

Ageing and Gender in India: Paradoxes of a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

For women specifically, ageing has added problems of institutionalized gender hierarchies deeply ingrained in their cultures. This paper related issues of ageing in India to a feminist discourse on gender inequality and hierarchies and social norms rooted in patriarchy. The conclusion to this analysis is that serious and urgent efforts have to be made to address issues of gender imbalance in society and to better understand the problems of an ageing population which is now leading to a feminization of ageing.

Key words

gender, ageing, India, feminism

Introduction

Ageing of populations has increasingly become an important issue and concern globally. These concerns are grounded in emerging skewed economic futures, social imbalances, and individual risks. In each country these concerns are further overlaid with cultural neglect based on their social norms and traditions. For women specifically, ageing has added problems of institutionalized gender hierarchies deeply ingrained in their cultures. World wide it is also being observed that older women are the single most vulnerable group to poverty which further complicates the ageing process for women. In this paper I want to add to this discourse by relating the issues of ageing in India to a feminist discourse of gender inequality and hierarchies and social norms rooted in patriarchy that are responsible for the issues women face when they grow old. While parallel discussions about providing for the elderly as a separate demographic group are necessary, their issues cannot be separated from gender

hierarchies prevalent in all societies. My conclusion to this analysis is that serious and urgent efforts have to be made to address issues of gender imbalance in society and to issues of poverty that specifically plague women (feminization of poverty) to better understand the problems of an ageing population which is now leading to a "feminization of ageing." I conclude with the paradoxes of a feminist agenda in the traditional and economically imbalanced society of India.

It is important to point out at this juncture that class plays an important part in this discussion too. For the poor and lower castes (because lower castes' women have always worked), ageing has always been a problem and continues to be so. Interestingly, today it is not just the poorest of the poor that are seeing these issues but the problems of ageing are becoming more rampant among middle classes too.

This paper will also wrestle with the issue of whose responsibility is it to ensure fair representation of older people, specifically older women in society. In an attempt to address these issues, this paper will discuss first the Indian cultural and traditional family norms and briefly review the situation of widows in India. The latter is pertinent to the understanding of ageing women in India because of the continuing discrimination and destitution of widows. Next, it will discuss the impact of modernization and globalization on shifting family relations and representation of older women in the media to deconstruct the myths surrounding older women in society. An attempt on a feminist analysis to understand issues of ageing by challenging the dominant social paradigms, which have their roots in culturally sanctioned patriarchy will be conducted. The paper will also very briefly touch upon policies formulated by the United Nations and the Indian government to "help" older women. Many United Nations conventions, principles and statutes have been put in to place since 1982 (World Assembly on Ageing), and more recently, national level policies in India have also been devised to address issues pertaining to ageing populations. The ultimate attempt in this paper is to address the gendered ageing question within a feminist framework where it becomes integral to feminist and women's studies and not just confined to the discipline of gerontology.

There continues to be a denial that problems of ageing exist in India. An acceptance by the general population that old people are a burden is seen as a decline in moral and cultural values. India is unique in that

it has a strong sense of preserving traditional and semi-religious cultural norms but it practices only those that preserve the Brahmanic patriarchal order.¹ The need to "look" honorable and pious even at the policy making level within the great traditions of India, prevents a realistic analysis of pertinent social issues which render large segments of the population underprivileged and disadvantaged. The state exhorts families to take care of their old because that is prescribed in the religious texts and is a sign of high moral values. The Indian family is perceived to be the most harmonious and integrated social institution in India; hence, any crack in its veneer is seen as belittling whole of Indian culture, especially in the face of western perceptions of hyper patriarchal and poverty-ridden India. Consequently, the family is used (and abused) by both the state and by individuals to retain its patriarchal control and to prevent an in depth understanding or analysis of the individuals within this sanctified institution. A feminist analysis of the family by deconstructing it as a unit to focus on individuals within the family is thus resisted by the state and most Indian mainstream academics because of its threat to their power and convenience of using the family as a sole provider to its members, young and old.

To put it succinctly, there are five institutionalized strikes against older women in India: gender, widowhood, age, class, and caste. Disability and illiteracy etc. further complicate the lives of older women in India. From birth she suffers from lack of nutrition, lack of education, low self-esteem, sense of dependency on a male kin, rights illiteracy, and denial of the self due to devotion to the family. Further, denial of healthcare and low self-perception of one's health, suppression of individuality, and lack of mobility complicate women's status in India. Self- deprivation through sacrifice for the family is a coveted and noble virtue. Son preference still dominates the desires of most families though ironically daughters are the ones who end up taking care of the aged.

¹ Traditional Hindu society is stratified by a caste system in which the Brahmans hold the highest rank. Next in line are the Kshatriyas (warriors, kings etc), the Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and the fourth are the Shudras (manual laborers etc.) At the bottom in the hierarchy are the Untouchables who are considered so low in their occupation (carrion carriers and toilet cleaners) that do they do figure in the caste system and are also socially seen as the most polluting.

