

Global Essay Competition 2024

Title: The Silent Epidemic of Aging Alone: Why should we Care about Care?

Essay:

Introduction: The Looming Crisis of Care in Aging Societies

“Old age is the most unexpected of all things that can happen to a man.” Leon Trotsky

But can our society keep pace with the rapidly greying tide that demands our hearts & minds alike?

In the intricate web of this modern world, the way we care for our elders stands at a critical juncture. A paradigm based on separation and evident from the physical and emotional distancing of our elders from the mainstream daily life, carries repercussions not only for their well-being, but also for the very fabric of our cities and societies. In India, caregiving towards elders is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric as well as deep rooted ethos, as reflected in a common saying: “Elders are like gods; serving them is our salvation”.

This essay talks about the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, questioning prevalent development models onto which cities are being created, and advocates for a transformative shift in how we perceive and integrate our senior citizens – a reservoir of societal wealth awaiting recognition and appreciation.

Today, when the world faces a new demographic challenge of “Population Aging”, also described as the “Silver Tsunami”, our senior citizens, in the loneliest times of their lives, are left to fend for themselves. This leaves a growing void, a scarcity of care that whispers of neglect and loneliness in our own homes. This essay explores the multifaceted dimensions of this looming crisis, delving into the demographic, cultural, and gender nuances that shape our understanding of elderly care.

Changing Family Dynamics

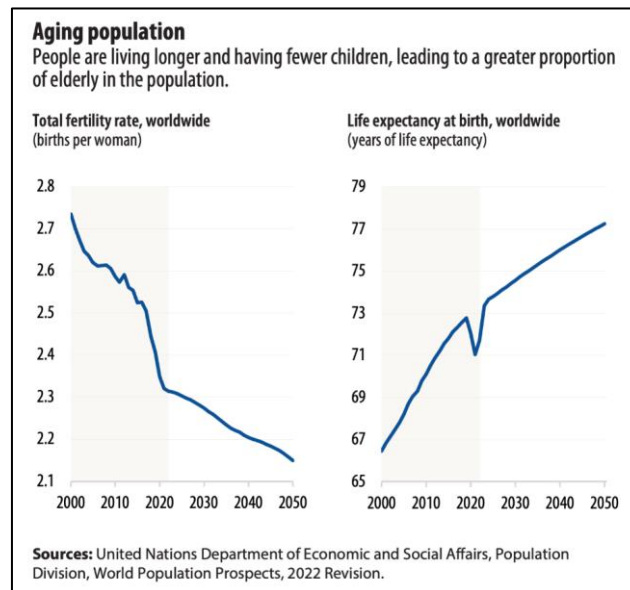
Globally, there were 727 million people aged 65 years or over in 2020. Over the next three decades, this number is projected to be more than double, reaching over 1.5 billion in 2050. All regions will see an increase in the size of their older population from today till 2050. The share of global population aged 65 years or over is expected to increase from 9.3 per cent in 2020 to 16.0 per cent by 2050¹². Our seniors, often considered a burden when set apart, possess an untapped wealth of wisdom, guidance, and resilience. (*UN report, 2020*)

People’s routines are getting increasingly hectic each day, and traditional multigenerational families are becoming less common, with nuclear families increasingly dispersed across geographical distances. This evolving family structure wherein joint families disintegrate into nuclear families is leading to older people being left to live alone in the years of their lives, which demands quality care. Moreover, advancements in technology, reduction in fertility rates³, and inability to adapt to the change have led to further isolation as the remaining family members make themselves busier, distancing themselves from the affectionate elderly in the house and further widening the relationship gaps.

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf>

² https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3898412/files/undesa_pd-2020_world_population_ageing_highlights.pdf

³ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Analytical-Series/aging-is-the-real-population-bomb-bloom-zucker>



(Image Source: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/Series/Analytical-Series/aging-is-the-real-population-bomb-bloom-zucker>)

Demographic and Cultural Differences towards Caregiving

Different parts of the world see caregiving differently, and the cultural fabric of the society influences the value ascribed to it. Asian cultures are known for respecting as well as celebrating elders. In East Asia, “filial piety” becomes a moral compass that further dictates respect and responsibility towards elders. Role reversal happens once parents age and the duty to care for the parents shifts automatically onto the child.

