

Challenges Faced by the Elderly in the Evolving Indian Context and the Necessity for Social Work Interventions

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Abstract: *The ageing population and increased life expectancy result from reduced mortality and fertility rates, indicative of a society's socioeconomic advancement. In several nations, the internationally acknowledged threshold for categorising persons as elderly is 60 years. The increasing older demographic heightens apprehensions over physical and functional health, social isolation, and maltreatment. The ageing process is linked to several issues, each arising from multiple factors. Geriatric social workers are essential in augmenting the mobility and autonomy of elderly individuals, thereby raising their quality of life and that of their loved ones. Social work intervention is crucial for successful ageing, encompassing comprehensive evaluation, counselling, crisis intervention, information distribution, and interdisciplinary teamwork. A multidisciplinary strategy, incorporating geriatric social workers, is crucial in the 21st century for guaranteeing a secure living environment and facilitating good ageing.*

Keywords: Ageing Population, Geriatric Social Work, Successful Ageing, Elderly Care, Social Work Intervention, Multidisciplinary Approach.

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Introduction

Definition:

Ageing is a perpetual, irreversible, and universal phenomenon that starts with conception and concludes with death. The age at which creative production declines and economic dependence begins may be seen as the onset of the senior phase of life. Old age represents the concluding phase of the human life cycle, a universally acknowledged reality. The employment of the phrases 'elderly', 'older adults', and 'senior citizens' in both public and academic discourse suggests a homogeneous group, despite considerable diversity within and across several categories of older individuals, as well as throughout different nations. Consequently, providing a concise definition of ageing is challenging. Ageing, from a physiological and psychological standpoint, is an inevitable process (United Nations, 2015).

The ageing process is an inevitable phenomenon marked by physiological and psychological transformations. The global population is experiencing ageing, seen in every nation. The United Nations suggests designating individuals as old at reaching the age of 60. Furthermore, the elderly demographic is classified into three distinct categories:

(i) Young elderly (60-75 years),

(ii) Elderly (75-85 years).

(iii) Age exceeding 85 years.

The demographic structure of the global ageing population is undergoing significant transformation due to declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy. In 2015, the global population of adults aged 60 and above reached 901 million, reflecting a 48% increase from 2000. By 2050, this number is projected to reach 1.4 billion (United Nations, 2015). While affluent nations possess the oldest demographic profiles, the most rapid ageing occurs in developing regions where two-thirds of the elderly population resides (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2015). Despite improved health in some older individuals, the incidence of chronic illnesses and impairments escalates with age (Beard et al., 2016).

The global average disparity in life expectancy was 4.5 years from 2010 to 2015, with women surpassing men in longevity (Kinsella & He, 2009). The gender gap is anticipated to shrink in affluent nations but expand in less developed areas. By 2050, for every 100 women aged 60 and above, there will be 89 men; for every 100 women aged 85 and above, there will be 73 men (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Contrary to common perceptions, the worldwide dependency ratio of older elderly individuals has decreased to record lows. In 2015, there were 74 dependents per 100 working-age individuals. This

ratio includes individuals under 20 and those aged 65 or more relative to individuals aged 20 to 64 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Research indicates that primary factors contributing to elder abuse include poverty, lack of offspring, physical frailty, familial conflicts, and evolving societal beliefs. Health concerns are anticipated to be a significant societal issue, as older individuals are more prone to sickness than younger demographics.

Social work interventions have a crucial role in facilitating good ageing. These treatments employ several strategies, encompassing thorough evaluations, counselling, crisis management, and dissemination of information. Social workers assist elderly individuals in enhancing their quality of life and autonomy by addressing their diverse needs.

Transformations in Social Structure and Institutions:

Industrialisation, urbanisation, technological advancements, education, and globalisation are effecting substantial changes in Indian society. Consequently, traditional values and institutions are deteriorating and evolving, weakening the intergenerational connections that were once characteristic of the conventional family structure. Industrialisation supplanted modest family manufacturing units with mass production and factories. Economic exchanges are progressively carried out among persons. Personal employment and remuneration generate income inequalities within the household. Push factors, like population pressure, and pull factors, such as enhanced economic prospects and modern communication, compel young individuals to migrate, especially from rural to urban areas. With the rapidly growing population of the elderly, exacerbated by the disintegration of joint families and the continual rise.

