

Chapter 1

Older Women: Global Concerns and Responses Toward Their Well-Being, Is a Serious Issue—An Introductory Note



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Abstract Older women are generally regarded with negativity, but this needs to be overcome. There is increasing need for their concerns to be heard, responses generated toward improving their well-being and they be given respect and status in society. There are many strengths and resilience which older women bring in their lives, and these aspects need to be acknowledged by generating policy and societal response toward their well-being. This chapter with focus on older women's lives, on their images in society, on identifying their problems and concerns discusses the need for proactive practices, policies, and programs which enhance their status in society and contribute to toward giving them respect and dignity. The chapter points to difficulties older women face in their private lives, working situations, in relationships with different sections of society. The chapter puts forth an agenda which overcomes gender discrimination, fights ageism, removes barriers in health and social fields, and provides a positive approach toward recognizing their potential and their contributions in society. The analysis presented here adopts a development and human rights-oriented approach.

Keywords Negativity · Resilience · Policy and societal response · Proactive practices · Contributions and human rights approach

Older women defined here as sixty years and above are the fastest growing segment of the population, and their numbers are swelling in all countries, in some at a slower phase but in many rapidly resulting in feminization of aging, with important policy implications. This phenomenon not only brings attention to the question of well-being among older women but also makes us reflect on what it means to be an old woman in general and more specifically in different societies with various cultural contexts and in various circumstances. Given the heterogeneity among older people, while both men and women in their later years do go through a variety of experiences and react in many different ways but given certain gender commonalities as seen across the world, older women face specific vulnerabilities which relate to their well-being. The concerns for older women become more acute and serious because

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of their vulnerabilities affecting their access to affordable health care, utilization of health services, seeking provisions for social care, shelter, food, freedom from abuse and living with dignity with adequate economic resources, and enjoyment of human rights. This then calls for a systematic universal response to address issues that affect their well-being by essentially taking into account the social, cultural, economic differences which exist impacting lives of both older men and women, but older women merit special attention, thus a focus on them specifically in this book. There are many issues related to older women that can be discussed from multiple perspectives; however, this volume is not exhaustive of these but touches on some of them. The various chapters bring forth selected concerns related to different aspects be it the vulnerabilities of older women or their strengths, be it discussing certain programs, actions applicable to them or just referring to certain dimensions which require our attention for improving their well-being across later years.

This book in no way suggests that many concerns voiced here are exclusive to older women and do not cover those for older men, but nonetheless the chapters only focuses on one gender keeping the discussion on the other gender for a future publication. Also the chapters here are illustrative of few countries, but the topics and emphasis on the issues cut across nations and regions of the world as many concerns related to older women are universal in nature, penetrating through social, cultural, and economic boundaries. There is unintentional absence of mention of certain countries/regions, but this is not to undermine that these societies do not reflect the concerns and similar responses voiced here. The discussion on older women presented here through specific chapters by experts who have a reputation of international scholarship has some amount of universality and applicability which speaks of certain commonalities that cannot be overlooked; thus, wider coverage of different countries/regions is seen not as a necessity. The idea reflected in this book is to bring to the reader concerns and responses which speak about different discourses going on in the world and more specifically discuss those concerns which are dominating in the field of gender and aging studies. This volume does not aim to provide a complete theoretical orientation to issues which concern older women though takes support of certain conceptual analysis. It must be remembered that while there is literature available on older women in many countries and as a field requiring affirmative action from both government and non-government sectors as well from the civil society members it is only recently since last two decades or more that interest on the well-being is being looked at from a rights-based perspective and more diligently in some parts of the world. The chapters of the book point toward new directions which discourse on older women is generating in this century. It in no way overlooks or rejects thinking which shaped it from the past. Mixing some of the old and new ideas on the lives of older women, the different chapters take us to various dimensions, some upcoming that not only show the urgency to deal with it but also indicate the need to be pragmatic in our approach. Thus, many of the chapters practically and realistically discuss the contributory dimensions and responses to the well-being of older women while not getting lost in the theoretical frameworks.

