

Elderly Population of Sri Lanka in Gender Perspective

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Introduction

Sri Lanka is unique as the fastest aging nation in South Asia with its regionally unparalleled indicators of social development. The median age of a Sri Lankan (21.4 years) by the Census year 1981 has increased up to 30 years by the 2011. Elderly population in Sri Lanka has doubled within the reference period. 12.4 percent of elderly population by the Census year 2012 may be 24.8 percent by the year 2041. The aging index that was 14.5 in the year 1946 has increased 49.1 in the year 2012 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Higher life expectancy for females has already made aging and old age a gendered phenomenon. Projected standard life expectancy of Sri Lankans by the year 2011 was 68.8 years for male and 77.6 years for females (de Silva 2008:25). Life expectancy has been increasing while the mandatory age of retirement remained static. According to above projections of life expectancy a male elder gets retired by the age 60 lives additional 8.8 years while a female elder lives additional 17.6 years.

Table 01: Elderly Population and Sex Ratios in Sri Lanka

Year	60-74 Aged Population			75+ Aged Population		
	Male	Female	Sex ratio	Male	Female	Sex ratio
1981	413,800	359,547	115.1	108,600	99,861	108.8
2012	891,038	1,072,575	83.1	224,613	332,347	67.6

Source: *Census of Population and Housing 2012*

This information clearly depicts that Sri Lanka has experienced a clear demographic transition between two census years. Male majority in the elderly population by the census year 1981, has turned out to be a female majority by 2012. This is due to the increasing higher life expectancy ratio for female elders. Female majority among elders is historically high for the census year 2012 to the extent that just 67.6 male senior citizens for 100 female senior citizens. The overall objective of this research is to unravel the observable recent socio- cultural trends pertaining to senior citizens of Sri Lanka in gender perspective. Specific objectives of the study focused activity patterns, religious behaviour, old age related attitudes, problems and health related trends in the perspective of gender.

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative investigation of this study is based on the new paradigm of anthropology which posits culture as a totality actively constructed by the human actors (Lamb, 2000). Each culture provides a different perceptual lenses of reality (Sokolowsky, 1990). On the strength of these theoretical

assumptions, the study examined the gender related experience of Sinhalese senior citizens.

Methodology

This study first analysed available national statistics identifying the demographic trends related to senior citizen population. In the first round of data collection, sixty unstructured interviews enabled collecting a large volume of qualitative data analysed using qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti). Quantification through a structured questionnaire was based on those qualitative interviews. In the second phase of study, the structured questionnaire was employed on senior citizens live in five cultural- ecological zones. A sample of 400 families were selected representing five identified cultural- ecological zones namely, urban, sub-urban, rural paddy culture, colonized schemes and estate sector. These identified zones were selected from Colombo, Kalutara and Ratnapura Districts of Sri Lanka. A random sample of 80 families were selected for data collection from five *Grama Niladari* Divisions represented above five zones.

Findings

Overall employment is high for male elders and same is noted in the agricultural sector. Employment is nearly four times high for male senior citizens in agricultural sector. High informal sector participation rates of females suggest that female labour in agricultural work may also be high, albeit female are not much represented in the official agricultural statistics and such labour is complementary to male labour. Rural Sinhalese female elders engage in a wide range of income earning activities closely bound with their residences or living ecological settings. The majority who involved in political and social service activities are males in comparison to female elders. Female elders are more religious than male elders. Female elders seem to be more emotionally involved with the religion and they attend more in collective rituals. Advancing physical incapacity at old age, gender based discrimination and being in lower classes in combination tend to make old age a negative experience displacing some vulnerable female elders in to the margins of the society. In that sense, a burdensome old age can be more of an experience of female. Relatively, more a female finds it difficult to live by own leaving the family due to gender based attitudes and resultant social repercussions. Female elders appear to have marginally a more negative attitude towards youth fashions, love marriage, family planning, living away from children and gender equity. Female elders show marginally a high attitude towards cast consciousness. Female were the category shown relatively a more negative attitude towards gender equality. Female elders apparently are specifically more critical in their attitude on female youth. More of female elders show a negatively trended attitude towards love marriage (44.8%) and youth fashions (57.7%) compared to male elders (33.7% & 48.2%). Female elders are more with the opinion that they are physically weak in comparison to male elders ($P=0.000$). Female elders show more of self-acceptance as old people. A clear majority of problems appear to impact more on female elder than on male elder. Relatively higher level of restlessness due to domestic activity engagement is from female elders. They appear to face slightly higher occurrence of chronic illness despite the added benefit of longer life expectancy experienced. Nearly a double fold occurrence of orthopaedic illness among female elders can be related with high disability. More of

female elders encounter loneliness and this appear to be related the widowhood which is more of a gendered issue. Higher proportion of death anxiety and worries over bereavement among female elders shown can be related with the same issue of widowhood. Female elders appear to play more of the role of caring so that child care burdens and caring sick within the family is more of an experience of the female elder. Contrastingly a higher percentage of female elders are affected by the problems like high chronic illness, medical costs, changing the place of residence, poverty, memories of personal tragedies, sensory incapacity, abuse, sleeping problems and poor housing. Out of all illness types considered, heart diseases were the only noted disease type more prevalent among male elders. All other diseases were relatively high among female elders. More of females seem to experience chronic illness. Relatively low mental health related attitudes were reported from female elders. Synthesis of above gender related facts portray more of female Sinhalese elders to be socially, economically and psychologically vulnerable.

Keywords: Elderly; Gender; Sinhalese; Old age;

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