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AGEISM AND AGE DISCRIMINATION IN OLD AGE: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Bangladesh is the eighth largest countries in the world with a population of more than 160 million. Today, the number of older persons is about 12 million which represents 7.5 percent of the total population. As increasing the number of older persons gradually their deprivation is also increasing. Age discrimination is a global social issue which affects the health and human rights of millions of older persons around the world, and an issue which deserves the attention of the national and international community. In our country, ageism is observed severely due to low economic capacity, poverty, loss of work and authority, physical inability, changes of social norms and values, breaking the joint family unit, negligence attitudes towards the elderly, individualism and other psycho-social, economic and cultural reasons. Age discrimination affects older men and women across all socio-economic groups, cultures, races and ethnicities.

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Introduction

Ageism is an alarming issue in today's world both in developed and developing countries. In fact, age discrimination is the result of ageism. From the beginning of human existence some people have survived into old age; consequently, aging has long been a subject of myth. Gruman (1966) says that the myths of aging and death usually express one of three themes: the antediluvian theme, the hyperborean theme, and the rejuvenation theme. The antediluvian theme is based on the belief that long ago people lived very long lives. The best-known source of support for the antediluvian myth is the Bible, especially the Book of Genesis, in which some ancient Hebrews are reported to have lived for several hundred years. In the hyperborean theme a distant culture is thought to produce long-lived people. The third theme, rejuvenation, was the motive behind the search for the fountain of eternal youth (Decker; 1980: 3). Another theme running through much of human history is that of gerontophobia, or a general dislike or fear of old age that is related to ageism. Studies (Freedman, 1978; Tamke, 1978) have found gerontophobia to be a persistent theme in English literature. Tamke (1978) noted that English Victorian literature portrayed a socially withdrawn and a passive role of the older people. Palmore (1971) has developed the following statements for the elderly people which are widely accepted as true:

1. Most old people have no interest in, or capacity for, sexual behavior;
2. Most old people are set in their ways and unable to change;

3. The majority of old people are socially isolated and lonely; and
4. The majority of older people have incomes below the poverty level.

Ageism is a process of stereotyping and discriminating against people because they are old. From a definitional perspective, ageism is like racism or sexism in that it treats people differently based on stereotypes about a group. Ageism as a term and as a process to be studied is relatively new, an ironic twist for the study of how society views getting old. Most studies of ageist attitudes tend to focus on its negative aspects. From the anthropological and gerontological studies, we can see the ageism and discrimination of old age in pre-industrial societies. Traditional culture in France has no venerated old age; rather, old age was a horror and old people a great nuisance (Stearns 1976 and Ward 1984). The Fulani Society of Africa seems that older persons are socially dead. When a person becomes old he has to live separately in one corner of the house. This place is regarded as the graveyard for the older person (Leslie 1982 and Schaefer 1983). The Ik society of Uganda desires the death of the elderly. Older persons are obsolete and ineffective to them. When the Ik was removed from their land the aged section felt great trouble with survival of life. A researcher, Simmons (1945) conducted a research on 39 tribal groups. Among them he showed that 18 tribal groups left their aged persons when they became unable. For example, the Yakut society of Siberia left their older persons and compelled them to take the beggary and slavery profession (de Beauvoir 1972 and Ward 1984). The older persons were regarded as excess baggage in Siriono society of Bolivia. Many pre-industrial societies such as ancient Israel, Rome, China and the Inca society of Peru showed the deepest respect and honor to the elderly. Ancestor worship was prevailed in China. They

have obtained the knowledge of filial piety from the Confucianism. The security of the aged was not based solely on charity, but on positions of social significance because of useful abilities or controlled over valued resources. The position of the aged is particularly related to their possession of strategic knowledge that is of use to the society in a number of forms (Rosow 1974 and Ward 1984). Older persons are better off in societies that allow for the acquisition and exercise of property rights and in which property is institutionalized and guaranteed by law. Property is based on right rather than strength or abilities that can decline with age. In agricultural societies, younger generations are dependent upon their elders for the transmission of scarce resources, such as farmland. This dependence is less in hunting societies where individuals must rely on their own abilities rather than the accumulation of others, and in societies with open frontiers where the young can make their own fortunes (Ward 1984). In pre-industrial society where the society was stable and mainly agro based and natural environment was favorable for the people the aged consumed respect and honor in these societies and where the society was mainly hunting and the natural environment was hostile to the people the position and status of the aged was worst in those societies.

