

Demographic dynamics and role of senior citizens in Nepal

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Abstract

The demographic shift from high fertility to low mortality naturally leads to population aging. Global ageing, the success story of the 21st century has been made possible by advancements in medicine, socioeconomic development, and public health initiatives. This paper explores the demographic dynamics of the senior citizen in Nepal and their roles for developing the society and the country as a whole. Elderly people are not only the burdens and beneficiaries but also the assets of society, repository of boundless knowledge, and skills. The seniors play a role of counselor, care taker, main source of ethical instruction, sources of income. Moreover, they are living history and sociocultural transformer.

Key words: Ageing, demographic dynamics, dependency ratio, demographic transition, generation gap

Introduction

Ageing is a multifaceted concept encompassing social, psychological, biological, and chronological aspects, as defined by the UN. According the UN, individuals aged 60 or older are termed as senior citizen. The UN and HAI (2017) stated that the diverse needs, capabilities, lifestyles, experiences, and preferences of elderly individuals, which are influenced by factors such as age, gender, health, income, education, and ethnicity (Bisht, 2003). Population ageing is a natural outcome of demographic transition from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality (Singh, 2014). The universal definition of ageing varies across countries due to socio-economic development. In Nepal, the elderly population aged 60 and above is considered old age, while in eastern philosophy, they are considered senior citizens. World Health Organization (WHO) has defined senior citizens are those who are 60 years and above. Similarly, the senior citizen act 2063 considers these people in Nepal are respected and their knowledge and experience are revered (Subedi, 2003).

The elderly life is the collection of all sorts of experiences from the birth to this age. “The elderly people are assets of society, repository of boundless knowledge and skills and are living history and proof of the past” (NEPAN, 2003). Birth and death are two important proved truths in the world. All people have to face the stages of life: childhood, adolescence, adult and elderly age if accidental death is not appeared in life. The first stage is fulfilled with childhood love (*batsallya prem*), youth is with enthusiasm and courage (*youban tatha jos jagar*) and old age is the flashback of real life with the collection of sweet and bitter experiences of journey of life. Senior citizens' knowledge, skills, and experiences are crucial for family, community, and nation. They are pillars of socio-economic development in Nepal, and their experiences can benefit the younger generation. Respecting and ranking senior citizens is essential for their prosperity. In other words, respect

The 21st century's biggest success story is global ageing (MOHP, 2010). Ageing is a global issue due to improved public health, medical advancements, and socio-economic development. Nepal has demographic dividends, but ageing is a pressing concern due to youth migration (Subedi, 2005).

This paper explores the demographics dynamics and functions of the senior citizen in Nepal, a country ranking 143 out of 191 in the human development index (UNDP, 2022). Nepal, with a population of 29.16 million and a density of 198, is renowned for its sociocultural diversity, including 142 ethnic groups, 124 languages, ten religions, and seven provinces (CBS, 2023).

Population aging, international migration, population growth, and urbanization are four global demographic megatrends affecting sustainable development. Nepal's study on the senior population is in its infancy stage. This study is important in the sense that the researches till now have not primarily focused on ageing related issues. Despite public perceptions of the elderly as useless and burdens, they are valuable resources and can contribute to the society and nation's dignity. Scientific advancements have improved access to health services, reducing morbidity and mortality rates.

Urbanization and modernization negatively impact the status of senior citizens, leading to a decline in their status and increased physical and social distance (Subedi, 1999). In agricultural communities with joint families, elderly individuals often experience mental poverty due to illiteracy, ignorance, lack of

love, respect, and family strife (CWDC, 2003). The Madrid Plan of Action acknowledges the significant contributions of elderly individuals to society, ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes and their social, cultural, economic, and political development.

Method and Materials

This study is based on interpretive research design in which the researchers desk-reviewed the available secondary information from the published and unpublished sources like dissertations and records. This study is qualitative in nature. However, some numeric information is taken as quantitative method to make interpretation more meaningful and to generate meaning. Information has been collected through various available sources, such as annual reports, publication of National Statistics Office (NSO), research articles, reports and download materials from websites.

Result and Discussion

Demographic Status of elderly people in Nepal

As UN (2017) states that population ageing is a dynamic process of demographic and socio-economic transformation. The pattern of fertility and mortality both in developed and developing countries is similar. During the last five decades the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has decline by two-third from around six per woman in 1970s to 2.1 in 2021 (NDHS, 2021). For the corresponding periods, the life expectancy at birth has increased by nearly 30 years to 71 years (UNFPA, 2022). Due to the effects of fertility and mortality decline, the share of the elderly people aged 60 years and above has increased from 5 percent of the total population in 1952/54 to more than 10 percent in 2021. The censuses of Nepal revealed that the elderly people are increasing continuously, both in number and proportion. The sex ratio of elderly people in Nepal was highest in 1981 and after that, it has been declining from 101 in 2001 to 98 in 2011 and it reached to 94 in 2021. It may be due to higher female life expectancy than male in Nepal like other countries in the world. The demographic status of the elderly people from 1952/54 to 2021 is presented in table 1.

