

A sociological study on elderly care in an urban community in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

It is expected that the world will feel an implication of population ageing in the near future ever than before. It is also estimated that 48.2% of the world ageing population belongs to Asian countries. Furthermore, Sri Lanka accounts for the highest rate of increasing ageing population among the countries in the region. In this context, the region as well as the world face a new dimension of issues related to caring elders. This paper, discusses the way of caring elders and the associated problems, particularly in an urban context in Sri Lanka. Further this study, aims to understand how this problem signifies according to gender and social class.

Some specific questions were addressed in the field study such as: what are the elders' present situations and their routines, how smoothly do they maintain relationships with family members, what are the problems faced by the elders when receiving care and caregivers in caring elders.

The study found that the main problem faced by the elders from lower class was economic difficulties. Meanwhile, social insecurity seemed to be the major problem faced by elders of the middle class. This study clearly identified that elderly women face more difficulties and problems than elderly men.

As a key player, caregivers also encounter numerous difficulties in caring elders. These were found in the spheres of social, economic, cultural etc. In spite of difficulties they faced, majority of elders wished to live with their family and thereby they can receive love, affection and attention, which they need.

Key words: Economic insecurity, Social insecurity, Health issues, widowhood, present life and future hope

Introduction

Rapid population growth affects in numerous ways to both developed and underdeveloped countries. According to the growth of the world population in recent past, it can be seen that the ageing population has increased rapidly in many countries. Thus in the 21st century, implication of the population ageing is likely to be enormous ever than before. Indeed, the 21st century has been named as "**The Era of Population Ageing**" (Kuroda, 1993).

Until the recent past, ageing was a problem in developed countries. But, at present, developing countries too face the same problem. According to UNO reports (1993), people who are over 65 years of age were 20.7% of the world population by 2000. Out of this, 48.2% of the world ageing population belonged to the Asian countries. In the South Asian region, Sri Lanka accounts for the highest rate of increase of ageing population. 6.6% of ageing population in 1981 has increased up to 8.5% by 1995 and by the year 2001 it was forecast as 10% (Siddhisena and Rathnayake, 1998). It has been predicted that the Sri Lanka's ageing population would increase up to 6 million, by the mid 21st century. It is nearly 1/4th of the total population of the country (De Silva, 1994). Indeed, this statistical information is a sign of necessity to focus attention on socio economic needs and wants of the ageing population.

According to general social norms, care of the elderly is a family responsibility (Rosenthal, 1985). However, due to rapid social changes, family has been reformed structurally and functionally, and thus its responsibility of elderly care is fading away gradually (Amarasekara, 1984). This implies that another entity such as the government has to undertake the responsibility. Presently, Sri Lanka is confronting various forms of social, economic, cultural and political problems and therefore the state alone, can't undertake the full responsibility of caring every elder. In this context, ageing becomes a crucial social problem, which affects in various ways on the whole social structure in the country.

Most of the societal changes in Sri Lanka have been widely connected with the problem of ageing. However, so far, it is not a too complex problem in rural areas when compared with urban settings because of the existing social values and norms (UNO, 1989).

Methodology

Ageing is a biological, as well as a sociological phenomenon. From a sociological perspective, there are two issues that have to be considered, (a) sociological factors associated with age and age related problems? (b) Societal means available for solving these problems? (Robert and Robert, 1976). On the basis of these aspects, this study attempts to identify the issues of "caring elders" and the related problems.

The main research objective in this study is to find out whether the caring of elders is a problem in the urban society in Sri Lanka and how that problem is deviated according to the social class and the gender. The empirical data for the study were collected in the area of "Swarna Road in Wellawatta North Grama Niladari Division. There were 235 households in the area. Out of that number, 116 persons at the age of 60 years or above were found in 80 households. The total number of these elders was taken as the sample for the study. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Primary data were collected from elders, their main caregivers, household members, neighbors, relatives, clergies, medical officers and nurses. Three types of data collection techniques were used in the study. The techniques were (a) a survey, (b) in-depth interviews and (c) case studies.

Survey: a questionnaire was administered with 92 elders who volunteered to provide information. They consisted of 52 women and 40 men. **In-depth interviews:** A sample of 50 elders was selected to conduct in-depth interviews. Emphasize was given to select persons from different classes and gender wise. **Case study:** 10 cases were selected from among the 50 elders with whom in-depth interviews were conducted. They consisted of 6 women and 4 men. In addition to these techniques, observation was also made for the collection of qualitative data.

Discussion

It was found that the elders as well as caregivers faced a number of socioeconomic problems relating to caring. The following are the major problems identified in the study.

Economic difficulties: In case of caring elders, the main problem faced by the lower class elders was economic difficulties. About 42% of the elders who fall under the lower class face this problem

severely. Particularly, this problem is faced when fulfilling their main necessities. Most of the lower class elders were found to have suffered from poverty throughout their lifetime.

