

# Aging and Gerontological Outlook of Iran: Issues and Disorders

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to represent the outcome of aging trend in Iran in recent years. Though positively and gerontologically aging population is rapidly increasing in Iran yet the aging people are facing various issues and disorders including Dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's disease movement disorders and many more issues which need increasing investments all over the country with special reference to the urban areas. Such issues not only belong to Iran but many more developing countries are experiencing the same. Low fertility rate and increasing life expectancy will lead to new issues for the elderly people either in the years to come. Therefore, the country will increasingly be in need of medical services nursing and proper accommodation for the emerging elderly at present and in the years to come. To conduct the research, five hundred elderly people were randomly selected and interviewed through questionnaires. The main hypothesis of the research is: "Improving quality of life of the elderly people contributes to their longer life"

**Keywords:** Aging trend; Alzheimer's; Gerontology; Life expectancy; Movement disorders

## Introduction

Population ageing is an obvious outcome of the process of demographic transition. While the developed countries of the world have already experienced the consequences of ageing the developing countries are facing them now. The present paper reflects on some of the dimensions of the elderly people's vulnerability in Tehran, Iran. While the recent emphasis on studies pertaining to the elderly in the developing world is mainly attributed to demographic transition the deteriorating conditions of the elderly are results of the fast-eroding traditional family system in the wake of rapid modernization migration and urbanization [1]. This has in turn caused the elderly in almost every society to face challenges and various forms of insecurity. In Iran too, conditions such as isolation loneliness physical weakness uncertain future etc., contribute to the sufferings of the elderly people as a whole. Abuse of the elderly or elder abuse was publicly acknowledged in 1980s. It takes many forms from passive neglect to active torment and includes verbal emotional, financial and physical harm. As the proportion of elderly people raises so does the incidence of abuse. Older people get support and comfort from their families, but some people face exploitation and abuse. No any single

definition refers to abuse and neglect "Any action or inaction by any person which causes harm to the older or vulnerable person" [2]. Abuse against elder persons includes physical abuse neglect (Active or Psychological Passive) institutional abuse and domestic violence. However most abuse against elder persons comes from family members. Some theorists say that abuse against elder persons fits into a larger societal pattern of ageism and devaluation of elder people [3]. As in other parts of the world, there has been an enormous growth in the elderly population in Iran also. Until the early 18th century global population size was relatively static and the lives of the vast majority of people were "Nasty and short". Since then the size and structure of the global population have undergone extraordinary change. More than three decades have been added to life expectancy with a further gain of one or two more decades commonly projected for this century [4].

If we look at the global ageing scenario we would find that the population of the world which was 5.7 billion in 1995 is expected to reach 10.8 billion by 2050 a two-fold increase. In this fast-growing population, the percentage of the elderly will also increase rapidly i.e. from 9.5 in 1995 to 20.7 in 2050. Further amongst the elderly the number of the oldest ones those aged 80 and above will increase more rapidly. That is from 320 million in 1995 to 1,050 million in 2050 [5]. So far as Iran is concerned today nearly 4,871,518 elderly people lived in Iran. According to Iran's

national census in 2016 about 6.09 percent of the total population of the country and over 8.4 percent of Tehran’s population were over 65 years of age. In early 2017 above 8.2 percent of Iran’s population is reported 65 years of age and above [6]. With regard to the current demographic structure it is anticipated to have an unprecedented increasing trend of population ageing in the years to come i.e. from 7.27 percent in 2006 to more than 16 percent in 2050 - a phenomenon that has never happened before [7]. Besides since Tehran City has a good record of in-migration flow the ratio of ageing population will be higher than the other urban areas in the coming years. It may also be pertinent to mention here that those born in early 1940s at the outset of Iran’s modernization process are at present increasingly reaching ages 65 and over and are usually much concerned about their economic security, safety, marginal participation and economic independence. This has also become a priority area for social welfare planning in Iran [8].

