

## **Who Is Old and When Is a Woman Old? Cultural, Social and Economic Meanings**

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### **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 label someone as old. On the other hand, a woman does not become old at the same time as a man. It is the society where she lives and the culture to which she belongs that specify the parameters for her to be labelled as old. A woman may become older in a number of ways that are different from a man. This article examines the ways in which we can enrich our understanding of the definitional complexities surrounding the question of who is old and when is a woman old.

**Keywords:** Old age, old men, old women, chronological and physiological meanings, cultural, social and economic meanings

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# ใครคือผู้สูงวัย และจะเรียกผู้หญิงว่าสูงวัยเมื่อไร? ความหมายเชิงวัฒนธรรม สังคม และเศรษฐกิจ

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## บทคัดย่อ

นิยามของคำว่า “สูงวัย” มีประเดิมปัญหาอย่างมาก เนื่องจากมีความแตกต่างกันในแต่ละวัฒนธรรมและสังคม ยังไม่มีความหมายหรือนิยามเป็นที่แน่ชัด ยกตัวอย่างที่จะจำกัดความของคำว่า สูงวัย บนพื้นฐานของปีเกิดและความเสื่อมทางกายภาพของบุคคล ปัจจัยด้านสังคมวัฒนธรรมและเศรษฐกิจที่แตกต่างกันควรได้มีการพิจารณาบทบทวนระดับความสูงวัยของคน อีกรอบหนึ่ง ผู้หญิงไม่ได้เป็นผู้สูงวัยในช่วงเวลาเดียวกับผู้ชาย สังคมและวัฒนธรรมที่เรออยู่เป็นผู้ชี้วัดถึงระดับความสูงวัยของเข้า ผู้หญิงอาจจะกล่าวเป็นผู้สูงวัยได้หลายหนทางซึ่งแตกต่างจากผู้ชาย บทความนี้นำเสนอวิถีทางซึ่งเราจะทำความเข้าใจมากขึ้นถึงความซับซ้อนเชิงนิยามต่อประเดิมคำตามที่ว่า ใครคือผู้สูงวัย และจะเรียกว่าเป็นผู้หญิงสูงวัยเมื่อไร?

**คำสำคัญ:** สูงวัย ชายสูงวัย หญิงสูงวัย ความหมายเชิงปีเกิดและกายภาพ ความหมายเชิงวัฒนธรรม สังคมและเศรษฐกิจ

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## 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 & Ginn, 1995). Again the symptoms of old age do not all appear at the same time or progress at the same rate (Posner, 1995). Old age may simply be defined as a pattern of structural and functional changes that take place in a biologically mature individual (Harries & Cole, 1980). Beyond the boundary of biology, however, cultural, social and economic factors have a paramount influence on how rapidly we become aged and how we determine what aging means to us (Colemen & Cressy, 1980).

In this article, based on secondary sources, I have examined how cultural, social, and economic meanings address the question who is old, and specifically, when does a woman become old? Are there any significant reasons for identifying men and women 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 criteria.

### 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, nowadays, 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. The UN report further states:

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

We can, therefore, provisionally say that chronological old age starts from the age of 60. 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 graying, stiffening of joints and ligaments, less efficient respiratory system, metabolic change, decrease of sense, memory, taste and many other complicated physical disorders (Victor, 1994). 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 hair 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 other reasons. People might look old but remain vigorous, or they might be old in years but not look old (Thane, 2000). Poor men and women seem to be older much earlier than their actual age, but rich men and women who benefit from better diet, medical service, exercise and cosmetics can easily disguise their age. In the western developed countries, the availability of quality cosmetics and cosmetic-surgery further separate people from their actual chronological age (Thane, 2000). 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 & Coole, 1980). According to 2014 information, life expectancies in many countries still fall far behind 60 years. 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.

## **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.

### **Females Outnumber Males in Society**

This demographic fact is prevalent everywhere without any significant variation, except in a few countries where males have a longer life expectation (Victor, 2005)<sup>1</sup>. 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 (UNECE, 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). 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.

### **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 percent opted for senior citizen, 15 percent as retired, and 10 percent 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 & Maltby, 1997). These percentages are mentioned here because they indicate 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 identify in society and do not want to be forgotten. On the other hand, in the South Asian traditional culture of Bangladesh older people feel honoured by the way they are called. They prefer to be called commonly (outside kin group) as uncle or aunt if young-old<sup>2</sup>; and grandfather or grandmother, if medium- or old-old. Interestingly, a young-old person may not like to be called grandfather or grandmother because it indicates absolute oldness. Young-old aged people think they are not old enough, hence should be addressed by specific terms whose social and cultural meanings are neither oldish nor youngish. Other groups think they are aged 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.