It can also be connected to the deep-rooted Indian traditions, as seen in Indian mythology, which contains stories such as Prahlad. Prahlad, a revered figure in Hindu mythology, epitomises complete devotion and duty toward one's parents. Despite adversity from his father, Hiranyakashipu, who was a demon king, Prahlad's unwavering commitment to Lord Vishnu highlights profound respect for the divine in all beings. This story underscores our obligation to prioritise and protect our elders and their rights, akin to recognising the sacred in them. Nevertheless, some of these tales are gradually fading away as India & most of the developing countries are accelerating towards economic growth and modernisation.

Japan has a strong culture that places high value to care, deeply rooted in the principle of “Omoiyari” (empathy). Additionally, caregivers in Japan are known to care for their image, always striving to avoid any negative social consequences driven by the fear of shame. This concept, known as “Sekentei”, revolves around reputation and dignity within the community. Despite this culture, Japan faces care scarcity due to a rapid surge in the elderly population. Contrastingly, western cultures are seen as those that prioritise youth-centric values, emphasising independence and individualism. As health deteriorates, the elderly in these cultures often have to transition to retirement communities such as nursing homes. This is opposite from the emphasis on familial care in Latin America, where “familismo” (familism) is paramount, prioritising family needs and respecting older family members.⁴

Rapid industrialisation and migration in China and other developing countries have lately forced people to leave their homes and relocate for work towards urban areas. Elderly parents, often residing in rural areas and unable to care for themselves, face challenges due to the geographical distance. Times are changing, and countries are making laws to prevent this. Some years ago, the "Elderly Rights Law" was passed in China with the objective to warn adult children to never “neglect or snub elder parents”. It also mandated regular children's visits to their parents' homes regardless of how far

⁴ <https://theweek.com/articles/462230/how-elderly-are-treated-around-world>

they stayed, failing which provision was made for punishments such as fines and putting them behind bars.⁵

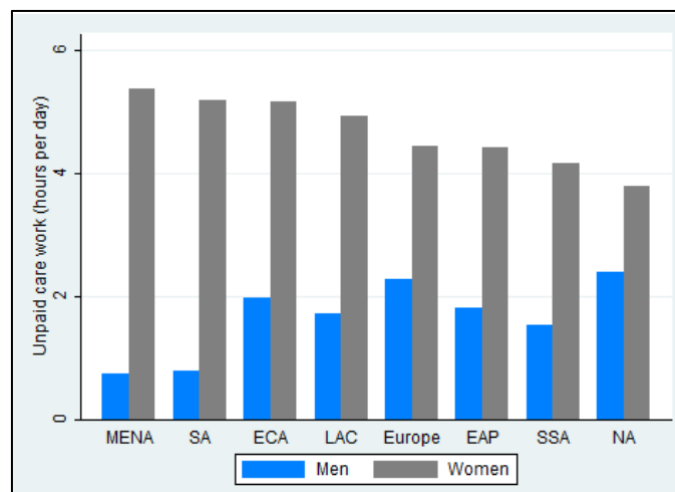
But it's not easy, as said. Apart from dealing with the distressful experience of caregiving, it takes a significant toll on the psychological and mental well-being of the caregiver.

Women being seen as Free Elderly Care Providers

Across the globe, providing care to the elderly and children has been a family affair carried out mainly by the women in the family. This is a region and income-agnostic phenomenon seen since ages. The situation is even exacerbated when the caregiver is ageing. With increasing women empowerment resulting in more female workforce participation, elderly people are devoid of the informal, unpaid care they need due to the long tradition being followed. This highlights the need for a shift in traditional caregiving roles.

As per a study, on a global scale, an average woman dedicates over 50 minutes/day to unpaid care work, including taking care of children and elderly, a commitment more than double that of men. A look around the OECD countries showcases that nine out of ten formal long-term care workers there are women. A similar situation can be witnessed if we further look into the countries that have achieved the highest levels of gender equality, such as Denmark and Norway, where the proportion of women who work as formal care workers is 95% and 92%, respectively. (OECD, 2021)

On an overall level, unpaid care includes all the activities that are necessary for the health, well-being, and maintenance of people in the family.



(Image Source: https://www.oecd.org/dev/development-gender/Unpaid_care_work.pdf)

Looking at the need for care, older women are more likely to require long-term care services compared to men since they are frailer, have a higher life expectancy and have a tendency to poor health in their older days than men. As a result, a large proportion of older women account for care recipients compared to older men. Also, a general norm in society wherein most women marry men older than them makes a huge chunk become widows when they enter their old age, thereby lacking direct support from their spouse.