Background to the Issue of Ageing: Statistics and Definitions

There has been a rapid increase worldwide in the rise of ageing people. The dramatic increase in the number of old (over the age of 60) in recent decades is due to a decline in death rates along with a decline in fertility rates. This also leads to fewer children to take care of the aged. The number of elderly according to Chakraborti (2004) has tripled over the last 50 years with more rapid increases expected in Third World countries. Chakraborti warns that, "Indeed, the concerns of the "oldest old" should be viewed primarily as the concerns of older women" (2004, p. 53). According to him 77 percent of the centenarians in 1995 were women. Seventy percent of the world's elderly will be in Asia in 2025, with India having the largest number. Of these, 70 percent will be women and the majority of them will be poor. According to Shankardass (2007), 25 percent of the Indian population lives below poverty levels. Amongst the elderly, 90 percent live below poverty. Ninety percent of Indians work in the rural areas or in the informal sector and thus besides having a low rate of savings because of working at basic-pay do not receive a pension or provident fund from the government (Bhat & Dhruvrajan, 2001). According to Gupta (2007) there were 77 million Indians over the age of 65 in the 2001 census and by 2025 this number is expected to jump to 177 million. On another note, there were 200,000 centenarians recorded in the census, with the majority of them living in rural areas!

According to the 2001 census life expectancy for men is 65.8 years and for women 68.1 years. In the 2001 census there were 15.5 percent widowers compared to 54 percent widows at age 60. Widows account for three percent of the population and 50 percent are the poor (2007, p. 17). These are the ignored silent minority of the nation.

According to Goh (2005), by 2050, those under the age of 15 will be only 19 percent compared to 30 percent in 2000. Simultaneously, in the same time periods, those over the age of 65 will increase from six percent to 18 percent by 2005. These statistics reflect the imminent problems Asian societies will face with a rapid decline in the working population and an increase in the ageing non-working but economically dependent population. This issue is further compounded with the ageing sex ratio being 70 men to 100 women.

Another question that needs a brief introduction is: How to define ageing? The a definition of ageing is complex and culturally determined. The simplest way of defining ageing is *chronologically* where the state defines it through age sets especially through employment eligibility. Retirement age still persists in many Asian countries and can be seen as the onset of ageing. Retirement in India, especially in government jobs (which is still the largest employer in the country) has a very early retirement age ranging from 58-62 years. This age needs to be extended much more given the increase in longevity. Giving of social security and other benefits could also define ageing with the age cut offs for eligibility as well as certain privileges for discounts etc. But in India as in other traditional societies, ageing is determined by one's social roles and is also a cultural construct, especially for women. Chronological and *social ageing* could overlap but there could also be a gap between the two, which in women's case in India could complicate her life. For example, socially in India, early widowhood itself could define ageing. A third determinant of ageing is *biological*. This determinant is again of more pertinence to women where menopause is seen as a sign of ageing. Since women's status is mainly determined through her sexuality and reproduction, menopause is especially detrimental to her identity as a woman because the loss of reproduction marginalizes her in many cultures. This loss of reproduction is also tied into her sexuality and in many cultures seen as a stage where she enters into a desexualized age. Eventually, this dual marginalization of her through her biology results in her reduced status within the family and society. Basically her "use value" is diminished. This phenomenon will be discussed in more detail later in this paper when discussing feminism and the body.

Background to the Traditional Indian Family Structure

In India, tradition dating back to a few centuries B.C. dictated the structure of a Hindu family, individual and collective rights and responsibilities of family members, and community relationships. These rights and responsibilities were based on age sets, kinship patterns and a set of "duties and sacrifices." Simultaneously, rigid guidelines were also set for gender hierarchies within these kinship relationships. According to Hindu scriptures and ancient texts (Basham, 1967; Manusmriti, 1969;

Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1973; Thapar, 1978) lives, especially for Brahman men were traditionally circumscribed by four stages. The first stage is that of studenthood, the second stage of a man's life is that of the householder where he is supposed to get married and have children, preferably at least one son! After fulfilling his fatherly duty of arranging marriages of his children, he is supposed to enter the third phase of his life by retreating from the house and kinship relationships to a forest in preparation to enter the final stage of total renunciation from worldly matters and materiality. These phases are spelt out for Brahman men who could afford the social and economic luxury of such a lifestyle. According to the Dharamashastras², signs of ageing for men are when their hair turns grey, signs of wrinkles appear, and they have a grandson (Desai, 1999). As Desai reiterates, Thus the Brahmanic concept of old age emphasizes conclusion of and, therefore disengagement from family lifecycle responsibilities (1999, p. 57).

Traditionally, filial piety is built into sons' responsibilities through religious texts. They are supposed to take care of their parents in their old age by providing food, shelter, clothing, and so on. The eldest son is required to light his father's funeral pyre, dispose off the ashes at a religious river, and do the last rites for his deceased father's soul a few days later. This is considered the ultimate salvation for the father. Filial piety, which was once a highly regarded familial concept, has now been reduced to a phrase that is part of the Asian values rhetoric but less and less practiced. All this (excluding the funeral rites) is part of a glorified family structure that may have existed in the past but is not part of contemporary reality any more. While today men do not conform to such life stages or to traditional rituals, their power and construction of masculinity is still founded in such an ideology. Though now men do not follow this regime, such prescriptions set the standards of what is desired, at least symbolically, by most men. At the very least it ascribes a higher status to men within the traditional matrix of gender hierarchies.