Iran				Tehran			
Year	Population	People 65 and above	%	Year	Population	People 65 and above	%
1956	18954407	758670	4.0	1956	1560434	52013	3.3
1966	25788722	993045	3.8	1966	2719730	81295	3.0
1976	33708744	1186470	3.5	1976	4536264	14829	3.3
1986	49445010	1493382	3.0	1986	6010075	203062	3.4
1996	60055488	2587437	4.3	1996	6758845	320430	4.6
2006	70472846	5130000	7.3	2006	7803883	464638	6.0
2011	75149669	434304	5.8	2011	8154051	464638	7.5
2016	79926270	4871518	6.9	2016	8643706	733823	8.4

Source: Results of the Population and Housing Censuses of Iran, 1956-2016 [9].

**Table 1:** Comparative Trends in Elderly Growth in Iran and Tehran City between 1956 and 2016.

As the Iranian society in general and Tehran City in particular are transforming the characteristics of modern mega-cities are also appearing in them. Similarly, as the families are also transforming from traditional to modern, the living space is becoming very small and tight. In this process the elderly face insecurity and other vulnerabilities. Besides factors such as social, psychological economic and cultural changes also influence the different dimensions of the lives of the elderly including their social security, welfare, safety, social cares/services and ageism. In this backdrop the issues pertaining to ageing elderly protection residence quality food conditions and their social networks are of prime importance. As a whole the study intends to reflect an objective picture of the elderly people in Tehran. In this sociological appraisal apart from studying the physical material and emotional well-being of the ageing population their socio-cultural similarities and differences will also be appraised. The scenario therefore considers elderly’s quality of life from a variety of perspectives such as demographic foundations social and family relations, economics, health, disability etc. While the elderly with better economic conditions have more social security in their old age the impoverished elderly largely face social insecurity. Therefore, paying attention to the economic and social security of the elderly particularly the women with regard to their health and treatment services is of prime importance in both urban and rural areas [10].

The present study aims at identifying the quality and quantity of different age-groups, including those moving towards the old age which would help the social planners to be familiar with

this hidden phenomenon that has not much been touched by any governing body so far. It is expected to improve the quality of life of these people from the perspectives made in this study. For the purpose of this research in the ‘Elderly’ age-groups of 60/65 years of age are included. Such people usually have common characteristics [11]. The study would not only prove useful to students of gerontology, social sciences and welfare studies but also help social workers urban planners and others in understanding the quality of life of these people in a better way their deficiencies weaknesses and other dimensions of their vulnerabilities. It could also be a beginning for further studies in this field at national level. In the present paper consequences of change in family as a unit, and in the living style of the elderly their expectations and relevant sociological theories will be analyzed. Besides social policies necessary for the elderly will be discussed at length. Though policy makers and social researchers themselves too are prone to sufferings arising from old age in this regard they do not often project their own future and loneliness [12].

## Method of Research

The focus of the research is to present a combination of theoretic frameworks and empirical realities. For the empirical part of the study 500 elderly people were randomly selected from different parts and neighborhoods of Tehran City. They were approached through direct interviews with the help of pre-designed questionnaires. Eventually the filled-in questionnaires were edited electronically extracted and presented in the form of tables.

The researcher also reviewed the background literature on ageing population from different societies of the world. In the theoretical part the researcher tried to refer to and make use of sociological and gerontological theories within reach. The main hypothesis in this research is “Improving quality of life of the elderly people contributes to their longer life”.