Long-Term Care Undervalued

People today have stopped valuing any form of care provided, and it is becoming a thankless job. This undervaluation of long-term care is evident from the challenges paid caregivers face, which include low wages, job insecurity, little or no benefits and poor working conditions. Caregivers are also being underpaid as compared to other occupations where similar skills, education and experience are required.

⁵ <https://theweek.com/articles/462230/how-elderly-are-treated-around-world>

While providing care to a loved one or a family member can be fulfilling, it is often seen that unpaid family caregivers encounter similar physical and mental stress as paid caregivers. Furthermore, family caregivers often have to juggle multiple responsibilities, which include managing daily household chores, finances and even their own jobs, which puts immense pressure on their body and mind. This causes overworked caregivers to face the risk of providing subpar care to the needy.⁶

When it comes to the on-ground execution, countries with established care provision policies have a flawed implementation, which has frequently resulted in vulnerable adults being left with insufficient and fragmented options of care. In the times to come, as we are moving towards an increase in the ageing population, there is an urgency being created to enhance affordable and quality long-term care services. However, investments and public funding for such services are still crawling along with a tortoise approach, falling short of the required level.

Recommendations

Village-centric Models: Old traditional people often want to stay in their own familiar environments and don't want any unwanted relocation, particularly when they have to move to old age homes for care. This is particularly due to the fond memories built, the love for their hometown and other age-related personal or environmental limitations. This model can be promoted and developed by local governments to foster interconnected communities where local residents support and care for each other and have a symbiotic relationship. People can share each other's resources, expertise, healthcare facilities, communal spaces, and garden spaces, which would reduce their isolation and promote social interaction between the communities.⁷

Integrated Technological Solutions: There is a dire need to implement a comprehensive technological ecosystem for elderly people, which includes teleconsultation platforms allowing them to have virtual doctor consultations and extensive use of wearable devices for remote monitoring of health vitals. Many people also don't have the knowledge to operate such systems.⁸ To address these barriers of age-related digital divide, lack of tech literacy, privacy and trust issues, AI-powered voice-activated companions can address social isolation, support independent & daily living, including medication reminders and managing daily tasks.

Respite Care Options: A holistic caregiver support system can be created, including subsidized respite care programs, including in-home care, daycare centres for adults and short-term stays in assisted living facilities. On the other hand, mental health should be prioritised specifically for the caregivers through dedicated support programs acknowledging the emotional toll it takes during caregiving. Flexible work policies may also be added, including reduced work hours, thereby accommodating employed caregivers, which would prevent burnout and enhance the caregivers' overall well-being.

Career loss compensation provides a forward-looking vision for carers: Cash benefits to informal carers can provide choice and flexibility to the recipients. It would also act as compensation towards the opportunity costs of caring, which are reduced working hours alleviating families from poverty.

Public-Private Partnership for Intergenerational Communities: I believe there is a huge social care crisis for older people. This can be mitigated by a PPP model, which is built to establish intergenerational communities that addresses this issue while addressing the housing needs of students and families. A case in point for this is the "House of Generations" in Aarhus, Denmark, which is a pioneering project combining retirement and nursing homes alongside family residences.⁹ This innovative approach can amalgamate older adults within the communities and also empower them to get the required care. A sample model for this would look like residents actively engaged in reciprocal support, where older adults provide childcare, and students assist those having mobility challenges, creating a collaborative, cooperative, inclusive and harmonious living environment.

⁶ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2022/11/caregiving-ageing-world/>

⁷ <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/52/3/418/580328>

⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7908177/>

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2023/09/21/how-to-mitigate-the-looming-senior-care-crisis/?sh=3e0f42137dca>

Adoption of Migration Policies: Countries where domestic supply is insufficient, can use this approach as an option that would allow skilled/ quality caregivers from different countries through regular and legal channels while also ensuring that the rights of the migrants are protected.

Conclusion

In grappling with the impending crisis of eldercare in ageing societies, a proactive and multifaceted approach is imperative. The undervaluation of long care, predominantly carried out by women, cannot be continued as is and calls for a societal shift in recognising and compensating caregiving efforts. Evolving family dynamics, cultural dynamics, and demographic shifts clearly highlight the need for tailor-made solutions that are built by collaborative efforts.

We all must know that by prioritising elderly well-being, fostering inclusive environments and creating sustainable support systems, societies can navigate these demographic shifts while ensuring dignified and quality care for all. In the era of championing individual rights, it is equally paramount to acknowledge societal duties, especially in times of scarcity, to provide care for the elderly. These individuals, who once cared for us in our infancy, now warrant nothing but reciprocation.

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Word Count (essay text only): (2081/2100)