In India, men's ageing identity is determined chronologically whereas women's is by marital status (Agnes, 1999, p. 51). For women, such prescriptions of ritualistic life stages did not exist. Women were not seen

² The Dharamashastras are ancient Sanskrit jurisprudence text. There is no precise date of the origin of these texts but a guesstimate is around 500-600 B.C.E. (Kane, 1953)

as individual entities divorced from relationships in Indian society. Women were seen as lesser than men whose main purpose was to serve men. To ensure that traditionally men could achieve these four stages women's lives were circumscribed by verses and prescriptions that basically kept them subservient and dutiful to their husband's needs (Manusmriti, 1969). The oft quoted and rightfully maligned verse by Manu relegates women to lifelong dependencies on male kin. The verse (interestingly not very different from Confucianism) instructs women to be dependent on their fathers when young, on their husbands after marriage, and on their sons after the demise of their husbands (Manusmriti, 1969). This sums up an Indian woman's identity throughout her life. Her status as an individual is derived from her relationship to a male through her life cycle. These dependencies in turn are responsible for dictating her social roles in society. Deriving her status from men at different stages of her life means her social roles are also focused on providing services to men and not about self-development or individuality.

In India, the onset of puberty defines women's entry into marriage. Marriage in India continues to be the main institution through which gender hierarchies are arranged and reproduced to define women's subservient status. These institutions are based on a fear of women's sexuality and therefore tight control of it through patriarchy be it the father, husband or other males in the family is of prime importance to the honor of the family. Her ability to have children, especially sons, empowers her, though inability to produce sons can lower her status within the household (Ahmed-Ghosh, 1998, 2009). Another contributing factor to an enhanced status for the daughter-in-law in the patrilocal residence is the demise of her mother-in-law or the widowhood of the mother-in-law, which promotes her to the head of the domestic sphere of the household. Likewise, menopause implies not just the end of her reproductive years but also a lack of sexuality when she is supposed to withdraw from worldly pleasures and move towards a more ascetic life. This deprivation is somewhat compensated for in her early ageing process by empowering her with the freedom of mobility, dominance over her daughter-in-law, and dominance in household affairs. She is able to develop a more public persona if she desires because she is not seen as a sexual threat—basically the fear of her getting pregnant dishonorably!

But this phase of glory is short lived as she gets older and weaker and even shorter lived if her husband precedes her in death. She then enters the phase of widowhood, which ascribes to her a totally new and problematic status, which is unique to India (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2009; Chen 2000; Dube, 1998; Giri, 2002; Lamb, 2000).

At another level, since women are such defined, investment in her upbringing through education or nutrition is also denied. She is constantly seen as *paraya dhan* (someone else's wealth/property) and therefore in families with limited resources, she is not prioritized for food, health care or education, further adding to her lower social economic status within the family (Chakravarti & Gill, 2001). Later in life her mobility especially in employment is also limited--because of lack of training and because of familial responsibilities. This combined with her culturally devalued status renders her totally dependent, and helpless in her old age. Thus, when at any age and more commonly in old age, a woman is widowed her social and personal identity is nullified and she is viewed as a burden to her family and to society.

Changes in Family Structures

Margrit Pernau (2003) in her edited volume on family and gender lists four aspects to the formation of a family. According to Pernau, a family is "culturally constructed" and not necessarily based on blood relations; it is not necessarily a location of "unity and harmony" but can also be a space of conflict and discord; the functions of a family are continuously shifting due to an evolving socio-economic environment and the structure of the family is shaped by the state too; all families may not subscribe to the normative images of families and may be at the margins of traditional families (2003, p. 7). Keeping in mind these dynamics of a shifting family structure one is made aware of the changing status of women in a family too.

But the family in India continues to be a necessary institution for distribution of resources, as Leela Dube points out, "Kinship will be seen as providing the organizing principles that govern the recruitment of individuals to social groups and their placement in them, the formulation of the family and the household, residence at marriage, resource

distribution including inheritance, and the obligations and responsibilities of members of the group in the business of living" (1998, p. 5). Accordingly, the person's location in the family is determined by their age and gender.

Given the above very generalized but still realistic and relevant gender hierarchy in India, the changing patterns in the family structure have also impacted the status of the aged, especially ageing women. Traditionally, till a few decades ago, most Indians lived in extended or joint households. Though this may not have been the ideal situation for some individuals, this setting provided care for the children and aged. Chakraborti (2004, p. 223) defines the family as "the most specialized institution of non-marketable services with deep cultural roots to family where elderly can provide services like cooking, babysitting and so on."