## Findings

Among the respondents i.e., 500 elderly people who were referred to, and surveyed in various parts of Tehran City on random basis 89 (17.8%) were in the age-group 60-62 and 99 (19.8%) were in the age group 63-65. Gradually and with increase in age the ratio and number of ageing people finds a declining trend: In such a way only six (0.5%) of people within the samples were found in the age-group 90 and above. The age structure further shows that the sex ratio for the elderly (i.e., 60 years and above) is 106. This high sex ratio for the elderly is due to high fertility and high maternal mortality for the women in the past. The survey also found that the elderly people with spouse were 60 percent whereas the percentage of elderly widows was 29 male elderly 8.4 percent and finally those never married were 2.6 percent of the total elderly studied in various neighborhoods of Tehran. Similarly, 55.8 percent of the respondents enunciated that they never received any financial assistance from their sons whereas 19.2 percent received a little bit. Likewise, 18 percent declared that they were reliant on their sons' assistance and finally 7 percent stated that they received a considerable amount of financial assistance from their sons every month. In Iranian culture parents normally expect to be financially assisted by their sons in their old age. The above figures indicate that most of the elderly are facing financial constraints despite having male offspring. So far as the emotional attachment of the sons is concerned almost 20 percent of the respondents said that they were highly attended by their sons whereas 44.6 percent said that they were much benefited by the emotional supports of their sons and 35.2 percent declared that they were not absolutely attended by their sons. The figure indicates that sons did not care for their elder parents at all. However, government support and help by social workers can to some extent reciprocate this lack. That is to say due to such failure social workers provide the elderly with the necessary assistance.

Results of the survey further show that financial support by daughters towards old parents is very insignificant. While a little less than two-thirds i.e., 63.4 percent of the respondents declared that they did not receive any financial help from their daughters' 20.4 percent asserted that they got it a little bit and only 16.2 percent were satisfied with such help from their daughters. Such a scenario strengthens the idea of son preference in the Iranian society and this heritage passes to the future generations too. However, daughters emotionally attend to their old parents very much as less than three-fourths i.e., 73 percent of respondents gave an affirmative answer in this regard whereas only 27 percent replied in nega-

tive. Generally speaking such dissatisfactory helps and attentions from offspring to parents particularly in the old age and towards people who are highly traditional in their lifestyles and attitudes create problems more due to emerging generation gap. Although literacy can help the elderly to get them engaged in reading books and newspapers something like 27 percent of the respondents were not literate at all. This percentage was 16.7 for the male elderly and 37.8 for the female elderly. However, in the present study about 20 percent of the male respondents had higher qualifications while this ratio stood at only 1.6 percent for the female elderly.

The elderly people usually have plenty of leisure time and that is also reflected in the present study. While about 48.2 percent of the respondents preferred to watch television during their free time 29 percent read books and newspapers and the remaining 23 percent used other means of entertainments. Similarly, while the rate of reading newspapers by male samples as leisure is 22 percent 55 percent of female samples assert that they watch television as their leisure. The results of the research show that little less than two-thirds of the elderly i.e., 64.6 percent had mostly interrelations with their children whereas 14.5 percent had it with their friends 9.4 percent with relatives and finally 11.5 percent with neighbors and others. While one of the psycho-spiritual needs of the elderly people is known to be travel and tour more than 20 percent of them had not traveled at all during the period of study. It is worth noting that the elderly people in the Western countries usually travel very frequently. Within the samples of the present study the elderly was usually found satisfied with their access to medical services. To a question about their health and safety only 39.3 percent of them declared that they were safe and healthy. Health demography is very much associated with safety and security. On the other hand, 25 percent informed that they had arthritis problems 10 percent of them had diabetes and 27.4 percent had other ailments. In the course of inquiries, it was also found that 91 percent of the respondents were not interested at all in staying in nursing homes.

## Discussion

The basic concept of social security is not new to Iran. Traditionally a sort of traditional support system (e.g., joint family system) existed before to provide security to elder destitute and other vulnerable groups in society. In such circumstances family was the protector of the elderly and thereby the elderly did not have to resort to the secondary institutions such as nursing homes for their protection. However, such a system is gradually disappearing and state-based social security system has come into being but it is not adequate for a large chunk of elderly population. Findings indicate that the offspring still feel responsible to help their elder parents as much as they can. For example, 18 percent of the respondents receive monthly financial help from their sons and 7 percent assert to be fully assisted by their sons per month. Iran which is comprised of 31 provinces and 1148 towns and cities [13] does not have the conditions of a balanced development in that some provinces are