Table- 1: Demographic Status of Elderly People

| Year | Total population | No of Elderly population | % of elderly population | Sex ratio of elderly population |
|---------|------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1952/54 | 8256625 | 409761 | 5.0 | 76 |
| 1961 | 9412996 | 489346 | 5.2 | 80 |
| 1971 | 11555983 | 621597 | 5.4 | 89 |
| 1981 | 15022839 | 857061 | 5.7 | 109 |
| 1991 | 18491097 | 1071234 | 5.8 | 100 |
| 2001 | 23151423 | 1477379 | 6.5 | 101 |
| 2011 | 26494504 | 2154410 | 8.1 | 98 |
| 2021 | 29164578 | 2977318 | 10.2 | 94 |

Source: CBS, 2023

Population Growth Rate of Elderly People

Elderliness is rapid growing segment of population throughout the world. Table 2 exhibits that the growth rate of the elderly people in Nepal also has always been found higher than that of the total population in Nepal. The older population grew faster (3.40 % and 3.29 %) in 2001 and 2021 to compare with total population growth rate (2.25% and 0.92%) in 2001 and 2021 respectively during last two decades.

Table- 2: Average National and Elderly Population Growth Rate

| Year | Population growth rate% | Elderly population growth rate% |
|---------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1952/54 | - | - |
| 1961 | 1.65 | 1.79 |
| 1971 | 2.07 | 2.42 |
| 1981 | 2.66 | 3.26 |
| 1991 | 2.10 | 2.26 |
| 2001 | 2.25 | 3.40 |
| 2011 | 1.35 | 4.29 |
| 2021 | 0.92 | 3.29 |

Source: CBS, 2023

According to 2021 census, the population aged 60 years and above is 10.21 percent (male 10.1% and female 10.3%) (CBS, 2023). Out of the total population of 29,164,578, the total population between the 0-14 years age group now stands at 8,115,575 (27.83%) and 12.2%) reduction compared to the census 2011 when the total population in the same age group was 9,248,246. Ageing is not only a demographic concern but it has also social, economic, cultural and political issues

of the country. In Nepal, **life expectancy at birth has improved by 5.6 years** in the period of 19 years from 65.3 in 2000 to **70.9 years in 2019**.

Age Structure and Dependency Ratio

Age and sex have an important implication for socio-economic development and demographic change. The dependency ratio measures the dependency burden of the population (Bhandari, 2020). The dependency ratio is expressed as the ratio of Child and the Old-Age dependents to the Working population. The dependency ratios for Nepal since 1952/54 to 2021 are presented in Table 3. The figures show that Nepal's dependency ratio in 2021 was 61.38. National population census and other data published by Central Bureau of Statistic (now, it is renamed as National Statistics Office) show noticeable changes in the age structure of the population in the country. The share of children is shrinking from 1991; conversely, old age dependency is increasing consistently overtime. So, the elderly population is growing. Population census 2021 reveals a significant increase in the number of elderly individuals and decline in younger population. Chalise (2023) concluded that due to the migration of young people, the traditional living arrangements and caregiving systems are in crisis. Therefore, the caregiving for elderly people is taken as a burden and it is projected to increase in the coming days. The dependency ratio computed in different periods clearly shows that old dependency ratio is in increasing trend from 8.79 percent in 1952/54 to 16.48 percent in 2021 and child dependency ratio is in decreasing trend from 67.94 percent to 44.91 percent in the same period.

The table 3 exposes that the old age dependency ratio was approximately 9 in 1952/54 and reached more than 16 in 2021. Aforementioned fact is the result of the decrease in fertility.

Table- 3 : Age structure and dependency ratio

| year | Total Population | Population Age 0-14 | Population Age 15-59 | Population Age 60+ | Child Dependenc y Ratio | Old Dependenc y ratio | Total Dependenc y Ratio |
|---------|------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1952/54 | 8256625 | 3165645 | 4659673 | 409761 | 67.94 | 8.79 | 76.73 |
| 1961 | 9412996 | 3753065 | 5170585 | 489346 | 72.58 | 9.46 | 82.05 |
| 1971 | 11555983 | 4674578 | 6232702 | 648703 | 75.00 | 10.41 | 85.41 |
| 1981 | 15022839 | 6211972 | 7953806 | 857061 | 78.10 | 10.78 | 88.88 |
| 1991 | 18491097 | 7840771 | 9576569 | 1073757 | 81.87 | 11.21 | 93.03 |
| 2001 | 23151423 | 8948587 | 12310968 | 1477379 | 72.69 | 12.00 | 84.69 |
| 2011 | 26494504 | 9248246 | 15091848 | 2154410 | 61.28 | 14.28 | 75.56 |
| 2021 | 29164578 | 8115575 | 18071685 | 2977318 | 44.91 | 16.48 | 61.38 |

Source: CBS 2014 and 2023

Table 3 reveals that the proportion of children in Nepal is gradually decreasing and proportion of older people on economically active age group is in gradually increasing trends.