### 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). 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 are her 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 in middle age. But when a woman reaches her middle age she not only starts losing her attractiveness but also lose in self-esteem and self-respect (Harries & Cole, 1980). Thus, in a male-dominated society and culture women learn to represent themselves in 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). If an old woman marries a young man it becomes a subject of humour. When the actress Elizabeth Taylor married men quite a lot younger than her, it became the talk of the media; while if an old man marries a woman half his age it is viewed positively as showing that he is capable, vigorous, productive, engaged with life and as such, young. Globally, most elderly men are married, but it is the opposite with elderly women (Kinsella & Taueber, 1993). Hence, we find many 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). In western countries it is said that life starts after 40. Up to 70 per cent of girls in South Asian traditional societies marry by age 18 or 20

(Sushila & Samara, 1996). Compelled by the cultural norms, girls in Bangladesh usually are prepared for marriage well before their eighteenth birthday (Burket et al., 2006). It is because women are seen to age 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 re-marry; once widowed, she becomes socially and culturally old<sup>3</sup>. It is noteworthy that factors like education and 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 & Cole, 1980). As Arber and Ginn (1991) state, women's value in society is sexualised, positively in the first half of life and negatively in the second. Hence, as long as women 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.

### **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 & Cole, 1980: 245).*

Work provides a sense of identity, a sense of belonging to the individual, 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). In 2010, the labour force participation of persons aged over 65 years was 31 percent in less developed regions and 8 percent in less developed regions. There were, proportionately, more older women working in less developed regions than in more developed regions (UN, 2013). Specifically, in the EU, the proportion of people aged 60 and more who are still in the labour force is extremely low. Overall, in the EU countries 10 percent elderly men and 3 percent elderly women are working (Avramov & Maskova, 2003). Does it mean women are forced to become older as well as non-productive much earlier than men in developed regions?

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). And those who do not have any land work as day labourers in the agriculture sector or do other peripheral jobs. On the other hand, it is almost impossible for any old man, or 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). 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 choose an active

young one in lieu of an old one. It means that typical economic sector defines old man and woman as unproductive.

### **Lonely and Dependent People Are Old**

Old people have an image 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 Euro barometer<sup>4</sup> survey, in many EU countries there is an increasing trend for old people to live alone (Walker & Maltby, 1997). 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 (Thane, 1998)<sup>5</sup>.

In many traditional societies aged people are still respected and enjoy the emotional support of their family members. Farnandes (1982 cited in Martin, 1990) 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, factors like modernisation, economic pressure and social change are bringing rapid change in caring services. Many educated people think of old people as economic burdens. 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, a woman 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.

### Old Age and Literature

The culture of a society is reflected by its literature. Literature defines the elderly quite ambiguously. Generally, the elderly are not the focal characters in literature and only play supporting roles. In fact, in many branches of literature they are excluded. They are portrayed as pathetic rather than as tragic, lacking in strength, dignity and purpose (Victor, 1994). 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 & Ginn, 1991). 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, Leonard & Reed, 1999). 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 & Ginn, 1991). In the Bengali literature of India and Bangladesh, an old woman's character is often depicted as bad, a witch, notorious or a constant trouble monger with the daughter-in-law<sup>6</sup>. An old man's character is rarely depicted as bad; rather he is pious, wise and amiable.

### Outfit and Old Age

In different cultures clothing and decoration can define old age and make a person appear 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 cited in Featherstone & Wernick, 2003) said 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, widows wear simple white dress and never wear any

kinds of ornaments. 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 heat 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). Outfits appropriate for young and married women are not appropriate for her since there is nothing left in her life. Though in western societies there is no particular color of dress to segregate young and old, 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.

### **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. 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 doctors always remind their patients that they are not getting any younger (Harris & Cole, 1980). Doctors regard the aged, both as patients and persons, as relatively uninteresting. All over the world, medical science has been specialised remarkably in every branch, but geriatric medicine has yet to flourish. That is why physicians lack knowledge and ways in treating their patients (Harris & Cole, 1980). Old people mostly suffer from chronic health problems which require nursing as a part of medical treatment. Sometimes it is difficult to obtain such service since their kith and kin are busy. Elsewhere 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 private and state care services since family care is rarely available. Historian Dr. Thomson once remarked that it is an un-English behavior to expect children to support parents (Thane, 1998). 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.

## Conclusion

Old age as a term is very difficult to define or categorize. It has a number of meanings and is 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 other factors, e.g., economic, social or cultural ones in determining old age. Men and women are not treated in the same manner as old in a society and culture that is gender-biased. Women are viewed mostly physiologically, and their gradual physiological degeneration makes them vulnerable in 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 livable 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.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Victor used the World Health Organisation's (WHO) statistics. According to the statistics there only are four countries where males have slightly longer life expectancy. The countries are Zimbabwe, Namibia, Eritrea and Botswana.

<sup>2</sup> 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 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 countries where life expectancy is lower than 60 years.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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