more developed than the others. Under such conditions some of the elderly people living in affluent provinces are in improved and better conditions whereas others in deprived provinces need to be more attended and cared for. In the latter provinces they are in a state of more insecurity and vulnerability. For example, Tehran Province especially, Tehran City is reckoned as a more secure site for the elderly people. In Tehran the elder people have more facilities with regard to public and private nursing homes easier access to medical facilities etc. They have more and easier access to parks hospitals and other sites which can provide them with the required services. Therefore, under such circumstances men and women in other parts of the country tend to migrate to this province particularly Tehran City to be more benefited of care and security in their old age. Similarly, as larger cities attract more social and material capital in Iran they are more developed and hence are provided with more facilities. Such perspectives attract more elderly people often accompanied by their children. Because of young population structure in Iran almost 60.5 percent of the entire population of the country stand at age groups 0-29 [14]. This young population is prioritized in different sectors of planning and housing investments. Thus, smaller investments on housing and health sectors are done in favor of the elderly. For instance, while a great number of the elderly people in various parts of the country are in immediate need of protection centers, they cannot easily have access to such facilities. They have to either live alone or be a burden on their offspring. Nevertheless, it is hoped that more priorities would be accorded to the elderly community in the sixth five-year plan scheduled to start in 2017.

Based on inferences and ad hoc interviews with a number of elderly people they do face many problems as far as their protection and care are concerned. However, the elderly with poor socio-economic backgrounds face multiple problems and constraints. What is therefore required as an immediate step towards an improvement in the elderly's quality of life is the establishment of centers for the elderly in all regions which could meet their various needs such as habitation care and food. In the meantime, the negative attitudes of the people towards nursing homes must be changed in an acceptable manner so that they could access improved social and economic lives. I must add that transformation of the economic structure of Tehran City in the past few decades from agricultural to industrial and service sectors in the wake of urbanization has to a great extent changed the attitudes of families towards the elderly members and the quality of protection that they provide. They have now largely recognized nursing homes as a social fact and as a positive alternative to keep and protect the elderly. Younger family members being involved in modern civil life they have implicitly come to recognize nursing homes as positive places to accommodate and attend the elderly. Increase in life expectancy rate in 2015 up to 72 years for males and 76 years for females in Iran [15] represents a good outlook of ageing in the country which requires appropriate planning in both rural and urban areas. Based on table 1 in the present paper life expectancy has

highly contributed to increase in percentage of the elderly people between 1956 and 2006. Yet increase in longevity is unjustly distributed among various social strata in Iran. However, such a transition contributes to rising needs of housing pension medical care etc., within the growing elderly citizens. Generally speaking this scenario has contributed the Iranian elderly people to gradually face the loss of inter-generational solidarity and integrity. Somehow or the other results of the study confirm the emergence of the scenario. Based on the researches conducted in different parts of Iran including Tehran City there are considerable differences in the quality of life within elderly males and females. Males are found to be in a comparatively better position. The differences stem mainly from more wealth that they hold possibility of remarriage after losing spouse for males more social respects for the male elderly etc. Such opportunities more await male ageing people rather than the female ones.

## Theoretical Concepts

In the past not only in Iran but in many other societies also the elderly people were considered as sources of knowledge rationality and experience. Currently with the passage of time and as a consequence of the social economic and cultural changes taking place in all societies they have gradually lost their importance and charismatic values. While in the 19th century and even in the early 20th century grandchildren rarely had the chance of seeing their grandparents now and particularly at the outset of the 21st century with the rise in average age three or more generations have got the opportunity to simultaneously live together. Physical changes that spring up in people in the course of time are not necessarily displayed among all people of the same age-groups in a similar manner but their physical and mental effectiveness and their reactions towards such factors are different within different age-groups of elderly people. In fact, the elderly suffers one (In some cases three at the same time) treatable sickness [16].

