



POPULATION AGEING AND EMERGING INTERGENERATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

Ageing in Sri Lanka is more rapid compared to other developing countries, especially South Asian countries. This is due to the rapid demographic transition which was influenced by the speedy advancement of health and education in the country supporting increasing life expectancy at birth and reducing total fertility rates of the country. However, this changing demographic scenario of the country, along with social development, has created intergenerational gaps as several generations lived during the same time and differences in attitudes between elderly parent generation and adult children generation have emerged. This study examines the emerging intergenerational inequalities due to the speedy growth of the ageing population and family change in Sri Lanka. This study is based on a survey carried out in the Galle district, Sri Lanka with a sample of 300 elders and 150 adult children. Stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques were used and data were analyzed through uni-variate and bivariate analysis using SPSS software. This study showed that the traditional and cultural norm of elderly care has been changing with changing attitudes among the adult children generation due to their changing life patterns in the present society. This study further revealed that half of the adult children are of the opinion that the reason for not living with elderly parents is to have a free life after marriage without kin influence, whilst one fifth of them want to maintain the privacy of their immediate family. Therefore, this study further revealed that intergenerational inequalities between generations are emerging and creating several issues in relation to elderly care.

Key words: Population ageing, elderly parent generation, adult children generation, intergenerational inequalities, elderly care

INTRODUCTION

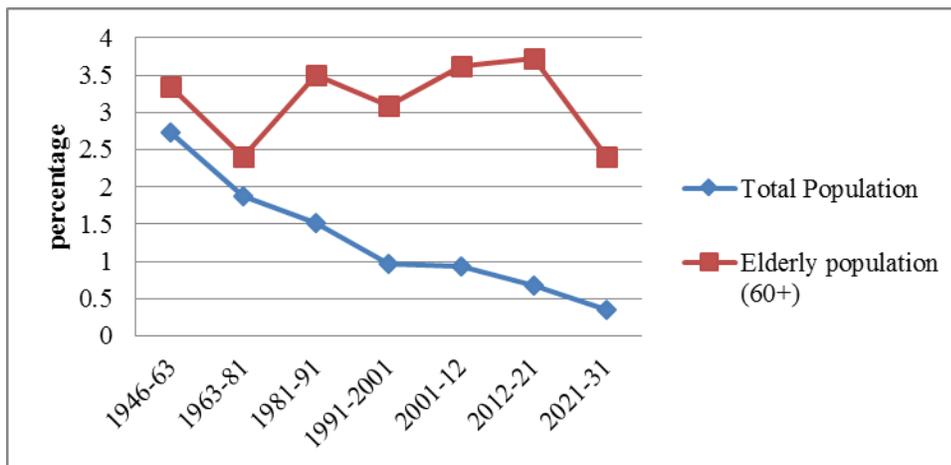
Population ageing is occurring in an unprecedented manner in developing countries at present. The ageing processes in developed and developing countries are quite different in terms of the different patterns of demographic transition experienced in diverse settings. In the developed world, demographic transition was rapid with swift economic development while the developing countries showed a slower pace of transition with low level of economic development. Sri Lanka's demographic transition can be attributed to the advancement of social development accompanied by improvements in education and health. This has gradually led to producing an increasing ageing population in the country. Sri Lanka's aged population was 12.4 percent in 2012, which is somewhat high compared to developing country standards (DC & S, 2013). It is quite striking to note that the growth of the ageing population in Sri Lanka is quite similar to Japan and Singapore today. One of the major issues today is to provide the necessary care for the

elderly with limited resources and hence, rapid economic growth is necessary to offer the required welfare measures for the growing elderly population. Another important aspect is the diminishing trend of intergenerational support systems to the aged, which would create several issues in terms of care for elders in the coming years. It is a well-known fact that Sri Lankan elderly have traditionally been almost dependent on family support. Therefore, a key policy question would be whether the transition from traditional to modern families could change intergenerational relationships which directly affect the welfare of the elderly. In this context, it is important to understand that Sri Lanka's rapidly ageing population has created important social-economic implications and real challenges not only for the government, but also for the older people.