In post industrial period, most societies have mixed feelings about the aged-love, disgust, respect, fear. Older people may be mocked in private but treated with public deference or honored in words but neglected in practice (de Beauvoir 1972 and Ward 1984). For example, for some people retirement is a dismal, unhappy experience with serious financial, social and psychological problems (Harris 1990). Retirement may mean the golden years for some, but to others it is psychological death sentence (Barrow and Smith 1990). Cowgill (1980) argues that urbanization provides advantages to the young and

handicaps to the aged. It tends to invert the statuses of the generations and leave the elderly in a relative deprivation. However, ageism can also have a positive perspective, such as when the attributes of age are deemed advantageous. For example, a positive view perceives is an association between aging and greater wisdom, patience, and an enhanced appreciation of life's benefit.

Objectives of the study: The aim of this paper is to explore the nature, causes and consequences of age discrimination as a whole along with explain the situation of Bangladesh. Another aim of this article is to raise awareness about ageism and age discrimination in old age.

Sources of data: The article has been prepared on the basis of the secondary sources of data and information. Data and information have been collected from published and unpublished research reports, journals, books, periodicals and so on. As the article is written on the basis of the secondary sources, content analysis approach that explores the issues mentioned in the paper and highlights the ageism and age discrimination in old age.

Conceptual orientation of ageism and age discrimination

Ageism: The word “ageism” was first introduced in 1968, by an American physician Robert Butler. According to him “Ageism or age discrimination is a process by which stereotyping and discriminating against individuals or groups occurred because of their age.” Ageism is discrimination or unfair treatment based on a person’s age. It can impact on someone’s confidence, job prospects, financial situation and quality of life. It’s important that ageism, often called age discrimination, is addressed to ensure that nobody loses out because of their age. Although ageism is often seen as a workplace issue, we may face it when we’re out shopping, at

the doctor’s surgery, or even when ordering products and services over the phone.

The term has also been used to describe prejudice and discrimination against adolescents and children, including ignoring their ideas because they are too young, or assuming that they should behave in certain ways because of their age. Age prejudice or ageism is a negative attitudes or disposition toward aging and older people based on the belief and aging makes people unattractive, unintelligent, asexual, unemployable, mentally incompetent, which are more exaggeration about the older person (Atchley, 1997). Ageism is a serious form of social discrimination and has a severe effect on the self-esteem and wellbeing of seniors. Stereotypes about age are ingrained in us during youth and are further reinforced by society and media. The elderly are the predominant victims of age discrimination and are burdened with the negative effects. With seniors becoming the fastest growing demographic it is surprising that ageism is still so pervasive. As a society we need to look towards ending age discrimination and change the negative attitudes we have about getting older. In many societies, the older persons are seemed to be stubborn, touchy, quarrelsome, bossy, slow moving, decrepit, sick and feeble, dependent and emotionally unstable. The general statement of youth class in American society is ‘when an older person is walking very slowly right in front of me, I feel pity’ (Schaefer, 1983). Every society more or less believes that older persons are the symbol of 3D (disease, disability and death). Loneliness is a painful situation for older persons. Over all ageism is a set of beliefs, attitudes, norms, and values used to justify age based prejudice, discrimination, and subordination. This may be casual or systematic form of discrimination and prejudice against an age group, and is

acutely felt by seniors (<http://www.eeoc.gov/employers/coverage.cfm>).

Age discrimination: Discrimination is the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the ground of race, age or sex. Age discrimination involves treating someone (an applicant or employee) less favorably because of his age. Discrimination in old age continues to be tolerated across the world. Ageist attitudes and stereotypes are common at every level: in the family, in the community, in the workplace and more badly in the society. Ageism and age discrimination may manifest themselves differently in different social, economic, and cultural contexts but they remain rife, often unrecognized and accepted. Discrimination in old age is rarely based on old age alone. More often it is based on multiple factors, complicated further by the cumulative impact of a lifetime of discrimination.