From the demographic point of view too the number of the ageing people in Iran is on increase and the scenario needs the provision of more medical care sufficient nutritious foods and other necessities of life. Under such conditions special social policies should be made and applied for these elderly people and any failures in this regard would lead to problems for them and consequently they would reflect as a burden. In other words, though entering old age has been identified as ages 60-65 i.e., the age in which people usually get retired yet we cannot fix up a definite age border in which the people should be named 'Aged' [17]. In another definition old age has been called repeated dependency i.e., a period followed by the period of dependency and socialization followed by the second period i.e., independence and maturity and eventually the 'Third Age' or the beginning of the elderly period [18]. Census data indicate the sex ratio of 108 for those elderly people aged 80 and over [13]. Therefore, with regard to increasing female elderly more arrangements should be made to protect

them in their old age. Elderly women being poorer than men due to their limited sources of income in their old age need to be more protected and attended. In a global comparison in the developed world while 17 percent of the people are aged 65 and above the ratio stands at only 6 percent in the developing world [14]. In this regard Iran's ratio of ageing population stands at 7.3 percent and that of Tehran City stands at 6 percent [19]. On the other hand, while because of ageing there happen a sharp fall in people's safety and people's social costs their medical and health costs increase [20]. In this regard creation of supportive establishments at neighborhood levels would be very effective and enabling.

## Social Isolation of the Elderly People

One of the main dimensions of social insecurity and vulnerability of the elderly people stems from their social isolation. In fact, isolation is one of the general issues of old age and that is the result of the elderly's non-functionality or lack of role in the society. However, it is extremely difficult to measure or define social isolation [21]. It may be objective (e.g., social contacts can be counted) or it can be subjective (e.g., people can be asked about their feelings).

Most studies on social isolation have been concerned primarily with the four types of isolation as outlined below:

- By comparison with their contemporaries in the developed world: Peer contrasted isolation.
- By comparison with younger people: generation-contrasted isolation.
- By comparison with the social relationships and activities enjoyed by (other younger or middle-aged people): age-related isolation.
- By comparison with the preceding generation of old people: preceding cohort isolation.
- Measurement of isolation usually consists of information about social activities as a way of estimating the number of social contacts [22].

Quite a lot (one-fifth) of those interviewed in the present study were found isolated or extremely isolated and the majority of them included women (widowed). This high percentage of isolation within the elderly people is more due to the breakdown of joint family system weakening of family network and more migrations by the younger family members in Iran in current times as a whole. Isolation does not necessarily increase with age but there is little variation in the likelihood of being visited by family friends and relatives. The appearance of this phenomenon is highly due to the complexity of life in highly populated Tehran City with poor and congested transportation network. Though the two concepts of isolation and loneliness are almost synonymous and are used interchangeably yet there is a conceptual distinction between

the two. Isolation relates to circumstances (which can usually be measured, however crudely) whereas loneliness relates to feelings (often about these circumstances). Widows are also likely to experience loneliness as do others who have been bereaved [23]. The problems of isolation and loneliness not only arise within the elderly people who are dispersed in a city but they may also happen to the elder people residing in nursing homes. Studying the older people in residential care Townsend (1986) has commented that "The Lack of even a single friend a higher rate of severe or frequent loneliness the discouragement of spontaneous social activity the inability of visiting relatives and friends to adopt useful roles the lack of satisfying and sociable occupation all represent isolation and loneliness by the elderly even in care centers." Social isolation is more problematic for women, since they usually live longer than their male counterparts. Culturally speaking women usually have less outside-home relationships and contacts in Tehran City as compared with men and that contributes to more likelihood of isolation among them. Similarly, as mentioned earlier women in Tehran City have longer life expectancy than men in this city. Such a phenomenon makes them highly vulnerable in various grounds and spheres. Under such conditions women are more prone to psychological sufferings like dementia. While sociologists highly recommend that the elderly People should have their own independent lives yet providing them with adequate financial resources remains unsolved in many instances. Clinicians have identified a broad array of risk factors typically associated with elder abuse and neglect [24]. Factors such as caregiver's mental health substance abuse dependence on the care recipient etc. have been described as important indicators leading to social isolation of the elderly People. Similarly, widowhood, the deaths of friends or children moving away can lead to social isolation [25]. Such circumstances widely relate to Tehran City too.