In India, as in many agriculturally dominant countries, the rural household was built on social and economic interdependencies. Labor within and outside the household was also divided in a way that material reciprocity and trading of chores and necessities provided economic stability. Most labor in rural areas, and especially women's labor is not remunerated in cash. The collective labor of men and women and intergenerational occupational distribution provides for most. Division of labor was determined by age and gender with each member of the household contributing to its sustenance and to individual maintenance. In fact, grandparents took care of the grandchildren and all familial labor was somehow reciprocated and socially and economically compensated for. Social and economic intergenerational dependencies provided for all within their means. In extended families in India, age-sets are grounded in responsibilities and rights. As Dhillon (1992) points out there was 'an element of social utility' to such stratification. Elders were respected for their wisdom and special respect was accorded to them. The status of family members was gauged by their total life span and the assumption that everyone would ultimately reach the age of respect. The eldest son lived with the parents along with his wife and in most cases inherited the family assets. This economic dependency translated into social security for ageing parents. For women in such families, becoming a mother-in-law enhanced her status compared to her entry into the husband's household as an outsider as a young daughter-in-law. Additionally, through her son she could negotiate power with her

husband and other decision-making situations. For a variety of factors social, cultural and economic, the elderly in India commanded respect (Ahmed-Ghosh, 1998; Chakraborty, 2004; Dube, 1998; HelpAge India, 2007).

But today forces of urbanization, modernization and globalization are gradually eroding this social construct. With urbanization, and out migration to cities (and foreign lands), families in rural and urban areas have been restructured. In rural areas, older people are being left to fend for themselves when their children migrate to cities to look for better jobs and education. With outmigration, economic and social breakdown results in isolation and helplessness for the aged in rural areas. Further, lack of institutions to provide financial, social or health care in rural India is minimal too. Disappearance of the young from the village also implies a breakdown in social networks. Those who migrate to cities to live with their children in their old age experience a strong sense of alienation because of the drastic shift in lifestyle and the absence of a social network. In urban centers, older people become dependent on children in small homes, with limited income where with rising consumerism their children see ageing parents as financial burdens. Globalization and capitalism are creating a high level of consumerism among adults and children alike, thus expenses related to ageing parents are a grudging expense for young families. The changing socioeconomic environment in urban centers is also leading to a more individualistic lifestyle where the familial norm of "duty and sacrifice" is fast losing its meaning in the face of modernization and westernization (Desai, 1999; Gopal, 2006; Sahu, 2005; Yoon & Hendricks, 2006).

Widows in India

In India, given the dominance of a cultural framework for interpersonal relationships that are semi-religious, each member of the household specifically the women internalize their social roles as presented to them since childhood. The glorified relationship of son and mother too contributes to the widow's restraints of accepting any harsh treatment meted out to her by her own family members. In situations of distress, being fatalistic helps to cope with a negative situation. Under such circumstances, most turn to god and prayer to find solace

(Ahmed-Ghosh, 2009).

I have in a recently published article (2009) written in detail on how issues of honor and shame further compound the lives of older people especially women. Elder abuse is rampant and largely hidden in Indian families. Given the projected harmonious relations within a household and its sanctified status within society, the abused themselves do not want to air their situation. This double bind leads to numerous situations of elder abuse ranging from emotional abuse to starvation, neglect of health and hygiene, poor housing, lack of mobility, ascription of servitude through household chores and dire economic dependency. Shame is seen as degrading family status and saving face is an important social marker of all individuals. Besides, the aged are dependent on their abusers so bringing their abuse to light will not only bring shame to them and their families but also lead to deteriorating living situations. According to the *Indian Journal of Gerontology* (2005) perpetrators of abuse for over 50 percent of the elderly women is by their sons- and daughters-in-law. Older women also internalize feelings of subservience, guilt and dependency as pointed out by Dessety and Patnam (2005). In her research Dessety and Patnam (2005) found older women become conscious of not being able to contribute financially and physically through labor to the welfare of the household. This becomes exaggerated with guilt of being a burden, fear of dying, anxiety, loss of memory etc. The State is unable to provide resources for their care and the police are apathetic to their plight given they do not have recourse to any State sanctioned solutions. Consequently their vulnerability is social and economic. Widowhood is thus a complex stage in older women's lives in India.

Swati Varshney (2007) in her PhD dissertation on predictors of successful ageing confirms, widows in India, specifically Delhi, have a much higher rate of depression than widowers. Varshney (2007) found that though widows may have larger social networks than men, overall life satisfaction was much less than for widowers. Indian widowers continue to exercise power within the household because of their esteemed status in the family as ascribed by the texts and the internalization of serving the father-in-law by the daughter-in-law. He remains the head of the household. On the one hand, widowhood should be seen as a culmination of a woman's life that is a natural course

followed by married women. Its ritual vilification and separation from mainstream society should not occur. Another way of looking at widowhood is as a liberating stage of life devoid of marital and maternal responsibilities. As discussed earlier in this paper, widows are seen as dependents and burdens on their families and this becomes ritualized through cultural assumptions derived from ancient texts.