Age discrimination is when someone is treated differently, with an unreasonable or disproportionate impact, simply because of their age. Older women are also vulnerable to discrimination based on both age and gender. Women, for example, may have faced a lifetime of gender-based discrimination that has serious consequences in old age. They may have been denied an education as girls, married when they were young, forced to have many children, subjected to physical and sexual abuse, denied access to decent or paid work and be unable to own or inherit property or accumulate other assets. The cumulative impact of this discrimination has a profound effect on enjoyment of rights in old age, including little or no access to social security, limited access to information and lack of identity documentation to enable them to access entitlements such as subsidized health care.

Theoretical orientation of age discrimination and ageism

Gerontology, currently a developing branch of social science has made some renowned social theories to explain the nature and problems of the older people. Some theories expose the negative and positive attitude towards the elderly.

One of the most well known social theories is disengagement theory introduced by Cumming and Henry (1961). According to the proposition of this theory, as people become older, they simultaneously withdraw themselves from all sorts of involvement and participations in the social activities. This withdrawal is both a response to the social context of the aged and a process that helps the older persons adjust to his or her diminished capacities and face death. In the course of disengagement, older people are freed from society expectations and can focus on their own needs (Smelser, 1981:225). According to this theory, social disengagement may be voluntary or involuntary. In the case of voluntary social disengagement, elderly people withdraw from social activities because they feel that such activities no longer meet their needs. On the other hand, involuntary social disengagement comes within elderly people want and need social contacts but is deprived of the opportunities to have them because of conditions over which they have little or no control. When for example, many of their contemporaries have died or have moved away or are physically or economically unable to do things with them, elderly people no longer have the companionship they formerly enjoyed (Hurlock, 1981). Disengagement is a mutual withdrawal of the aged from society and society from the elderly in order to ensure its own optimal functioning (Barrow et al 1979:54). According to this view, through the process of gradual disengagement of older people from social activities, society reasonably transfers power from the older members to the younger as the old people

are more likely to die than younger ones. This sort of withdrawal or disengagement is not good both for the society and the older persons.

Another theory of ageing is the modernization theory, which indicates the ageism and age discrimination. According to the views of this theory, as the older persons cannot adapt with the changing situation of the modern society, they must have to lose their prestige, position and status what they hold previously. Modern society is based on technology, but the older people are not adaptive to the situation of the technological advancement. The wisdom and experience of the older people are devalued in the modern society. This is why younger people have been replaced against the elderly in every sector of the society. Some investigators have found that key elements of modernization were in fact broadly related to the decline status of older people in different societies (Palmore and Manton, 1974).

Older people are becoming a much larger group both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of the total population in any society. Burges (1960) argues that the social structure is not capable of absorbing them. The traditional social institutions, such as the work place, the family and kinship networks and the community are not accustomed to accepting older people as fully participating members. Burges observes a situation developing in which older people are being left out, excluded from the normal day to day activities of the society. The old are being thrust into a state of social inactivity that Burges terms the 'roleless role.'

Erik H. Erikson has given a theory which focuses in the total life span. Total life span is divided into eight stages in the Erikson's "psycho-social development" theory. Characteristics of older people have been focused slightly in the last stage of

his theory. According to this theory, old age is characterized by either ego-integrity or despair. When the achievement of the elderly has come up to the standards they set for themselves earlier, so that the gap between their real selves and their ideal selves is small, they experience ego-integrity and are reasonably happy and satisfied with themselves and their achievements. On the other hand, those who have experienced a great deal of frustration and suffering may have more misgivings than satisfaction, experience despair and depression. Actually, people ordinarily experience both ego-integrity and despair, but the healthier person, the more self-acceptance and satisfaction will prevail. In the late adulthood, individuals tend to look back upon their lives as a whole. To the extent they have achieved a satisfying life; they will feel happy with themselves in old age. But if they feel that their life has been disappointing and a failure, despair will be the result (Atwater; 1995: 31).