To get rid of the problem of isolation among the elder people social networks can be proved very important. These networks may include both the fellow co-residents as well as from beyond the household including friends' neighbors etc. So far as the elderly in Tehran City are concerned there are still further steps to be taken in their favor. For example, friendship centers are to be established in neighborhoods to help them with isolation.

## The Elderly's Housing

Adequate and suitable housing is also reckoned as an example of the elderly security, and the provision of which would bring safety and security to the weak and disabled elderly people. However, there is a growing recognition of the link between poor health and housing. Features such as the absence of stairs/ramps may force even a very frail person to continue living independently. Many old people however live in less than desirable housing and some of them have particular problems. There is evidence too that some people remain in residential care only because alternative accommodation is lacking [26]. In the course of interviews

with the senior respondents in Tehran City the researcher came to know that almost 60 percent of the interviewees preferred/wanted neighbors without children. The study found that such housing sites give elder people more feelings of well-being giving them more control over their social contacts. Though the problem of elderly's adequate and suitable housing has to some extent been tackled in the Western societies it still does exist in the developing nations including Iran. If we look at the basic family structure in Tehran City many parents are found to live with their children as joint families. Therefore, the elderly's housing quality tends to depend on the economic capacity and shelter patterns of the household. It is worth noting that the trend in population ageing (growth) in Iran is even faster than its socio-economic growth rate. Thus, if necessary arrangements are not made for the elderly in a futuristic manner the gap/difference will contribute to further challenges for the elderly. In view of this dealing with this problem in urban areas has been a priority for the large City of Tehran. So far as preferences in apartment living is concerned no single type of housing fits all older people in Tehran. But, older people do prefer some types of apartments and neighborhoods over others; depending on their middle-age lives and backgrounds.

## Types of Insecurity

Although there has been a rise in the all-age mortality from accidents the number of deaths from accidents in those aged 65 and above is fairly constant. In the course of study, the researcher came to know that the elderly people are frequently at risks at different conditions.

- Older people like people of other age-groups suffer domestic accidents, fires, burns, poisoning, road/workplace accidents and falls.
- Older people are at particular risk from injury or death from domestic fires.
- Falls account for almost one-third of deaths from all accidents. Older people are at particular risk with 65 percent of fatal falls occurring among those aged above 75.
- Risks Factors and Recommended Strategies.

The risks factors that the researcher acknowledged associated with accidents and injuries among old people are very broad and it includes the following:

- Environmental factors
- Inappropriate use of medicine
- Poor health status
- Disability
- Being overweight
- Lack of exercise

- Nutritional deficiency
- Poor housing
- Lack of training for careers

However, as the number and proportion of the elderly people in Iran is growing especially those living alone they may be more vulnerable to accidents. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to their safety and security both inside and outside home. Thus, a number of strategies aimed at these people should be implemented:

- Extended awareness programs for elder people their careers and health professionals associated with accidents.
- Promotion of healthy ageing practices such as reduced smoking, increased exercise etc.
- Educational programs to improve knowledge and safety skills.

## Conclusion

In this research a multidimensional perspective of the elderly People's lives in the capital City of Tehran, as part of the macro society of Iran is presented. The research reflects that the 'New elderly' (Those born in early 1950s) have even more concerns as compared with the 'Older elderly' or a generation before them. Tehran City being a migrant-receiving city while the ratio of its in migrants is higher than other cities the expectations of the elderly people in this city are by far different from those in other cities. Under the conditions of modern life elderly's general welfare care/protection and financial constraints are quite remarkable in different neighborhoods with special reference to the current socio-economic conditions. Tehran City is considered as a part of the country wherein the elderly are more prosperous. They have easier access to medical care nursing homes etc. Based on researches done in various age-groups marked variations have been found with regard to the quality of life of male and female elderly people stemming from more wealth within the reach of males, possibility of remarriage by the male elderly and so on. While the improved socio-economic conditions have made it possible for three generations to live together yet modern life has also forced them to live away from their families. Regardless of class race creed and color among the elderly, what is common among them is disability and dementia. While this research has considered and analyzed some of the challenges profiles and problems of the elderly people yet the scenario of ageing needs more research studies on a regular basis in the future too.

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