In the USA, on the contrary, Catherine Silver claims that widows are "faced with a paradox: Older women who are still at a socio-economic disadvantage compared to older men, are more likely to have a positive view of ageing, feel less depressed, and engage in creative pursuits" (2003, p. 381). According to Silver, loss of status through retirement and therefore power in the family depresses the men more. Pat Chambers (2000, p. 129) lists stereotypes of widows in the West as widowhood being synonymous with acute bereavement, as an experience that is isolated from the rest of women's lives, as widows being lonely and isolated and in a period of social decline. Chambers (2000) contends that these myths are "dangerous when they influence personal perceptions, social interactions and social policy." While agreeing with Chambers (2000) on the impact of such stereotyping on policies, it is a sad realization that in India each of these characteristics is a part of the reality of most widows.

As mentioned earlier, the causes for the changing composition of family structures are industrialization, urbanization modernization and globalization. Combined with the above disadvantages, poverty also plays a crucial role in ageing women's situation. India, due to its own economic problems is still a developing country. With a burgeoning population, it cannot afford social security programs to its citizens. As Gopal (2006) points out with India's entry into the global economic market, it is making all the economic and tax accommodations that it needs to attract international business to the country. India is definitely not making the effort it can to bring about economic parity between the advantaged and severely disadvantaged populations. This miscalculation is already and will in the future bring about an imbalance that will handicap India's development. With not enough economic social security in place to handle this deluge of dependents, India will be weighed down in its progress. Thus, looking at this impending crisis in just economic terms should compel the country to provide more efficiently for this

demographic. Once again, the bulk of the ageing in India will be women with minimal skills, high levels of illiteracy, in poor health and no place to seek shelter (Liebig & Ramamurti, 2006; Desai, 1999).

In India, widowhood is part of the patriarchal social order that defines women's status in terms of relationships and dependencies. Thus, widowhood denies her an individual identity and controls her social being through a series of relational dependencies on men. Despite changes in civil laws and family laws as prescribed in the Hindu Code Bill of 1956, women's lives continue to be constrained by customary laws based on ancient texts. The gendered power hierarchy is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and is difficult to counter because the implementers of changed laws and policies are men from the same culture (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2009). Consequently, the need to reexamine the evolving family systems from a gendered perspective becomes imperative.

Feminism and Ageing

Feminism too has neglected issues of ageing women. Here it is necessary to clarify that the field of gerontology has produced the feminists who are concerned with ageing and not necessarily the discipline of feminism and women's studies. This "controversial/problematic" statement has been an observation from my research on gender and ageing in Women/Gender Studies departments and programs in the USA and in India. Focus on the young and youth is becoming central in all countries, in fact feminism is also tending to address their issues more. Feminists who have written on ageing in recent years are those who themselves are ageing and is an extension of the personal to the political (Friedan, 2006; Steinem, 2006). There has not been a sustained feminist call for ageing women's rights or situation within the discipline. Feminism has focused on women's rights in relation to men's, and basically emphasized women's roles in the workplace.

Credit has to be given to the stalwart of feminist gerontology, Toni Calasanti. Calasanti (1986, 2001, 2006, 2008), along with her colleagues has tirelessly brought to our attention the need to focus on issues of gendered ageing. As recently as a year ago Calasanti still confesses, "I have experienced greater acceptance of feminist work and feel a part of a community of scholars; at the same time, I continue to struggle with

deeper levels of ageism in society, both within the disciplines in which I work and within myself" (2008, p. 152). It is in this light that this writer is studying the importance of cultural and societal norms to lay claim to a feminist analysis of gendered ageism by highlighting the resistance from a patriarchal society. Two examples will be briefly discussed to emphasize the resistance all societies have to furthering an agenda of equity and justice for both men, and women and touch upon the cultural differences in the West and India.

Representations in the Media

A major difference in the work on ageing in the West and in India is the representation of the body and family in feminist discourse. Given the focus on the individual and the fragmentation of the traditional family form in the West, focus on the body including menopause and the ageing body is emerging in the field of feminist gerontology (Twigg, 2004). Indian feminism is still focused on issues of the family and issues of poverty to frame feminism, though in the metropolitan cities of India, this westernization is becoming more and more apparent.

While discussing Gulette's work, Twigg reinforces that in the USA, "Culture is saturated with concepts of age and aging. Dominant culture teaches us to feel bad about aging and to start this early, reading our bodies anxiously for signs of decay and decline" (Twigg, 2004, p. 61). It does not help that media representations of older women tend to be derogatory or pressure to be youth oriented is emphasized. Regaining lost youth through cosmetics, gyms, diets etc. is flooding the advertising industry. The message that ageing is not desirable and that if you have money you can reverse it is the dominant message being sent out. When older bodies are represented in the media it is to sell age related products from anti-wrinkle creams to "better sex" drugs for the ageing. Twigg (2004) further points out that gender becomes a central issue when defining cultural representation of the sexes by focusing on women's physical attributes as ascribing status to her compared to men's status being measured by their income, jobs, success in the political and social arenas, and ability to exercise power. Therefore, graying men are seen as "mature with authority" while graying women are seen as "old and sloppy."