Causes of ageism and age discrimination

Gender dimension of ageing reflects that both men and women face discrimination, violence and abuse due to age, but women experience this differently due to subordinate status and stereotyped attitude towards women and older women as well. As women age and their independence decline they become more vulnerable to exploitation, violence and sexual abuse. Ageism, negative stereotyping and prejudice against older women often cause harmful impact on older women's life and mental health. There are some specific causes of age discrimination which are as bellow:

Sick and feeble: The aged people most of the time remain sick and they are usually feeble than other. For this reason, society is regarded them as useless to any kind of job or profitable task.

Slow moving: Slow moving is another reason for their discrimination. The aged people take long time for any work to complete. Family members and caregivers also lose faith on them.

Decrepit: As the old people becoming older they suffer from many kinds of diseases like diabetics, gastric, back pain, dental problem, cardiovascular problem, high blood pressure, and physical weakness, lose of eye-sight, loss of hearing capacity etc. And these are the factors which discriminate the aged people in the society.

Dependent: The aged people become the victim of discrimination because of their dependency on others. They are physically, mentally and economically dependent on others.

Lack of technological knowledge: The aged people generally have less knowledge about new modern technology. The era of science and technology go forward rapidly but the aged people cannot easily cope with them.

Reducing physical capacity: The aged people are given less important as their capacity of working reduces by the time they get older.

Preservation: It is believed that the people become more conservative and more preservative as they get older and fear about any change. So, they become the victim of discrimination.

Less productive: The aged people become the victim of age discrimination as they are less productive than the young workers. They are not capable of producing much more goods.

Less adaptable: A study shows that the older people are resistance to any change and slow to learn new skills and uncomfortable with new technology. They try to avoid change.

More rigid: The aged people are somewhat rigid in nature, which foster their discrimination. Any kind of change around his/her is unexpected and unaccepted to him/her normally. They do not try to make them use to the new innovation, rather they prefer alike before.

Mandatory retirement: Policy makers usually consider the demography, fiscal cost of ageing, health, average life expectancy, nature of profession, supply of labor force etc. while deciding the retirement age. In Bangladesh, government employees have to get retirement from job after 59 years though they are capable of performing their job and they are willing to do their job as before. In USA, German, Australia, Norway, India and Pakistan the retirement age is 62-67 years, 65 years, 65 years, 67 years, 60 years and 60 years respectively. In many countries, the retirement age varies between male and female. For example, in United Kingdom retirement age is 65 years for male and for female is 60 years and in Switzerland it is 65 years for male and for female is 64 years.

Lack of employment: There is an age barrier to get a job for the older people. Older people none can apply for a job, though he/she is perfect or fit for the job. Most often the employment advertisement searches for young and recently graduated person. And in a work place the old worker looks down upon by the young workers. Authority also gives them less priority as they are less productive than young workers.

Unfavorable environment in work place: The working environment in the workplace is not always in favor of the aged people. They face various problems while working with others in work place.

Lack of education opportunity: Education is a lifelong process. Aged people also discriminate in the field of

education. There are a lot of educational and training facilities for young, but the arrangement of the elderly education is hardly found in both developing and developed countries.

Faces trouble in transportation: We most often see that our transportation system is not friendly for the aged people. In transportation system, we see a number of reserved seats for the women and disabled. But there is no same special arrangement for the aged people.

Deprivation of basic needs: The aged people can hardly enjoy their basic needs. Basically in rural areas, most of the aged persons are illiterate and live in below poverty. Even they do not know about their basic rights. So, they are deprived of consuming the basic rights.

Harassment: Older people face particular threats to their rights from different forms of violence and abuse. Though law has forbidden age discrimination only for becoming old, but the scenario is that, older people have limited access to justice and equality before the law. Older women and men face discrimination of their rights at family, community and institutional levels. Older persons with disability, ethnic minority, refugee or stateless person or detainee face huge discrimination and exclusion due to age (<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/age.cfm>).

