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Research Papers

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## AGING AND WOMEN'S HEALTH: AN EVALUATION

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### Abstract

*The subject of aging has assumed a greater significance than ever before in the context of the UN Declaration of October 1, 1999 as the World Elders Day and 1999 as the International Year of the Aged with the theme Towards a Society for All Ages. Women are more prone to depression than man. "Woman face empty nest syndrome in old age. When children settle down away from home, the home becomes an empty nest. Since a mother is more attached to her children than the father, she is more likely to get depressed,*

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According to psychiatrist Sanjay Chugh, women have more emotional strength and tolerance than men. "Its not only the older women but women of all ages are more stronger than males." "The nature of life that a woman has to lead in our society is different from man. The hardships of daily life make them stronger than man," he says. 71 per cent older people surveyed felt that in spite of their active participation in family's financial matters as well as social obligations and having originally possessed major part of the property, younger family members were ignoring them. 73.5 per cent of older persons in urban areas had limited access to social interactions and consequently they face lower self-esteem and decline in interpersonal skills. They are also found to be more self-conscious. Even people living in joint families have less interaction with family members, with 39 per cent complaining so.

#### Meaning of Aging

Chronologically speaking, aging refers to

old age. But the phrase 'old age' differs from time to time and country to country. Nevertheless, despite differences in the concept and practice of aging it could be said that old age begins at 60 years regardless of legal definitions practiced in different states and countries.

#### Objectives of the Paper

The main objective of the paper is to analyze the effects of aging on the health of women.

#### Aging and Women's Health

Aging brings in its fold innumerable problems to the aged, especially women. Aged women, especially widows/ divorcees/ desertees have more serious and sex specific problems. For example, aged women lead a sedentary life and become isolated and alienated. Thus, they become lonely and segregated people. This itself has a deep psychological effect on their health in terms of mental disorders and loss of interest in life. Such a life reduces their life-span.

The recent literature on aging women suggests that the most acute problems faced by women pertain to financial stringency, withdrawal from the mainstream of society and the feeling of uselessness, segregation from the younger generation, poor health and despaired cognitive functioning (Clark & Barbara, 1967; Renue, 1986; Joseph, 1986; Mahajan, 1987).

#### **Indian Perspective on Aging Problems**

With the advent of Globalization there has been a significant change in the family system. Joint families disintegrated and nuclear families emerged where the young couple find no time to look after their old parents. In such families the position of the old has become a crucial factor. The old themselves find it difficult to adjust with the modern ways of living of their young looked after by the family is worth enquiring. In the cities where there is growth of individualism and with the desire to be self-reliant. The clashes between generations, distress the old in the cities.

Recently in India, technological developments have caused tremendous changes in the lifestyles and values of the younger generation. Their respect for and dependence on the old is reduced. Housing shortage has made the pressure of city life unbearable for the young and even more so far the cramped existence, the old feel lonely and deserted. They feel guilty about being old and housebound. The increase in the employment of women outside the home means their help and presence is lost to the aged in the household. Poor health, economic dependence and inability to work, lead to a loss of self-esteem. The elderly lose everything including friend, spouses, jobs, status, power, influence, income and health, none of which can be replaced. Thus they become short tempered, rigid in their attitudes, selfish and suspicious. Adjustment in the family or society becomes painful. This happens particularly when they come into conflict with the young who are exposed to an urban life style and it leads to isolation.

Finally, new standards of behavior, new ways of spending time and money and the like provide specific grounds for conflict between the generations. The disagreements which would have remained suppressed in the past are now openly expressed. Unless the older generation remains silent, suppressing its feelings of disapproval before the young, it risks to verbal argument and contradiction, within their cultural framework, this constitutes the antithesis of appropriate modes of

intergenerational communication.

Aging is also a social problem because of the lag in adapting social institutions to the needs of older people without disrupting the machinery of the whole society. The problem lies in the dislocations occurring in the society because it is not prepared for having a large number of the aged. In this way in India the old face a variety of aging problems for instance the feeling of loss of social status in the family and professional status at work place, mental torture of the elderly people for being ignored, neglected, and misbehaved by their own kith and kins, intergenerational value conflict, feeling unwanted and useless creature on earth, feeling of isolation, frustrations and tensions of different sorts, feeling insecurity of all sorts etc. These aging problems are both the causes and consequences of personality, family and social disorganization and anomie too.

#### **Earlier Studies:**

Researches conducted by Purohit and Sharma (1972), Pathak (1975), Mishra (1987), Sati (1988) have reported that there was a considerable difference in the perception of old people of their health status and the reality. It was presumed that such differences narrow down to the socio-economic status of elderly people, because with higher education and income they would have greater access to health/medical information and services.

A more recently conducted medico-social study of the urban elderly in Mumbai by Siva Raju (2002) has revealed that the influence of factors like, educational status, economic status, age, marital status, perception of living status, addiction, degree of feeling idle, anxieties and worries, type of health centre visited and whether or not taking medicines, on both the perceived and actual health status of the elderly was found to be significant and varying considerably across different classes and sexes of the elderly.

Sharma and Dak (1987) have found that upper caste aged people face more socio-psychological problems, whereas those SCs and backward classes experience more economic and health problems.

The health status of aged people varies from individual to individual. In this regard De Souza (1982) described four factors which determined the health status of the aged.