Population ageing in Sri Lanka

As indicated above, aging is an outcome of Sri Lanka's successful policies on education and health which influenced the rapid demographic transition of the country. The growth of the elderly population is three times higher than the growth of the general population in the country. This suggests that population ageing in Sri Lanka is rapid and will create many unexpected socio-economic issues, if this phenomenon is not handled seriously. The rapidity of the growth of the ageing population can be determined by looking at various measures such as growth rates, ageing index, and median age (Weeratunga, 2015).

Figure 1: Sri Lanka: Actual and Projected Trends of the Average Annual Growth Rate of the Total Population and the Elderly Population, 1946-2031



Source: Drawn from data obtained from Department of Census and Statistics (1946 to 2012 census reports) for 1991, 2021 and 2031 projections from Department of Census and Statistics and Dissanayake, 2016

Population projection prepared for Sri Lanka shows that 22.4 percent of the population of the country would be 60 years and above by the mid 2030's (Dissanayake, 2016). The ageing of populations is an unavoidable and irreversible global phenomenon. Ageing in developed countries occurred gradually over a relatively long period of time, while ageing in developing countries including Sri Lanka has been more rapid as we can see from its growth. The decline of fertility and mortality rates along with migration in developing countries reshape the age-sex structure of the population. Increased longevity together with lower fertility leads to rapid

population ageing. It appears that the ageing population will evolve in an exponential manner with low fertility and improved elderly longevity in the future. This is what Sri Lanka is experiencing today because its fertility is low and life expectancy has been continuously increasing to produce a greater number of people at higher ages.

DATA AND METHODS

Matara, Galle and Kegalle all showed a higher proportion of elderly population compared to the other 22 districts in Sri Lanka. However, the Galle district was selected since it showed the highest proportion of elderly population in both the 2001 and 2012 censuses. Within the Galle district, two Divisional Secretariat (DS) Divisions were selected. Galle Four Gravets DS Division, which recorded 12.6 percent of elderly population and 65 percent of population residing in urban areas, was selected for the urban sample, whilst Baddegama DS Division, which recorded 16.5 percent of elderly population and where almost all the residents are regarded as rural population, was chosen for the rural sample. More than 12 percent of the population in almost all the DS divisions in the Galle district is aged 60 and above. It is important to note that the Baddegama DS Division, from which the rural sample was selected, has the highest percentage of elderly population in the district. Galle Four Gravets is the DS division where the Galle city is located and hence, it was essential to draw an urban sample from the Galle Four Gravets DS division.

The survey carried out in this study used stratified sampling and simple random sampling techniques to draw the sample of 300 elders and 150 adult children in the following manner:

- The total sample size was determined as 450 households
- The sample was drawn in two stages; first, by focusing on urban and rural classifications and secondly, by drawing the sample according to the living arrangements of the elderly and their adult children;
- The samples were drawn from three categories of population: 1. Population aged 60 years and above who live alone or with spouse only; 2. Population aged 60 years and above who live with their adult children and 3. Population aged less than 60 years (adult children) who live without elders
- Accordingly, the urban and rural samples consisted of 75 households for each category of population
- Once the stratified samples for urban/rural and population groups were identified, a simple random sampling technique was used to draw a sample of households within each stratum.

This stratified sampling procedure was adopted because the first stage of selection had two strata as urban and rural samples while the second stage had three strata representing population sub-groups. The second step was to take a simple random sample within each urban and rural stratum. In this way a randomized probabilistic sample was selected within each stratum. There were concerns about the response rate for the survey because failure to achieve an adequate response rate¹ would have limited the usefulness of the study. Therefore, the response rate was improved by replacing non-respondent households with those who were able to respond. The non-

¹ In the simplest sense, response rate is the number of participants who completed a questionnaire divided by the total number of participants who were asked to participate.

respondent households were those who were not available at the time of the survey even after repeated visits to those households.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emerging Intergenerational Inequalities

Intergenerational inequalities in the present family have emerged as a result of changes from a traditional to a modern family system. Brannen (2006) argues that major economic, social, cultural, political and demographic changes have disrupted and redefined traditional family and social structures and intergenerational relationships. In Sri Lanka, it is clear that the family form has been changing since the 1960s (Dissanayake, 1995). From this analysis it is clear that the changing role of the family appears to be the major reason for emerging intergenerational inequalities in Sri Lanka. When the longevity of the elderly increases and the proportion of the youth population becomes smaller, the family structure tends to change from the shape of a pyramid to that of the beanpole (NIA 2011; Bengtson 2001; Bengtson and Allen 1993). This enhances the status of co-survivorship between generations (Bengtson 2001) which in turn influences the relationships, roles and functions of the family members. Therefore, it has been claimed that the increasing survival of people in Sri Lanka will enhance the duration of living with children then obtaining their old age support even after marriage of the adult children (De Silva 1994). The time period which the elderly could live (or prospective ageing) can make a considerable impact on both the elderly generation and the adult children generation.