Indian society is experiencing swift alteration due to the influence of ageing, which, from a sociological standpoint, signifies a shift from one set of social duties to another, presenting challenges. The move into the new position of the 'old' is one of the most complex and challenging role transitions that takes place as we age. In a conventional agrarian culture, when offspring inherited their parents' trades, it was customary for the skills and knowledge of one generation to be transmitted to the subsequent one, so bestowing significant societal importance onto the elderly. However, this is no longer applicable in contemporary society, where enhanced education, swift technology advancement, and novel organisational structures have often made the knowledge, experience, and wisdom useless.

Disabilities in Elderly Individuals:

An individual's limitations tend to increase with age. For some, ageing enhances status and elevates life satisfaction, whereas for many others, it presents challenges and difficulties. On one side, ageing enables individuals to unwind, indulge in leisure activities, and pursue interests they previously lacked time for in their youth. As individuals age, their physical, mental, and cognitive abilities decline. Multiple factors contribute to these constraints. As individuals age and their health deteriorates, they inadvertently become dependent, both physically and psychologically, on their family or established social support systems.

Financial Issues:

Economic variables undeniably exert a substantial impact on the provision of care for the elderly. The family's economic situation

and the functional abilities of both the care receiver and carer seem to influence the strain experienced. Economic dependence is a prominent factor affecting the welfare of the elderly. Economic dependence may manifest in two forms. Initially, retirement may result in economic dependence for those employed in the formal sector. Secondly, an individual in the rural or urban informal sectors may encounter a reduction in their capacity to work owing to physical and mental disabilities. Occasionally, elderly individuals face.

Psychological Issues:

The predominant psychological challenges faced by the aged are emotions of helplessness, inferiority, melancholy, worthlessness, loneliness, and diminished competence. The aforementioned concerns, along with social disadvantages including widowhood, societal prejudice, and isolation, intensify the dissatisfaction experienced by the elderly. Research indicates that prominent factors contributing to elder abuse include poverty, lack of offspring, physical frailty, familial conflicts, and evolving societal beliefs.

Health Issues:

Health concerns are anticipated to be a significant societal issue, as older individuals are more susceptible to sickness compared to younger demographics. Ageing is often believed to induce several diseases and physical ailments. In addition to physical ailments, the elderly are predisposed to poor mental health due to senility, neurosis, and diminished life satisfaction. The health status of the elderly should be paramount in any research concerning this cohort. Most primary surveys assume that the senior population in India, especially those in rural areas, has health problems like coughing, eyesight impairment, anaemia, and dental disorders.

The predominant population of old Indians resides in rural areas, hence discussions on ageing in India mostly focus on rural contexts. Nearly 80% of elderly individuals in India live in rural regions. The 2001 census indicated that 78% of old individuals in India resided in rural regions. Women constitute a somewhat greater proportion than men due to the extended life expectancy of females post-birth. Widespread poverty and income disparity, coupled with an insufficient safety net, have led to the marginalisation or destitution of most older individuals. Despite the nation's economic growth, the impoverished, especially the elderly, have endured hardship.

Ageing predominantly affects women:

Women not only have a longer lifespan but also predominantly experience widowhood. They endure significant discrimination over their rights and are encumbered with familial responsibilities. This adversely impacts their health, nutrition, and emotional well-being. Elderly women have an emotional void in their life, irrespective of their economic, marital, or educational status. The 'empty nest syndrome' is a term used by women to describe the sadness experienced by older females. The "empty nest" phase may induce despondency as their familial engagement declines. Additional measures of care and support are necessary to extricate them from their deplorable condition.

Furthermore, consider the plight of widows in contemporary culture. Approximately 99 percent of India's senior citizens reside below the poverty threshold, with 50 percent of this demographic being widows. They are especially susceptible to poverty,

inadequate care, and neglect in later life. The tradition of women marrying much older men, the increasing life duration of women, societal disapproval of widow remarriage, patrilineal inheritance practices, and challenges in securing employment render widows more susceptible than many other societal groups. Their situation deteriorates when they possess few or no assets and lack a self-sustaining revenue source. Single individuals, particularly women, are more susceptible in old age due to less social support. The family derives joy from their grandkids sharing school experiences and from organising visits to holy sites together.

The family's role is considered essential in addressing the needs and desires of their senior relatives. They provide several sorts of support and assistance to aid the elderly in alleviating their anxieties. Compassionate, caring, and considerate family members not only offer spiritual and emotional support to the elderly but also attend to their financial requirements, healthcare, and security, while addressing their concerns and proposing appropriate solutions. The support of family members is essential when individuals encounter diseases or health concerns, which are common with advancing age. With attentive family members, the elderly experience contentment and satisfaction, as well as liberation from many worries.