Generation gap

The term "generation gap" describes the lack of communication and understanding between the older and younger generations. The generation gap, exacerbated by technological advancements, urbanization, globalization, occupational diversity, and cultural pollution has created social and physical distances. As a result, it has caused mental health issues and elderly loneliness in Nepalese communities. Transitional societies have a greater difference between traditional and modern societies, leading to generational and family discord. The older generation upholds traditional norms, while the younger generation seeks modernization. Elderly believe children disrespect them, while the youth accuse them of being overly traditional.

Senior Citizens in Nepalese Context

Senior citizens contribute to the society in various socioeconomic and religious contexts by their role as an advisor, mediator, socio-cultural transformer. Besides, growing older populations offers major opportunities for sustainable development

Elderly People as Care Taker

The elderly people play a crucial role in shaping families and society, providing strength and stability. They act as caregivers for grandchildren, offering love, compassion, and life lessons. In Nepal, elderly people are active and productive, providing childcare, physical care, and financial assistance. They engage in unpaid household tasks like food preparation, cattle care, and farm work. Elderly females often share responsibilities in household chores but their contribution and economic value have not been duly recognized. Elderly people forget grief and pain by spending time with grandchildren, exchanging happiness and sadness, and reducing mental problems.

The Elderly as Major Source of Ethical Education

As family is the first school for children, the elderly people teach them the them ethical behaviors and societal values. Elderly individuals provide emotional, ethical, and cultural guidance, creating a peaceful, crimeless civilized environment. They guide the younger generation in religious and cultural programs, contributing to their moral development.

Role of the Elderly as Advisors

The study reveals that elderly individuals significantly contribute to their families by transferring knowledge, serving as advisors, and participating in farm and business activities. They also serve as valuable mentors and teachers, often

volunteering, providing consulting services, and mentoring younger generations during post-retirement.

The Elderly as Narrator of Historical Events

Elderly individuals possess extensive knowledge about the Nation's and the world's history, often through oral storytelling, interviews, and photographs. They are important sources of historical memory, cultural guardianship, and repositories of social traditions. They are ideal for youth and can strengthen traditional value systems, despite the changing family structure in Nepal.

The Elderly as Financial Supporter

Elderly people have different source of income for their livelihood. Pensioners support their family through the pensions they received. They get old-age-allowance. The elderly people, particularly the women, play a vital role in providing unpaid care for spouses, grandchildren and other relatives, including those with disabilities (UNFPA and Help Age International 2012).

Elderly individuals, despite being retired, can engage in various economic activities, such as share market and real estate, through their skills and experience. They can also contribute to family income through alcohol production, establishing small industries, and providing jobs, thus playing a crucial role in poverty alleviation.

Conservation of Traditional Norms and Value System

Elderly people guide social and religious activities, often using traditional herbal treatments. They have knowledge and skills, and often advise family members on health problems based on symptoms, despite the absence of modern medical services in Nepalese society. In the current time, allopathic treatment is dominated by *Ayurvedic* medical treatment but the trend of treatment of people on *Ayurvedic* system is going to increase because of the beliefs of no side effects from such medicine. Elderly people can share their knowledge to new generation about the importance of herbal medicine. They can create and expand awareness and give education for new generation on such types of traditional treatment system. They also serve people as witched-doctors.

The elderly in Nepal are keys to maintaining socio-cultural norms and values, guided by their religious beliefs. The country's diverse cultural activities reflect its rich history and heritage. However, if these values are eroded, the identity of the country may be lost (UNFPA and Help Age International 2012). Traditional knowledge, such as stories, songs, and artistic skills, is passed down through generations. Older individuals in rural areas often have expertise in farming and crisis management.

Mediator in Conflict Management

Conflict starts with small issues. The elderly individuals, with their extensive experience in family and community level conflicts, can serve as judges and mediators to bring peace. They are highly respected in Nepalese society, providing unbiased advice on conflict matters. They also have a role of mediator in disputes and diplomatic role to settle down national and international conflicts.

Conclusion

Society lacks elders, like the body without soul. Despite perceiving the elderly as a burden, aging should be accepted as a natural process of life. In Nepal, the percentage of senior individuals in economically inactive age group is rising while the percentage of children is steadily declining. It is concluded that Nepalese population is gradually in the process of ageing. So, the nation needs to be investing in the geriatric welfare and health services. Elderly individuals not only consume and bear the burdens and benefits of the family and society, but also play a significant role in the economy and socio-cultural transformation of the family and society. Senior citizens should be appreciated for their volunteer efforts as well as their roles as caregivers and community advisors.

The younger generation does not listen to the senior since they consider them to be outdated. However, older folks accuse younger people of being disobedient and culturally tainted. The generational division has grown as a result of modernized education, altered career diversities, urbanization, technological advancement, and modern lifestyle. This study also shows that older adults from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds contribute significantly to the growth of their families, communities, and the country. They are the ones who founded society, look after the children, provide the primary ethical instruction, support the family financially, and preserve oral histories of historical events. They also have a diplomatic and mediating role in resolving domestic and international conflicts, as well as guiding the political system and the advancement of the country.

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