Chapter 1
Quality of Life and Aging of Women

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ABSTRACT

Aging is the process of becoming older. It represents the accumulation of changes in a human being over time, encompassing physical, psychological, and social changes. Both men and women experience some sexual changes with age, but they experience aging differently. For women, it’s commonly known as menopause, starting around in the age of 50. For men, aging is more gradual, with testosterone levels declining slowly over time. Unlike menopause, which brings fertility to an end, men can still reproduce and create sperm well into old age. The effects of aging on social relations, existence, and identity are more alarming and often dreadful. Despite the influence of the aging process on women’s lives, very few feminist insights analyzed the interconnectedness of gender and aging. Hence, the impact of aging on gender inequalities requires more serious discussions and analysis. Only through these efforts can new visions of the plight and contributions of older women grow and policies be developed to remedy the problems.

AGEING: AN UNDERSTANDING

The number of people above 60 years and over in the globe is 673 million in 2005 and is expected to increase to 2 billion by 2050, almost a triple increase and the first quarter of 21st century is going to be called as ‘The age of ageing’ (Shettar, 2016).

Aging can be defined as a period of human life, measured by years from birth, usually marked by a certain stage or degree of mental or physical development and involving legal responsibility and capacity. In other way it can be defined as the process of growing old or gaining maturity. Ageing is a continuous, irreversible, universal process. However, the age at which one’s productive contribution declines and one tends to be financially dependent is popularly calculated as the climax point for an ageing person and it may vary from person to person; it is also set by mental state of a person.

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One of the major focuses in social gerontology in recent years is the study of aging, in which aspects of aging are studied in regards to their relation to other aspects of human life, though the study is not distinctly supported by any particular social theory. Within the sociological theories of aging, variables of ethnicity, gender, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status were previously only minimally taken into account. The emergence of the social theories of age and aging can be traced back to the era just after the world wars with the rising concern of the governments regarding the consequences of demographic imbalance and the shortage of young workers in USA and UK. During these years, social gerontology emerged as a multidisciplinary field of study trying to respond to the social, health and economic policy implications and projections of populational change (Phillipson, 1998). Both disengagement and activity theories postulate not only how individual behaviour changes with aging, but also imply how it ought to change. Some major protagonists of disengagement theory, like Cumming and Henry (1961) looked at how aged people should disengage from works and prepare for the ultimate disengagement from the material world by accepting death. They also concluded that gradual withdrawal of older people from work roles and social relationships is both an ‘inevitable’ and ‘natural process’. The disengagement process starts with retirement making older people detached from their bread earning occupation, though they may get engaged in other roles not necessarily aligned to any sort of financial deal. As the basic postulates of disengagement theory, Cumming and Henry narrated that man’s central role is work, and woman’s is marriage and family and if individuals abandon their central roles, they drastically lose social life space and confidence and so suffer identity crisis and demoralization unless they assume the different roles so as to overcome any sort of psychological distress. Disengagement theory is independent of culture, but the nature of its focus is bound by specific culture. Men and women disengage from society in different ways. Traditionally, men have a larger impact on their societies and influence on their families through their careers and women have a larger role in their societies that are socio-emotional in nature. As people age and retire, they lose skills and knowledge they gained by being part of their professional lives and lose credibility and/or respect on a personal level in family and friend relationships or at least they comprehend to be so. Aging is viewed differently in different cultures. For example, in most oriental cultures age is associated with wisdom, but in Western cultures, aging is viewed in a more negative light, in terms of inactivity and incapability to keep pace with the growing demands of the economy.

AGEING: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, there has been an acceleration of Feminist insights into understanding age and gender as identity variables of analysis (Arber & Ginn, 1991). Focus is on two important issues: first, power equation shapes theoretical construction; second, a group’s position within the social structure/strata influences theoretical attention; as older women tend to occupy mostly a position of marginal class status, especially in terms of financial credibility as compared to men of all ages and younger women, they are given less theoretical attention. According to Acker (1988 cited in Arber & Ginn, 1991) in all known societies the relations of distribution and production are influenced by gender, requiring a gender-based analysis. In capitalist society gender relations of distribution are linked to the capitalist mode of production and relations of production and distribution; here meaning and amount of ‘wages’ are determined by age. For example, teenagers work for less money than adults; middle-aged adults are paid more. Older people are usually ‘fixed’ to roles without resources or rely on resources distributed by the state, may be in the form of pensions, allowances, interests, dividends etc. which does not do justice to
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