The Government's Role in the Rehabilitation of the Elderly:

Since independence, the Indian government has been committed to supporting the aged in society through interventionist welfare initiatives. In 1999, the UN designated the year as the International Year of Older Persons, and on January 13, 1999, the Government of India ratified the National Policy for Older Persons to enhance welfare initiatives and empower the elderly for their benefit. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act of 2007 enforces legal penalties to safeguard the rights of the elderly. Moreover, constitutional measures for senior citizen security, pension schemes, the establishment of retirement homes, the enhancement of geriatric services, and the liberalisation of housing policies for the elderly have been enacted.

Advantages of Social Security:

The developing dynamics of intergenerational relationships indicate that economic reliance on offspring profoundly affects the quality of life for the elderly. Thus, government-provided social security is essential. Regrettably, social security assistance in India is now inadequate. Benefits such as pensions and provident funds are exclusively available to those employed in the public sector or major commercial corporations. For the vast majority of the 90 percent of older adults employed in the informal economy, benefits are almost absent. The sole assistance accessible to the impoverished comprises:

The advantages accessible to the elderly in India comprise:

- a. The National Old Age Pension offers 75 rupees monthly and is globally accessible just to impoverished persons aged 65 and above.
- b. Numerous governmental programs provide payments between 60 and 250 rupees monthly, mostly aimed at persons aged 65 and beyond who fall below the poverty line.

- c. Financial assistance for widows often provides compensation of under 150 rupees monthly.

Due to escalating healthcare and housing expenses, these benefits are inadequate to satisfy even fundamental need. Section 125(1)(d) of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, and Section 20(3) of the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956, acknowledge the entitlement of financially disadvantaged parents to receive assistance from their offspring. In 1996, the Government of Himachal Pradesh established the Parents' Maintenance Bill, which requires children to support parents who are financially disadvantaged and to aid those ignored by their progeny. Maharashtra and Goa are likewise in the process of enacting analogous laws.

Assisted Living Facilities as Care Providers:

The notion of senior living facilities, although not prevalent in India, is gaining recognition. The first house was founded in Bangalore in 1983 by the Bangalore Friends-in-Need Society. Help Age India reports that there are presently 728 institutes, predominantly situated in metropolitan regions, with Kerala exhibiting the largest concentration. More than 60 percent of these residences are philanthropic, targeting impoverished or extremely disadvantaged persons. Approximately 20 percent function on a "pay and stay" model, while another 20 percent are hybrid facilities, with roughly 15 percent designated solely for women.

In recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of senior living facilities, which are increasingly regarded as a more desirable alternative than being in a family where individuals feel unwelcome. Nonetheless, a persistent discussion exists among elite organisations, NGOs, and others over whether its expansion should be promoted, endorsed, or constrained. Numerous individuals express apprehension that a rise in senior living facilities may facilitate children's disregard of their obligations to care for elderly parents, resulting in a deterioration of traditional familial values and potentially jeopardising the family unit itself.

Although the decline of filial responsibilities and insufficient social security is a legitimate issue, there is an urgent necessity for diverse organisations to assist the increasing population of old adults whose offspring are unable or unable to offer care. Notwithstanding the initiatives of the government and NGOs to rehabilitate the elderly in India, they continue to be one of the most vulnerable demographics, with several issues that need adequate care and attention.

Ageing is an inherent process, and as J.S. Ross recently stated, "Old age is essential; it requires protection, promotion, and extension." The perception of age differs—"a man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she appears." Consequently, there is an urgent necessity for suitable care and safeguarding of the elderly in this evolving context.

The below recommendations may substantially enhance the quality of life for elderly folks in India:

Institutional care should focus on enhancing familial bonds that encompass both youth and older individuals. Effective law is required to safeguard parents' rights to receive care from their offspring.

The existing healthcare systems are insufficient to meet the physical and health requirements of the elderly population,

encompassing measures for old age security and the creation of senior living facilities.

Enhancing geriatric services and reforming welfare programs for the elderly is imperative. Enhancing public awareness on the necessity to safeguard this demographic is essential, particularly for at-risk groups such as rural elderly individuals, older women, and widows.

It is crucial for the elderly to maintain activity and perceive their significance within their family and society. It is crucial for their well-being to acknowledge that they can provide significant contributions to the nation and society at large.

The theoretical frameworks for social work with elderly adults encompass Systems Theory, Strengths Perspective, Crisis Intervention, Task-Centered Approach, and Emancipatory Practice. These theories guide social work practice by analysing the relationships between elderly individuals and various institutions, highlighting human value and resilience, addressing crises and transitions, focussing on pragmatic problem-solving, and confronting prejudice and ageism.