The ongoing socialization experiences of different cohorts emerging from social, economic and cultural changes associated with globalization and technological change, will potentially increase the differences further in terms of characteristics and experiences (Brannen 2006; Roopnarine and Gielen 2005). Such changes create intergenerational inequities. Although multi-generational family structure is the norm in Sri Lanka (Amarabandu 2004), the process of the changing role of the family during the last five decades arose due to changes occurring in the family system and relationships. This is clearly reflected in the growth of the number of the elderly living alone and the long waiting list to enroll at elderly homes (NSE 2004; Silva 2004). The focus group discussions carried out at Elderly Homes in both urban and rural settings, revealed that the main reason for living in an elderly home is the widening gap between elderly parents and their adult children. The gap exists because of the differences in ideas, attitudes, and expectations. The survey undertaken here further reveals that adult children are living a busy, stressful life, and often face financial difficulties.

When expectations are high and adult children are busy with their work, they appear to ignore or do not have sufficient time to take care of their elderly parents. Although some children are financially strong, their modern attitudes and different lifestyles prevent them from living with their parents. Although some children live with their parents, the generational gap between the elderly parent generation and their adult children have created many issues that can affect the wellbeing of the elderly population. Table 1 shows the reasons for the wider gap between elderly parents and adult children which can lead to a widening of the intergenerational inequalities between generations. It further shows that a quarter of the elderly respondents expressed concerns about their children's busy lives and about another quarter stated that the changing attitudes and ideas of the adult children have significantly influenced the widening gap between elderly parents and adult children. However, less than 5 percent of the elderly think that adult children do not have the habit of respecting elders.

Table 1: Reasons for Wider Gap between Generations according to Elderly People

Reason	Percentage
Busy life	25.4
Changes of attitudes and ideas	22.5
Maintaining higher social class	18.9
Younger generation living with stress	14.2
Selfishness	14.2
Lack of respect and good practices towards elders	4.7

Source: Elderly Survey 2012, multiple responses

Intergenerational inequalities can be explored further from the survey data by analyzing the adult children's responses to why they are living separately after marriage. Table 2 shows that almost two-thirds have done so because they needed to be independent and to have privacy in their lives. This suggests that many elderly parents will be left alone with the increase in nuclear families. Furthermore, such behavioural changes call for necessary support for the elderly from the government or non-governmental organizations to improve the wellbeing of the elderly.

Table 2: Reasons for Adult Children Not Living with Elderly Parents

Reason	Number	Percentage
Need for freedom after marriage	57	46.0
Need to maintain privacy	24	19.4
Parents like to live with siblings	12	9.7
Parents wish to live in a separate house for freedom	11	8.9
Lack of space at home	5	4.0
Because of conflict	5	4.0
Cannot look after parents because of busy life	4	3.2
Parental land is owned by siblings	3	2.4
Have a separate house in the same land	2	1.6
Due to child/children being ill	1	.8
Total	124	100.0

Source: Adult Children Survey 2012

Although traditionally the cultural norm in Sri Lanka has been for elderly parents to be looked after by their adult children, the busier life of the children including formal employment outside home and increasing costs of living have made the adult children move away from the norm as shown in Table 3. The table 3 further shows that according to half of the respondents the reason for not living with elderly parents is to have a free life after marriage without kin influence, whilst one fifth of them want to maintain the privacy of their immediate family. This suggests that the above mentioned cultural norm has been fading away in Sri Lankan society and a new norm is emerging over recent decades. Therefore, the familial relations between elderly parents and adult children have become much more vulnerable and less stable.

