

Reconstructing the Image of Ageing

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1. The Demographic Revolution

The world is going through a dramatic demographic change. The number of elderly people is growing rapidly and people are living longer. Today there are about 600 million people who are 60 or older. This number will double in one generation and in the year 2025 there will be 1.2 billion people in this age group, and about 2.0 billion in 2050. Between 1970 and 2025, the increase in the number of people age 60 and above will be 223 per cent.

The growth in the number of people 60 and over in the developing countries will be even more rapid than in the developed countries, and by the year 2025, 70 per cent of all older people worldwide will be living in developing countries. This will rise to 80 per cent by the year 2050. In 2025, 59 per cent of the people age 60 and over in the world will live in Asia, 287.5 million will live in China alone.

The reason for the rapid demographic change is the decrease in fertility on one hand and on the other hand, the increase in life expectancy. Total fertility is expected to decline from 2.82 children per woman in 1995-2000 to 2.15 children per woman in 2045-2050. Life expectancy is expected to increase by 11 years from 65 in 1995-2000 to 76 in 2045-2050. In 100 years, from 1950 to 2050, life expectancy will increase by 30 years.

The older population itself is also growing older. The group of people 80 and older is the fastest growing segment of the older population.

The reason people live much longer now than they did in the past is primarily due to the significant progress made in medicine, and the improvements in the environment and in peoples' lifestyles. People are more aware of nutrition, the dangers of smoking and the importance of physical activity in maintaining health. These trends will continue in the future, and will have an important direct effect on the increase in life expectancy.

2. Quality of Life

People always wanted to live longer – we used to bless each other with long life – but it is not always a blessing, particularly in some parts of the world. For some people old age is a blessing – if they are in good health, are financially comfortable and are surrounded by family and friends. But for many people, those who find themselves in declining health, those who do not have financial security and those without family, aging also brings suffering and unhappiness.

Unfortunately, one of the major problems many elderly people face is poverty. Poverty is a problem both in the developed and in the developing countries, but the situation is much worse in the developing countries. Health problems are another major problem that elderly people face. As people age, their health conditions usually deteriorate, some become chronically ill and some

experience diseases which are common among elderly people such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and cardiovascular diseases. Old age is also characterized by a number of other social, psychological, biological and medical problems that have a significant impact on quality of life.

Everywhere in the world many elderly people are discriminated against on the basis of their age. This is true with regard to access to medical services, employment opportunities, human rights and social exclusion in general. This is sometimes described as ageism, a term introduced by Prof. Robert Butler in 1968.

3. The Image of Ageing

What is the image of older people in society? In general, society has a negative image of older people. The stereotype connected with old people is one of dependence, frailty, disability and total lack of sexual potential. Old people are considered as people who can't contribute to society and are not creative.

In novels that deal with old people, the descriptions of the elderly are of characters who are depressed, repulsive and degenerate.

How does the media relate to the elderly? First, old people are seldom seen on television. And when they do appear, they are usually characterized by "lack" – unhealthy and ill, not interesting, not happy, confused, not fashionable, not productive and not creative. Under certain circumstances, older people are used in advertisements, but this is only for marketing products related to old

people, such as vitamins, drugs, nutrition, and special housing opportunities. In such circumstances, the elderly are presented in a positive light and as active and happy people, because it helps sell the products.

The negative image of ageing has also a negative effect on professionals. Doctors, nurses, social workers, and others are usually not interested in working with old people – they prefer working with more interesting populations such as children or young couples, and in fields where there is more prestige and more income. Thompson points out that “working with older people has traditionally been seen as a routine and relatively undemanding, requiring only basic training,” and he suggests that this reflects a deeply ingrained negative and dismissive view of older people.

4. How to Change the Negative Image

Reality is of course different from the negative image and the stereotype that society has regarding old people. Most of the people at the age of 65 and over are independent, active and relatively healthy. That does not mean that old age does not include problems such as chronic diseases and loneliness, but most elderly live happy, fulfilling lives.

It is not easy to change people’s attitudes towards the elderly, but it can be done. Three different strategies for change include education, legislation and demonstration.

A. Education

Changing the image of the elderly requires, first and foremost, education. Education to change attitudes must begin with children, and continue throughout the life cycle, with a focus on changing public opinion.

Young children should be taught, both at home and in school, to respect older people, not because they are old, but because they, like every person, demand respect regardless of their sex, ethnicity or age. It is also important for children to be taught about the life cycle and about ageing and the elderly – that age is part of the continuum which begins at birth and ends at death. One particularly effective way of educating children is through programs which bring young and old people together, for example, in programs in learning how to use the computer.