Social insecurity: The middle class aged mostly face the problem of social insecurity. 24% of them do not have a guarantee of receiving care from any family member except the old partner. Since the family members are engaged in their own activities, providing social security to the elders has become a problem. Hence, middle class aged suffer loneliness and isolation. They do not associate with their neighbors and live inside their own houses. They have a fear of defenselessness to be victimized possibly by the burglars or to face accidents, which may occur inside the house. In contrary, lower class aged do not face social insecurity because of the habit of association with neighbors.

Economic Activities: Disengagement Theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961), Role Theory (Kart and Barbara, 1976) and Activity Theory (Hendricks and Hendricks, 1981) emphasized that the aged are disengaged from their work in latter age. But this study revealed that such theories are not in accordance with most of the lower class. They are engaged in household chores, and also attend to income earning activities. When compared with men, it is the women who are engaged mostly in domestic work in both classes. About 56% of the middle class men do not assist in domestic work at all while all, women except, those who are bedridden and infirm are engaged in domestic work.

The findings revealed that the lower class aged represented in the sample had been engaged in income earning activities in the informal sector. Hence, they did not receive pension or provident fund at the retirement. It made them economically insecure after retirement. Only 35% of the lower class aged received the government poor relief (Samurdhi) and 41% of them are still engaged in economic activities. Among them, the most salient feature was that 17% were women, those unemployed earlier, are currently engaged in earning their daily living. However, none of the middle class elders was engaged in income earning activities at present. This was because; they themselves and their children too think that it is a shame or indignity. But the lower class aged does not think so and have no objection from their children to engage in any type of economic activity. Accordingly, most of the aged in lower class earn some sort of living and hence they do not depend entirely on their families.

Health issues: When a person reaches his/her latter age, there is a trend to suffer from various illnesses due to the biological situation (Kart and Barbara, 1976). The majority of the respondents who were between 60-74 age category, did not suffer from severe diseases. The nature of diseases varied according to gender as well as the social class. Accordingly, this study found that those who suffer illnesses were mostly female. Most of the aged have problems in weaknesses in eyes. Nearly every middle class elder wear spectacles, but most of the lower class elders do not incline to wear spectacles as they do not realize the necessity.

About 55% of the middle class women and 57% of the lower class women suffer from pains in joints. Diabetes, blood pressure and heart attacks could be seen among the aged irrespective of social class. However, low-blood pressure was common among elders of the lower class. Mental disabilities were not reported in the study, but some aged suffer from mental disorders such as dementia, stress and depressions. In case of illnesses, mostly it was the daughters who assisted and moved with their parents irrespective of gender or social class.

Leisure at aged: Most of the respondents spent their leisure time in watching television programs. Particularly, women are fond of watching teledrama while men were interested in watching sports and news.

Being a single at old age: As revealed from the study, the widowhood is higher among women. Among the respondents, 48% were women who are widows. Widowhood creates additional problems regarding caring elders, particularly because of the social attitudes on the woman's widowhood as a symbol of unfortunate.

Owners of property: It was very clear that the ownership of the house in which they lived makes decisive impact in receiving care. In our society, women have less opportunities of owning a house compared to men. If women are to have the ownership of the houses, it was because of their widowhood. Accordingly, the widowhood doesn't bring emancipation for the woman as men could have.

How he/she is important in the family? When considering the decision making power, aged women have lesser power than men. Especially 1/3 of the lower class women interviewed have no power to make decisions within the family. But if the family depends fully or partially on the income of the aged then the decision-making power increases. This was clearly reflected from middle class men who were represented in the sample.

Are they living happily? 48% of the respondents stated that their present life is not good. 30% of them belong to lower class. The reason given for this situation was the lack of economic power. 26% of the aged have indefinite hopes of their future. But when compared with lower class, more middle class aged hopes that their children would look after them in the future. Statistically it is 15% and 24% respectively. However, a vast majority, i.e. 95% of the aged expect the care of the family even though it is a problem.

Care givers' role - is it important? Only 3% of respondents did not have somebody to look after them. 48% of aged were widows, and most of their daughters look after them. Wives and/or daughters looked after most of the aged men. Accordingly, as Rosenthal (1985) emphasized, this study too confirms the attitude that "the care is a responsibility of the woman".

Due to the increase in life expectancy of people in the country, the ageing problem is critical among two consecutive generations. In such a situation, the second-generation elders have to look after the first generation elders. In addition, some elders have to look after their children or grand children instead of receiving care.

In analyzing the caregiver's views, three reasons could be identified as to why people tend to look after elders (a) Caring of elders as a duty and responsibility, (b) Some people were compelled to do so as there was no alternative, (c) Some people were compelled to do so in order to evade the blames from the society (d) People who care the elders unwillingly with a motive of gaining ownership of properties.

Conclusion

In caring elders, family has a greater role and responsibility according to the general societal norms. In the present society, this is gradually weakening. In this context, caring of elders has become a severe social issue as the aged population is increasing rapidly. This study identified that it is the woman who undertakes the caring responsibility mostly. However, the changing role of woman has been a factor that influenced caring elders.

The study found that the main problem faced by the lower class elders is "economic insecurity" while the middle class elders it was "social insecurity". As a whole, social and economic background of the family and particular situational difficulties were influential factors in caring of aged.

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