In general, viewing it from gender and age lens older women's well-being is affected by many factors, but seldom are the impacts of all of these recognized nor

older women's contributions acknowledged and very little research is available to highlight the different aspects and more importantly to suggest remedies to improve the well-being of older women across the world. This book tries to overcome this drawback to some extent by taking into account their contributions in terms of caring, their caregiving role, coping mechanisms, despite experiencing various forms of mistreatment, undergoing forms of depression, facing gender-based violence, taking into account lives of oldest old women in their 90s who like their younger counterparts continue facing different kinds of vulnerabilities. The book brings attention to the view that differential vulnerabilities require specific interventions which can create empowering environments. The challenges cut across countries and regions as shown in certain chapters of the book pointing to the need to adopt strategies that facilitate better health care, access to specific public services, overcoming agist attitudes and prevailing discriminatory practices. As highlighted in some of the chapters in this volume in order to improve quality of life of older women and contribute toward their well-being in a holistic way, a universal recommendation is to put policies in place for their betterment, raise awareness on their rights, and promote a realistic image of them in society. This all means having a gender- and age-focused strategy at national and international levels to aging issues and life in later years. Older women's lives in general are undergoing a change in many ways and more so in certain parts of the world. While concerns related to their poverty, social security measures, labor force participation remain significant and should be included in our planning for their well-being, there is need to recognize how emerging circumstances be it to take the role of being the sole caregiver and bread earner as in the case of impacts of HIV/AIDS seen in many countries of Africa, or in conflict situations as witnessed in some parts of Asia, Europe, Middle East or facing any other contingencies is shaping the lives of older women and compelling societal responses for their well-being by recognizing their elements of independency, ability to make adjustments, strive for their rights as part of heterosexual or homosexual unions or even remaining single. Some of these concerns have been dealt in this volume, but others have been left out with the promise that future publication will take note of changing emerging scenario related to lives of older women.

There is growing concern about health issues among older people, and one emerging area requiring immediate attention is increasing cases of dementia as highlighted in the book. Dementia like few other diseases is seen to occur more among women compared to men, and the burden of it on the social and healthcare systems is tremendous. There is lack of well-organized responses both from the public and the private sectors to deal with the impact of dementia like it is for many other age-related ailments. At the most what is available in most countries especially in developing societies to deal with acute or chronic illnesses is availability of informal care provisions mainly by the family members where gender considerations dominate. Not only is caregiving structured around gender and age lines with providers being mainly women and receivers of care often being not women and especially those in later years beyond their reproductive phase. Many diseases especially being in the category of non-communicable ones have a gender dimension, and bringing

focus on health needs of older women is the need of the hour especially with feminization of aging taking place. This also brings focus to pay attention to the requirement for specific gender-based caregiving and care-receiving practices existent in different parts of the world and the need to improve facilities and services for older women. As data from all cultural and development context reveal older women's vulnerability to health care, access to services, impact on their quality of life is a matter of grave seriousness. There are issues related to treatment and management of diseases which are specific to older women including barriers in accessing them and facing abusive environments. Disability issues within a broad framework of enabling environments have over the years emerged as an important aspect of life in old age. Connected with dependency, negativity, frailty, losing of autonomy, and self-esteem, it intersects with gender, caste, class, and many other factors. A growing issue requiring attention is how to overcome these constraints and can older women come out as strong individuals when handling limitations being set in by their physical, mental, social, and cultural conditions. How do they handle a change from independent health status to dependency or facing certain types of impairments in later stages of life and managing their lives without being isolated or marginalized in the society? Not much has been discussed on these dimensions in the available literature, and thus, the contribution in this book adds on to bringing focus on it.

Many aspects of older women's well-being as much as it is for older men too are affected by living arrangements, though studies indicate that the gender dimension adds on to the vulnerability of women getting more affected. The impact on their experience of old age, feeling of loneliness, and their quality of life depends a lot on with whom women stay in old age and what kind of relationships emerge out of their associations and family ties. Interestingly, a contribution in this book indicates that safety net provided by family members is not always conducive to better quality of life. Many factors contribute toward the well-being of older women as much as they do for older men too. The quality of relationships, involvement with activities, be it leisure or work related, social interactions at the family, community levels or in the society all add on to the experiences of well-being. Such research findings assure us that older women's well-being is dependent on many factors, and these must be understood within the socio-cultural milieu. While families do play an important role, it is significant to realize that many more aspects are pertinent for the well-being of older people and more so for women as their levels of occupation, dependency, interests, resilience, and coping mechanisms speak a lot about their position in society. Policies, programs, and provisions in society must comprehend the unique needs of older people and more specifically of women as they not only have the tendency to live longer but also have poor health status as they move on in years. Findings from various studies show mortality patterns having a gender dimension as much as they are affected by economic and social factors. Overall health status of older women is pivotal for any aging society and must be taken care of by proactive approaches toward their well-being. What alternatives exist to better the position we need to think of and as a community we must work toward enhancing the status of women in general and more specifically as they move on in years. It is imperative for aging societies to make later years holistically comfortable and meaningful for