Representation of older people and the overemphasis on hyper sexuality and the "perfect" body add to the degradation of women's images and identity as they age. Noleen O'Beirne (1999) equates desired feminine body of the young as being "white and slim with the older body being grotesque and defective." According to O'Beirne, when compared to the hegemonic model of women, the older woman "no longer menstruates, reproduces, holds shape and so on" (1999, p. 294). Men closely tie the appearance of the female body with desire, which ultimately defines women's sexuality. Men's desire for a certain kind of women's body plays a major role in women's internalization of what they should look like. Within this paradigm there is no space for an ageing body (Twig, 2004). In recent years, Indian media is emulating the West by advertising products for older women to look younger. Ironically, the preferred or advertized woman in India is also supposed to be slim, tall, and white! (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). All this is in contradiction to the socially prescribed roles of Indian women to be caregivers, desexualized, and dependents.

In the West, with the focus on the individual, the body holds a different significance for women's identity than it does in most of Asia though this is shifting somewhat in Asia. In the West, over determinism of the body and its sexuality and reproductive powers are more closely tied into the woman's self worth. Thus, a separation is required of the body from the mind to approach issues pertaining to women's status in society. This separation is important for Indian society too. The close association of an ageing body with an ageing mind is detrimental to women worldwide. In India, where social ageing takes precedence over chronological ageing, this separation becomes even more crucial. A young widow is socially old and therefore is not supposed to have any desires and is supposed to live a life of austerity, limited mobility, etc. Individuals internalize social roles and expectations and thus create complex and shifting multilayered identities.

Gender and Care giving

The issue of gender and care giving is a very major one in the field of feminist gerontology but still not adequately recognized in women's studies. This is a surprising lapse given that women's role in the family

and household has formed one of the backbones of the discipline. A major difference in the treatment of the ageing between India and the West is that the West provides some institutional support to their ageing, whereas India continues to be in denial about the ageing issue. Simultaneously, India is also taking shelter in the haloed concept of the traditional family in India to pass on the government's responsibility towards its senior citizens. In India, care giving is seen more as a "familial duty" than as "work." This duty extends from parents (primarily mothers) taking care of their children, to wives of their husbands, to middle-aged women (daughters-in-law) of their parents-in-law. In this duty lies virtue and self-sacrifice which continue to be recognized by the Indian society as desired qualities in all women. Care giving is also one of the biggest unpaid occupations that women are engaged with, especially older women who may have to care for elderly parents and then spouses. In many instances, care giving can also prevent from going out to work.

Care giving continues to be women's work and men usually step in when women are not available to do it or when the care is institutionalized (Stark, 2005; Hooyman & Gonyea, 1995). It has also been observed that women live longer than men therefore providing men with care in their later years. The oldest of the old are increasing in numbers and therefore requiring much more care due to economic and physical dependencies (Yoon & Hendricks, 2006; Desai, 1999). This work is traditionally done by women in the family in Asia and given the longevity of women; old women are care givers for older women. This has been a common observation in India too (Gopal, 2006; Alam, 2004; Sujaya, 1999; Krishnaraj, 1999). Thus, care giving of the elderly is a duty and even a sacred duty for younger women in the family. As other unpaid labor, especially within the household continues to be invisible and, non remunerative and unrecognized, care giving too suffers from those strictures. It is in this paradox that a feminist analysis of family labor becomes crucial.

Bernard *et al.* aptly sum up the conflicting social and economic signals society puts out for old women by stating, "The way society is constructed, alongside, myths and notions about women's natural roles and predispositions as carers and mothers in particular, sets up tensions and ambiguities in thinking about, and reflecting upon these issues" (2000, p. 2).

Recent Debates

In the 21st century, the discourse on gendered ageing in Asia and specifically in India has become more visible. As Yoon and Hendricks succinctly sum up, "Asian nations are moving rapidly from overarching traditional values of filial piety, communal harmony, and self-subjugation to Westernized notions of materialism, personal happiness, and individualism" (2006, p. viii). This as the paper has discussed so far is creating intergenerational cultural conflicts and a desire to be consummate consumers of high technology and consumer products. For India, a nation where 70 percent of the population still lives in rural areas and where the majority of the women still work in the rural areas and in the non formal sector, globalization has out-paced social change, to the detriment of women's status in general and older women's lives in particular.

As many scholars who are referenced in this paper are aware of the grave situation of gendered ageing, this new discourse is still wrestling with the question of what to do about it. For Indians and Asians in general a feminist analysis of the family is problematic. The Indian family as explicated in the first half of this paper continues to be based on traditional values of intergenerational cohesiveness, loyalty and duty. To breakdown the family unit to focus on the individuals in order to understand their rights and relationships is seen as displacing a sacrosanct institution.

Under the above stated ever-changing cultural and economic circumstances, India has to look into the status of women and engage with feminists and women who are dealing with women's issues to develop this demographic to avoid disastrous socio-economic consequences in the future. India has to start this process by addressing the needs of the girl child and provide for incentives to educate them and develop strong working skills to enter the work force in the formal sector, which guarantees old age pensions etc. The first step is to deconstruct the family and look at the status of individuals within the family unit to better understand the social roles and expectations from individuals within the household. The deconstruction of this hierarchy will then enable us to view societal constraints on women through a gendered lens.