Education is not only needed for children. It is also important for professionals, many of whom have negative images of the elderly. Doctors, nurses, and social workers need to learn that elderly people are not “second class citizens,” but are simply people who have lived longer. And it is important for professionals to recognize that, as the population ages, their clientele will increasingly contain older people. These changes can be achieved mainly through introducing the subject into the curricula of professional schools, especially medical schools, nursing schools and schools of social work.

B. Legislation

Changing the image of older people is a problem for society as a whole, but specifically for governments as well. The major contribution of governments to this issue is legislation to protect the rights of the elderly and prevent discrimination in all areas.

In 1990, the International Federation on Aging drafted the “Declaration Rights and Responsibilities of Older Persons”, with the goal of influencing policies pertaining to the elderly. One year later this principles were adopted by the UN, and the UN issued the “UN Principles for Older Persons,” (December 1991 – Resolution No.46/91) in which governments are encouraged to incorporate the following five principles into their national policies:

- 1) Independence – Older persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing and health care.
- 2) Participation – Older persons should remain integrated in society and participate in the formulation and implementation of policies related to them.
- 3) Care – Older persons should benefit from family and community care, and have access to health care and social services.
- 4) Self Fulfillment – Older persons should be able to pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential.
- 5) Dignity – Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security, and to be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse.

One specific form of legislation which governments can introduce is to change retirement policies. If there is no compulsory retirement age, people will

continue to work longer, and, as long as they are active and productive, they will continue to command the respect that they did when they were younger, because they are seen by society as continuing to contribute. People in their 70s and 80s will continue to be a vital part of society.

C. Demonstration

The image of the elderly can also be changed through demonstration, namely by showing that older people can continue to be active, creative, healthy and independent. Contrary to the common stereotype that older people are not creative, many authors, artists, musicians and actors have continued to be actively creative well into their 80s and 90s, and, indeed produced some of their best material in their later years, for example:

- Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel between the ages of 71 and 89.
- Gandhi led India to independence at the age of 72.
- Frank Lloyd Wright completed the Guggenheim Museum at the age of 90.
- Cecil De Mille produced the movie “The Ten Commandments” at the aged of 75.
- Claude Monet began the series of paintings “Water Lilies” at the age of 73.
- George Burns renewed his movie career and won an Oscar at the age of 80.
- Bertrand Russell published six books after the age of 88, until he died at 98.

At ESHEL, the Association for the Planning and Development of Services for the Elderly in Israel, a major goal is to improve the quality of care and change the image of the elderly in society. Five projects in particular were designed to have an impact on the image of the elderly. Through these programs, which bring the elderly and their accomplishments in front of the general public – showing that older people are just like everyone else in terms of their abilities and contributions to society – it is demonstrated that elderly people can be active, creative, healthy and independent. Ordinary older people can also serve as examples for their peers, and demonstrate successful ageing. The following examples show how older people continue to be active in all areas of life and social activity.

A. National Physical Activity Day

ESHEL holds an annual National Physical Activity Day for the Elderly, which is attended by more than 5,000 older people from all sectors of society and from all walks of life. People are no longer surprised that it is possible to improve one's physical condition in old age. As one woman said, "Last year I walked four kilometers, but this year I walked eight. Can you believe that at my age I am able to do more each year?"

B. Computers for All Ages

Another program teaches elderly in day care centers and seniors' clubs to use computers. These older people then use their skills to write their life stories, play games with their grandchildren, and search the internet for information. Most of the tutors are elderly volunteers, who only recently learned how to use computers themselves, and who demonstrate the fact that not only can older people continue to learn, they can also teach.

C. Art Exhibitions

A special art exhibition was held last year in one of the main exhibition halls in Jerusalem. Older artists presented paintings which they had made during their later years. The work was on a very professional level, and thousands of people visited the exhibit, which had extensive media coverage.

D. Centenarians

ESHEL also held a special event at the President's house to honor centenarians, and 50 people over the age of 100 were invited. The media were fascinated, and for a week there were positive articles, TV and radio programs on the secrets of long life – everyone wanted to know how to live to be 100!

E. Community Television

Through a special program, more than 600 older people have been trained to produce videos and television programs in their local communities. Hundreds of programs produced by these groups are aired on local cable television channels.

Through an emphasis on these examples, the media, opinion leaders and decision makers can make a significant impact on public opinion, and can introduce a real change in the image of older people. This, in turn will help raise the consciousness of elderly people themselves, who will begin to realize that they can, indeed, do many of the things that they have been led to believe had been left behind, and the more they appreciate themselves and their own worth, the more others will too.

Although education and legislation are important in changing the image of the elderly in public opinion, it is probably easiest to begin with demonstration projects which highlight the abilities of active, healthy and creative elderly. Such projects raise the image of the elderly in society as a whole, and help support the development of appropriate education programs and legislation. Together, these three strategies can help create new opportunities for our elderly citizens, and make it easier for them to remain productive members of society – active, creative, healthy and independent!

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