its citizens. Bringing in work-related issues, opportunities for productive economic activities, providing financial security, eradicating poverty, all become important and serious concerns when we discuss well-being of older women. Deep thought in this regard must be given to what interventions will be useful culturally and universally for the well-being of older women. The different chapters in the book dwell on some aspects of these concerns and discuss existent responses and what should be course of action in the future. As researchers, as policymakers, as civil society members, and as those involved with old age issues in various capacities our focus must be to take into account health aspects, psychological and social challenges, economic and work-related concerns which positively and meaningfully make lives of older women better and enhance their well-being. This century when most societies will have a notable aging population an integral part of our strategy toward improving the well-being of older women requires focus on active aging and leading a dignified lifestyle throughout the life.

Adopting a life course perspective is necessary, essential for well-being of older women. Many health ailments, socio-economic conditions, psychological and emotional needs in later years are a result of continuum of vulnerabilities, experience of discriminatory practices, and disadvantages from a younger age. The gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and representations which exist in societies all influence how women are treated throughout their life and have major consequences for later years and end of life care. We are on the threshold of highlighting concerns related to older women by taking into account lifelong consequences of their ill health, low socioeconomic health status, being victims of mistreatment by family members, domestic violence or intimate personal relationships, weak psychological and emotional support, and caregiving burden especially while coping with their aging issues. While all these impacts get manifested on the well-being of older women, it also becomes crucial for us not to ignore their personal strength, their capabilities, their adherence to managing affairs, and their resilience to deal with their lives finding their own path toward their well-being. As much as older women's public image is a cause for concern, knowing about their private lives, about their personal experiences and reactions to deal with their problems or strengths is a significant aspect of molding interventions from a human rights perspective. Voices of women need to be heard and more so of older women as they because of age go through many life and lived experiences and move from one circumstance to another be it in terms of their marital status or residence or dependency due to health or economic reasons. Voices of older women often go unheard, suppressed, ignored, and even denied when it comes to giving them their rightful place in society. Certain movements emerging in present and very recent times in different countries have brought attention to the need for giving visibility to women and older women in particular and protect them from being dismissed, silenced, or denied their rights.

Concerns of older women as few chapters in this book highlight be it to remove them from abusive environments, or improve their health and social status or provide them with work opportunities to continue with their occupations in the informal and formal sector can no longer be ignored. They need positive responses at the policy planning level, in organizing specific programs at the societal level, in bringing out

legal measures to safeguard and protect their interests, rights in empowering them with a life of dignity and respect. As this book upholds research and planning for the well-being of older women is not only an urgent need in present and future times, it is also an important task for humanity where women dominate in numbers and more so in later years. Thus, a framework for action as suggested through the chapters of this volume in different ways is to keep the focus on older women prominent, to include not only their interests in policy and programmatic directions but also let their voices be heard, make them participatory group in advocating for their rights at the local, regional, national, and international levels. Both age and gender lens need to be applied in making women central to well-being issues. It is hoped that the various chapters in this edition touching on certain selected dimensions will generate further and enough interest to take forward concerns of older women with regard to multiple issues and suggest responses that are age and gender friendly and enabling. Lives of older women need to be celebrated, and the attempt through this volume is to provide aging women an environment conducive to their well-being through a life course approach and human rights perspective. It is hoped that the deliberations stated and focused on in this book will interest a wide range of readers and result in proactive outcome at different levels to take forward concerns and responses for the well-being of older women on a global scale notwithstanding the need for retaining a socio-cultural focus which absorbs their interests from their viewpoint. We must not only think about and for older women but empower them to bring about a change by personally and at individual level taking steps toward their holistic well-being.