The challenges faced by the elderly population in India are significant, especially in the context of a swiftly changing socio-economic environment. As Indian culture transitions from traditional joint families to nuclear families, coupled with the effects of urbanisation, modernisation, and globalisation, the elderly encounter a unique set of issues.

Challenges Faced by the Elderly in the Evolving Indian Context:

The shift from extended families to nuclear families, together with increasing urbanisation, frequently results in the elderly experiencing isolation. Numerous elderly folks continue to reside in rural regions or live independently in urban areas when their offspring relocate in pursuit of enhanced prospects.

Economic Reliance:

A considerable segment of the senior demographic lacks fiscal autonomy. In the lack of established pension programs for the majority of workers, many depend on their offspring for financial assistance. The deterioration of conventional family structures frequently leads to neglect, exacerbating their financial instability.

Medical Issues:

As persons advance in age, they frequently encounter health complications. Senior citizens frequently encounter age-associated ailments, including chronic illnesses (such as diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis), cognitive deterioration (including dementia and Alzheimer's), and difficulties with mobility. Additional health issues may encompass visual and auditory impairments, speech impediments, diminished vocabulary, arthralgia, variable blood pressure, and a range of other ailments. Healthcare access is sometimes insufficient, especially for individuals in rural regions where medical services are typically limited.

Maltreatment and Deprivation:

Incidents of elder abuse—encompassing physical, emotional, and financial forms—are increasing in both rural and urban regions. Numerous older adults encounter neglect owing to their family members' insufficient time, attention, or finances.

Absence of Institutional Support:

In India, there is a scarcity of old-age homes and other institutional care systems for the elderly. Despite enhancements in government assistance programs, they continue to be inadequate for addressing the requirements of the growing elderly population.

Mental Health Concerns:

The transition from an active professional life to retirement, coupled with diminished social interaction, may lead to mental health disorders such as sadness and anxiety. Cultural shifts have altered the position of the elderly within families and society, reducing their perceived worth and engendering sentiments of purposelessness.

Digital Disparity:

As dependence on digital platforms for communication, banking, healthcare, and social interaction grows, several older folks encounter difficulties in adapting to technology, exacerbating their sense of estrangement.

Requirement for Social Work Intervention:

Programs Based in the Community:

Social workers can establish community-oriented programs that offer emotional and social assistance, assisting the elderly in remaining connected and active within society. Programs such as senior citizen groups, day-care facilities, and intergenerational initiatives help mitigate loneliness and enhance community ties.

Advocacy and Policy Assistance:

Social workers can fight for enhanced policies on retirement pensions, healthcare, and social security for the elderly. They can furthermore advocate for the implementation of current legislation, such as the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

Health and Mental Health Assistance:

Social workers can provide counselling services to tackle the psychological difficulties encountered by the elderly. Furthermore, they can facilitate connections between older persons and healthcare providers, aiding them in navigating medical systems.

Prevention of Elder Abuse:

Social workers can launch initiatives to enhance awareness of elder abuse and implement reporting systems. Interventions may include mediating among family members or assisting in locating secure housing options for seniors who have suffered abuse.

Instruction and Learning:

Providing technological training for seniors helps mitigate the digital gap, enabling them to maintain connections with family, friends, and vital services. Moreover, conducting workshops for families on the significance of elder care—encompassing financial, emotional, and physical support—can improve comprehension and promote superior caregiving behaviours.

Institutional Care and Extended Support:

Social workers may greatly enhance the administration and advancement of senior living facilities, ensuring these

establishments provide not only accommodation but also social, emotional, and medical support.

Moreover, they can provide home-based care services for older adults who want to stay at home yet needing support with daily life tasks.

Legal Assistance and Awareness:

Social workers can aid the elderly in comprehending their legal rights, especially with property disputes, pensions, or inheritance difficulties.

Providing legal assistance to someone unable to pay it might be a crucial step.

Investigation and Data Acquisition:

Social workers must do study to get insights into the evolving requirements of the senior demographic in India. Data collecting can guide the development of policies and initiatives designed to improve the quality of life for older individuals.

Conclusion

The issues encountered by the aged in India are multifarious and progressively intricate owing to social transformations. There is an immediate necessity for extensive social work interventions to address these concerns. Social workers may significantly contribute to pushing for legislative reforms, delivering direct assistance, and facilitating older individuals in leading dignified, healthy, and socially engaged lives.

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