1. The nature and conditions of their (aged) work combined with poor nutrition leads to the state of general debility and most of the aged

suffered from what might be called deficiency illness.

2. Environment such as poor sanitation, lack of basic amenities such as water and proper drainage system, tend to make the environment itself become a health hazard,

3. Inadequate and unbalanced mal-nutritious diet; and,

4. The availability and quality of health services.

#### **Concept of Health**

It is difficult to define and operationalize the concept of health. As a biological and physiological concept, it means absence of common diseases such as cough, cold, jaundice, asthma, which affect one's capacity to work. According to World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and satisfaction. This definition is too broad to operationalize and implement in practice. A different definition given from a sociological perspective by Talcot Parsons (1954) who describes health as a state of optimum capacity for effective performance of valued tasks. Parsons focuses attention on social importance of health because healthy individuals are able to function well in order to perform social roles, while ill-health reduces their ability to do so. Therefore, health status both from individual and group point of view has consequences for progress and development of a nation. For example, unhealthy people are a liability to the nation. In a wider perspective, health is defined in terms of adaptation to changes in nature and society. Here, health includes freedom from pain, stress, discomfort and boredom and adaptation to social and biological environment (Dubos, 1968).

#### **Health and Aging**

Health is a major instrument of social and economic development and it can play a very important role in the creation of a new world. The level of development achieved by a society is often determined on the basis of the level of health and the system of health care and services prevalent in the society. According to the "Right to Health" in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living, adequate for the well-being of himself/ herself or his/ her family".

Health is a significant factor in relation to aging. A major issue of social concern is the health status of the aged. After infants and children, it is the old people who are most vulnerable to morbidity and mortality, as health impairment is a

function of the aging process. Healthy aged people constitute an important human resource for the development of the country. Health is significantly related to one's aging and the ability to manage the problems of aging.

The state of health in old age depends on one's genetic endowment, the surrounding environment and the kind of lifestyle that one has lived during childhood and adulthood. Many of the health problems of old age are known to result from an unhealthy lifestyle and are therefore potentially preventable.

#### **Aged Women and Health Problems**

Age has special implications for women as far as health problems are concerned. The existing hypothesis holds that aging brings decline in physical and mental health of people. The problem becomes more acute in the case of women. When they are young their health deteriorates on account of biological cycles (menstruation) and bearing of children. When they become old, they are subjected to social, economic and medical negligence and abuse. In short, aging and health problems in women are interrelated.

Women due to their vulnerable sexual character tend to stay back home rather than moving in public attending public functions.

Generally, they do not feel secured in public life. Incidences of sexual harassments such as molestations and rapes in public life further force them to withdraw to private and personal life. Consequently, they tend to lead a sedentary life. Inactive life leads to body weight, which in turn lead to heart and chest disorder, blood pressure (BP) and diabetes. Their health problems still become complicated if they become widows before or after 60 years.

#### **Diseases among Aged Women**

By and large, aging women suffer from the following diseases:

1. Blood pressure
2. Diabetes
3. Anemia
4. Loss of eye sight
5. Loss of menopause

Blood Pressure (BP): Blood pressure and aging are interrelated. BP is more common among aged women than men. The reason is that women normally do not go for physical exercises such as walking, jogging, etc. Such habits escalate chest diseases. BP could be found more among widows/ divorcees/ desertees. Loss of spouse has a deep psychological effect on widows.

**Diabetes:** Diabetes, which is popularly known as “sugar disease” is found more among women than men. The reason is that women during old age desire to confine to home playing with grand children (Neera Desai & Krishnaraj, 1987: 230).

**Anemia:** Anemia refers to a condition of general weakness. This condition can make one easily tired causing blackouts and general disinterest in work with lowered resistance to infection. Anemia is more common among aged than adult women. A study has indicated that 75 per cent of women in rural Punjab were anemic (The Tribune, 1988) (see Sharma & Singhal (1989).

**Loss of Eye Sight:** Loss of eye sight is a common health problem among aged people, especially among women. Loss of eye sight depends on nutrition, eye check-up. Aged in general and women in particular develop an attitude of withdrawal from life. They are less likely to visit doctors for treatment.

**Loss of Menopause:** A major problem of the aged women is loss of menopause (Stoppage of menstrual cycle) after 50 years. Loss of menopause to a women means loss of sex. A women suffering from a sense of loss of menopause will experience psychological stress and strains. Such a state of mind will have adverse effects on their health.

**Other Correlates and Health Problems in Aged Women:** Health problems of aged women are related to their age at marriage, member of children born, etc. For example those who marry at an earlier age are likely to attain aging much earlier those who marry at a later age – after 21 years. Similarly, those who bear more children (6+) are likely to suffer from physical weakness, anemia, mental stress, etc. In short, aged women suffer from a number of physical physiological and psychological problems.

To sum up, aging is becoming a serious problem in India. Aged in general aged women in particular are subjected to many health problems, physiological and mental decay are common. Besides, loss of sensory activity, decay of memory, disturbance in sleep i.e., dementia, and physical changes in skin, hair, teeth and bodily shape. Moreover, certain physical disabilities and diseases of the old age put both the elderly and the younger generation persons upon whom the former depend in a fix (Sharma & Singhal, 1989).

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