and Wernick, 2003: 88) says women’s purpose in life to be an erotic object and when she grows old and ugly she losses her place in society. Therefore, ugly old women are expected not to be dressed like a young woman. It is man in society who decides what is good, what is bad for a woman; and when she is ugly, when beautiful. Old aged outfit has a significant cultural meaning in every traditional society. In both Hindu and Muslim cultures in Bangladesh and India a widow lady wears simple white dress and not wear any kinds of ornaments forever. White is a symbol of holiness and such dress signifies that she should maintain a moral and physical purity like an old woman as long as she is alive. She must therefore be completely neutered, desexed. According to the laws of Manu a Hindu widow must give up ornamentation, observe fasts, emaciate the body, eat only one meal a day, and sleep on the floor. She must not eat ‘hot’ foods which heats up the body. The vermillion that marked her out as a sexual female was to be substituted by the ash of the funeral pyre (Doctor, 2003: np). Outfits applicable to the young and married women are not applicable to her since there is nothing left in her life. Though in western societies there is no a particular colour of dress to segregate young or old; but there are certain styles of garments and ornaments which are not made and designed for the elderly. Thus, outfits can also define old age in every culture and society. The outfit has some economic meanings too. In the poor countries the prices of garments and goods for old people are kept low on the assumption that the old cannot afford much.

3.8 Old age and medical treatment

The self regulating mechanisms of the body decline gradually with the process of aging but elderly women are more subject to degenerative diseases than men and live longer in poor health (Scott and Wenger, 1995: 163). Physicians pay little attention to the problems of the elderly and most doctors are not interested in treating them seriously. Physicians tend to assume their symptoms are normal and untreatable because at this life stage old people are expected to be ill with such diseases, and always remind their patients that they are not getting any younger (Harris and Cole, 1980: 348). Doctors regard the aged, both as patients and people, as relatively uninteresting. All over the world, medical science has been specialised remarkably in every segments, but geriatric medicine has yet to flourish. That is why physicians lack in knowledge and ways in treating their patents (Harris and Cole, 1980: 348). However, old people mostly suffer from chronic health problems which require perfect nursing as a part of medical treatment. Sometimes it is difficult to obtain such service since they find their kith and kin are

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6 In Bengali literature there is a prominent collection of folk-tales called Thakurmar Jhuli (Grandmother’s stories) where old ladies are depicted as merciless witches and cannibals. There is hardly any child in the country who is not told stories from this collection. As a result they grow up with a negative image of old ladies.
busy with other purposes. In the traditional Bangladesh culture caring for the elderly is still regarded as a moral obligation but the burden of medical expenses sometimes makes family members irresponsible. If the elderly live longer caring becomes an uninteresting and unbearable task. Such realisation cruelly affects old women since they live longer. In western societies people may seek for private and state caring services since family caring is rarely available. Historian Dr. Thomson once remarked that it is an un-English behaviour to expect children to support parents (Thane, 1998: 180). However, in terms of medical care old age is viewed as a state which incurs financial loss as well as wastes valuable time of both doctors and family members.

4. Conclusion

Old age as a term is very difficult to define or categorize. It has a number of meanings and used differently. Commonly it is viewed in its chronological meaning with the link to physiological degeneration of the body. But chronological age has little proven significance in relation to the non-functioning of the body after a certain age. So it is debatable when people actually become old. There is no direct and simple solution to this question. Therefore, social scientists consider some other factors e.g., economic, social or cultural ones in determining old age. Again, as we know, society is gender-biased, and there are significant differences in the ways how men and women are treated as old in the same society and culture. Women are preferred to be viewed mostly physiologically, and their gradual physiological degenerations make them extremely vulnerable in the male dominated societies. In the circumstances, they do suffer from both ageism and sexism. However, we must remember that old people have made the world liveable for us and we should not discriminate against them on the basis of ageism or sexism. Such discrimination undermines their potentialities and contributions in society.

5. Reference