Age discrimination and its consequences

Older people from the age group of over 65 years are particularly at risk of social exclusion, loneliness and abandonment due to various physical and mental illnesses and limitations, such as blindness, loss of hearing and other old age related illness including dementia and Alzheimer diseases etc. The impact of age discrimination may be described in the following way:

Social impact: Age discrimination creates social insecurity of the elderly population. Older people feel neglect due to age discrimination. The older people become the more likely to be dependent on families and the professional staffs of nursing homes and other service providers. Human beings, who are dependent on others for their survival, whether they are children or older persons, are always vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse. As older population has grown, the number of cases of adult abuse has also grown. The aged people become isolated from their family and close relatives due to old age. Older persons lose their freedom. Many times, they cannot express their choices in any matter, even in their very personal matter like choosing dress, food, furniture etc. After getting retirement, they become dependent on their younger fellow which they sometimes feel as dishonor because they always have to account their expenses to the fellow members. Younger people treat them as a burden of the family, who only increase the monthly cost and do nothing productive else. Today, young generation is not interested to pass their time with older persons. Older persons feel lonely and isolation due to age discrimination.

Abuse and neglect: Elder abuse and neglect is the result of age discrimination. Aged population forms a large and vulnerable group suffering from high level of physical, economical and social insecurity. As a result, they become increasingly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Elder abuse is a violation of human rights and a significant cause of illness, injury, loss of productivity, isolation and despair (WHO, 2013). The mistreatment of older adults takes many forms, including physical, verbal, emotional and sexual abuse, financial exploitation, and neglect. Many elderly adults are abused in their own homes, in relatives' homes, and even in facilities responsible for their care.

Physical Impact: As adults grow older they may become more physically frail, may not see or hear as well as they used to, and may develop cognitive problems such as dementia. It has been well documented; the problem with inadequate or inaccurate information about ageing is its tendency to promote stereotypical thinking, which results in negative attitude towards ageing (Palmore, 1998; Stewart, 2004). The number of physical abuse cases increases in old age by family members, relatives and also nearest and dearest ones. Physical elder abuse is non-accidental use of force against an elderly person that results in physical pain, injury, or impairment. Such abuse includes not only physical assaults such as hitting or shoving, slapping, pushing but the inappropriate use of drugs, restraints, or confinement.

Psychological impact: The three main psychological effects of age discrimination are acceptance, denial and avoidance. Acceptance means the victims submit to stereotypes and sometimes even go so far as to end them. This may cause the elderly to grow apathetic and eventually withdraw from society. Denial occurs when victims identify with the dominant group, refuse to consider themselves elderly, sometimes until they reach to their 80s. They may attempt to hide their age through choice of fashion, hair coloring and cosmetic surgery. Of the three psychological effects avoidance is the most destructive. Here the victims, who try to avoid the stereotype, may isolate themselves or resort to drugs and alcohol as a means of escape. They sometimes suffer from mental illness such as depression which can lead to suicide also (Palmore; 1971). Psychological/mental abuses include threats, verbal assaults, depression and stress, controlling behavior such as prohibiting or limiting access to transportation, telephone, money or other resources.

Financial exploitation: Most of the research findings show that older persons are faced any kind of victims due to old age. Most of the employers are not interested to employ the older persons in work. Because of that that may be more work is not performed by him due to less mobility. Discrimination against women is wide spread in Bangladesh. This is a result of a lifetime of deprivation, lack of education, poor health and nutrition, low status and restriction on mobility and association. The significant reduction in income that retirees face reduces their consumption along with the purchasing power of society as a whole. Financial abuse is the unauthorized or improper use of the resources of an elder.

Sexual abuse or abusive sexual contact: Sexual elder abuse or abusive sexual contact is any sexual contact without the elder's consent. Such contact can involve physical sex acts, but activities such as showing an elderly person pornographic material, forcing the person to watch sex acts, or forcing the elder to undress are also considered sexual elder abuse.

Conclusion

Ageism, at present is a burning issue all over the world. It causes a great hamper to the progress of the society as well as in a country. Because here, a portion of total population are became lag-behind from the main flow of development. The discrimination faces by older cannot be changed following a single prescription. Special measures should be taken in family, institutions, community and government level as a whole. Aged population is not a burden but they can be asset of a country because they have long experience, knowledge, wisdom and skills which can be used in national development. We should change our negative attitude towards the aged people, respect them, assist them to overcome their problems,

give them opportunity to do something for the country and consider them as valuable asset.

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