Feminists need to engage with issues of ageism and bring to the

forefront the gender hierarchy that continues well into women's old age rendering many of them economically and socially handicapped. Bernard *et al.* (2000, pp. 16-17) have come up with a list of concerns that feminists need to deal with in their better understanding of issues of ageing of women. They claim that such issues should be addressed under the rubric of social justice, ageing women's voices should be heard and more biographical research needs to be conducted. Recording narratives and biographies empower women to tell their stories in their own words to an audience that value such experiences and use them to implement change in lives of older women. There has to be an understanding of oppression in its multiplicity and diversity. Further, structures of inequality need to be challenged and the relationship between the state and the individual questioned. To this list they add an understanding of race and ethnicity, sexuality, class and disability. These issues though lumped together to form a matrix for analysis becomes extremely pertinent to old women because each of these variables impact women in different but concrete ways. Thus, feminism today has to be more inclusive of problems of senior women. Ageing women's issues have to be studied from a gendered lens challenging patriarchal power and resultant hierarchies.

State and UN Policies to Address Issues of Ageing

This section presents a very briefly mention some examples of policy level documents that continue to prioritize the family as a unit of the whole in their recommendations for care of the aged. For the first time in 1999 the National Policy on Older Persons was formulated and submitted to the Indian Parliament. These resolutions and recommendations have still not been passed by the Parliament. The document concludes that the aged should "live the last phase of their life with purpose, dignity and peace." These sentiments while very lofty are unachievable in a country where a third of the population is still living in poverty, besides the added complexities of social and cultural oppressive institutions, especially pertaining to women. This document does not pay adequate attention to women, to the extent of ignoring them totally in the section on health care. Also the document according to C. P. Sujaya (1999) has an urban bias with an emphasis on working

in the formal sector. The document emphasizes pension funds, retirement benefits and housing schemes in cities and these benefits are relative to one's earnings. Property rights and inheritance laws are not discussed, leaving the bulk of ageing women out of this document. This continues to be a prickly issue in India where sons have inheritance rights over their mothers to their fathers' property.³ According to Sujaya (1999) three-fourths of the aged live in rural areas of India. But the putting together of the document was at least a first step in the recognition of ageing being a serious concern to the nation. The last few years has seen a neglect of formalized institutions for older Indians, especially the oldest old and the poor. What is heartening is that a debate is flourishing and pressure on the government is increasing.

At the international level, the UN Vienna document culminating from the first World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 claims, "The family, in its diverse forms and structures, is a fundamental unit of society linking the generations and should be maintained, strengthened and projected, in accordance with the traditions and customs of each country" (p. 19). Once again the traditional family structure with a gendered hierarchy within the unit is evoked to take care of all its members. What these documents and other documents do not address is the gender hierarchy perpetuated by a strengthening of patriarchy world wide through a rise in capitalism, religious fundamentalism and the waging of wars. Unless structural changes in economic policies and social institutions occur and women's oppression diminish, these words remain rhetoric which will not change the situation for any women and more specifically for older women who have been experiencing gender discrimination their whole lives. As mentioned in the United Nations International Resource and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) document (1999), the models for policy making were based on the European welfare state, making no allowances for the ageing from different parts of the worlds and cultures. At the conference on the UN Decade for Women in Nairobi in 1985, brief mentions were made to

³ Women now have inheritance rights to their husband's property but if they live in extended households those rights get diffused with the customary rights of the husband's brothers still owning it. Sons also take over the property from their mothers under the guise of taking care of them.

ageing women in the context of giving them more recognition as contributing members to society rather than seeing them as burdens, and being sensitive to the challenges ageing women face in society. The year 1999 was declared the International Year of Older Persons, "in recognition of humanity's coming of age." According to the INSTRW document, by 2050, 604 million women will be over the age of 60, with 70 percent of these being in the developing world and 70 percent of them living in poverty (1999, p. viii).

Such documents while important to bring attention to the crisis ageing populations may create to global and national economies do not address the underlying problems in these societies. The issue of ageing is not an independent issue humans are suddenly facing. Old people have always existed and with increasing longevity will increase in numbers worldwide. The basic problem that has to be addressed is the twin issue of poverty and gender inequality. Within the United Nations and national governments, what is lacking is a comprehensive attempt to deal with issues of ageing as a continuum of already uneven social and economic development situations. The United Nations needs to consolidate their various principles on ageing in their numerous departments and consolidate the policies to give it the seriousness that it deserves. Once again, as has been the case with women's issues, concerns with ageing are appended to every report as the last paragraph for political correctness. Agencies and governments need to address the root causes of why ageing is becoming a "burden" on society instead of dealing with it as an independent stage in people's lives which suddenly needs attention and resources. UN programs like UNICEF, INSTRAW, UNESCO etc. need to address the basic issue of gender discrimination before they continue to add more programs and policies as band aid to the increasing discriminations of women starting from birth to ageing. A centralization of resources is vital to improving the status of women irrespective of their ages.

In conclusion, Phillips and Bernard reinforce that, "Policy and practice is inherently gendered and built upon myths and stereotypes and suggest, instead, that they should recognize the changing contexts in which women live their lives" (2000, p. 168).

There is an urgent need to address the structural causes of poverty too. The majority of the aged are and will continue to be women in poverty,

this issue needs to reverberate in all national and international economic policy making. Taking refuge in the sanctity of the family as a social and cultural unit that is required to take care of its ageing members or depending on non-government organizations to pick up the slack is no longer a viable option given recent statistics and changing family structures. State intervention is a necessity. Agneta Stark (2005, p. 14) lays out four institutions that can play a role in the caring of the old. These institutions are the family, the market, the public sector, and voluntary organizations. For India, all four institutions have to come together to the table and discuss these issues. The family component has to be from a feminist perspective keeping in mind the visibility of domestic labor and push for equitable and just division of labor within and outside the household. The market has to intervene with the State and help provide affordable alternatives for healthcare and social security. Voluntary and non-government organizations can engage with grass root issues of information dissemination and implementation of programs.

Conclusion

Under these circumstances, India has to look into the status of women and engage with feminists and women who are dealing with women's issues to develop this demographic to avoid disastrous socio-economic consequences in the future. Women need to be prepared for their life course and especially their ageing from an early age. The girl child has to be educated, there has to be skill development, and employment opportunities with equal wages as men, mainly in the formal sector, which provides retirement benefits to her. Women have to be able to inherit land and property on the demise of their husbands automatically. Lack of access to resources, at times even when she may own property or a home, is the biggest obstacle to a stable old age for women.

Younger generations should be sensitized about issues of ageing. In fact the term ageing should be all encompassing to reveal the reality of everyone ageing since birth! Ageing to old age is inevitable and thus its preparation should be encouraged from early stages in life.

Goh (2005) is very clear about the labor imbalance in Asia due to shifting demographics. As mentioned earlier, he warns against the

lowering active labor force and even suggests increasing birth rates to replace the retiring work force. He acknowledges that that is not possible and exhorts the traditional Asian family system to provide support for the aged. Both Singapore and Malaysia have enforced rules requiring adult children to take care of their ageing parents. A solution that Goh (2005) recommends is to encourage young people to increase their personal savings, keeping their own old age in mind. As we have discussed this is becoming harder and harder in most rural and urban areas of India. Though in contradiction to the encouragement of increasing consumerism and globalization, this is an institution that has to be resurrected to enable individuals to be individually accountable for their future. Of course this excludes most women and the poor in Asian societies but the governments need to intervene on their behalf by providing services and wrestling with issues of gender discrimination based on gender hierarchy and a rigid patriarchal system.

Why these issues are a concern in Asia and specifically India is because of the cultural baggage of rigid patriarchy and increasing poverty among the ageing that these countries encounter. As Desai (1999, p. 60) rightfully concludes, "Patriarchy works so systematically that although women continue to work throughout their old age, they are the poorest of the poor." Sexism and ageism go hand in hand.

Feminists have to recognize that a woman's position in the family is multilayered and determine not just by her age and gender but also by the family's class and her kinship relationships within the family, cast and culture. These relationships tend to be part of a patriarchal hierarchy that throughout her life is legitimized through dependency relationships with a male in the household. This gender hierarchy is maintained through the call for "preserving honor and social status" within the larger community. Honor of the family is invested in the honor of the woman thus she experiences and conforms to rigid strictures to prevent any opportunity of disgrace or shame she might bring upon the family. The main fear is of her sexuality and its preservation becomes the prime concern of the men in the family. This preoccupation with a woman's sexuality is what impacts her life later as she ages and once again works towards her oppression within the family. It is in this complex reality of women's lives that Indian feminists are in a dilemma of how to address issues of a gendered ageing. This paradox is what needs to be sorted out and can

only happen when the state recognizes the value of the girl child and her contributions throughout her life cycle to India's development.

Chakraborti continues that, "so long as the benefits are not outweighed by the costs, intergeneration living will survive" (2004, p. 223). But, today in India in both rural and urban centers, the costs (economic and emotional) of caring for the ageing seem to be outweighing the benefits. When caring even for parents is seen more in economic terms compared to a sense of duty or responsibilities of the children towards a parent, the costs can seem insurmountable to classes where it is hard to make ends meet. Longevity especially of women is an added crisis in many families.

In India issues of ageing women cannot be separated from issues of female infanticide, foeticide, dowry deaths and the practice of dowry itself, domestic violence and sati to mention a few institutionalized discriminating cultural practices that reflect the status of women in the country. Their status is the culmination of such institutions, poverty, and globalization. Thus, the need to understand the position of the girl child, Indian cultural and value systems, and the government's lack of will to change the gender hierarchy in India is the cause for the conditions of older people especially women in the country. Parallel processes have to be implemented to ensure better conditions for this age group, not just women, but given the intersectionality of these issues, India has a long way to go if it does not recognize this emerging burgeoning crisis that it will have to bear.

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