Table 3: Factors Affecting the Declining Relationship between Elderly Parents and Adult Children

Reason	Number	Percentage
Busy life and no time to look after elderly parents	63	56.7
Higher cost of living	19	17.0
Trend for living in a nuclear family unit	9	8.1
Increase in working women	6	5.4
Parents living with loneliness	5	4.6
Conflict among siblings because of competition	5	4.6
Decreasing care and love for parents	4	3.6
Total	111	100

Source: Adult Children Survey 2012

Status of the Elderly in Traditional and Modern Family

Increased schooling may break down traditional values and norms, including family values, which entail a specific obligation for children to support and care for their elderly parents (De Silva 2005). Although the evidence of such an effect remains incomplete, such situations may occur for two reasons: first, increased schooling results in children spending less time receiving care and guidance from their parents, and hence the feeling of debt towards the parents is reduced, and secondly, because the content in formal schooling, which in some developing countries is heavily westernized, and the system tend to inculcate western values of individualism and self-realization (Caldwell 1980). Both processes make the younger generation less willing to sacrifice time to provide physical care for elderly parents (Mason 1992). This may be a major problem in the family in relation to the caregiving aspects of support for older persons. The elderly population is highly respected in the traditional family system due to their age, experience and wisdom; however, researchers argue that changes in the socio-economic and demographic dimensions, modernization and urbanization have gradually made considerable impact on the traditional family system and cultural values (Singh *et al.* 2014). The elderly in the traditional society were respected by the family and the society (Hugo 1997). The Sri Lankan elderly were traditionally dependent on the family to be the main caregiver and most importantly as their support base (Siddhisena 2005). Amarabandu 2004, p. 83 states,

“Sri Lanka for centuries has had a social hierarchy, which consisted of the nuclear family, the extended family and the village. Within this social system, the responsibility of looking after the elderly was vested with the family, as a moral obligation of the children to look after parents in their old age. Traditionally, the youngest male who inherits the ancestral house is expected to look after the parents. Other children in the family assist in cash and in kind to maintain the parents. In a rural agricultural society the youngest male who inherits family house often continues to operate the income-generating activities of the father. This setup added ethical values concerning geriatric care to the rural family and society. The elders who were childless were looked after by a close relative or by persons outside the family. All these arrangements of elderly care were possible within a traditional family system, and a simple lifestyle was interwoven by villagers’ cooperation and goodwill”.

Family support has been an accepted norm for over thousands of years in Sri Lanka. Traditionally Sri Lankan society consisted of multi-generational, extended families living together and descending through the male line. In this family system, children were supposed to take responsibility for providing financial security to their parents during old age. As advocated by Sri Lankan culture, adult children, especially sons, were raised to respect and care for their elderly parents (Amarabandu 2004). Some argue that the process of economic development and modernization may be altering traditional norms and values, and changing family structure from extended families to nuclear families in many societies in Asia including Sri Lanka (Singh *et al.* 2014 Lin and Yi 2011). Continued low fertility and internal migration appear to reduce both the willingness and the capacity of adults to care for their elderly parents. Moreover, women, who were the primary caregivers, now actively participate in formal employment activities (World Bank 2008). These changes have been affecting the role of the family in traditional intergenerational support. However, some argue that despite these social changes, the practice of family support to elderly parents by adult children still prevails (Sun 2004). This suggests that even though social and economic transformations have weakened the role of family support, the influence of traditional values are still prevalent. However, this feature cannot be predicted in the future since the family unit has undergone significant changes during recent decades in modern Sri Lanka. Moreover, when the elderly are living longer than in the past, they tend to face a greater burden at present.

Changing Value Systems and Old-age Support

According to Caldwell (1982), parents' expect economic benefits from their children during old age and such benefits motivated high fertility in traditional societies, where it was the cultural norm for adult children to support their elderly parents. In modern society, however, it is argued that this expectation is deteriorating because of the changing nature of the roles of the family (Hugo 1997). Demographic changes together with rapid socio-economic development have brought about a decline in close family relationships which affects the well-being of the elderly in Asia (NIA 2011). In order to investigate this aspect in detail, two questions were asked in the survey: *do your children respect you in your old age?* And *does the society generally respect aged people?* It was found that 88.3 percent of the elderly are of the opinion that their children respect them whereas 62.8 percent claim that society generally respects aged people. This suggests that the old value system in relation to respect for the aged remains valid today. Nevertheless, a small proportion of the elderly believe that they are not being respected by children today. This is mainly because of reasons such as "*children do not consult parents in making decisions that affect the family, they do not like to seek advice on any important matters and do not communicate frequently*"; and most importantly *children completely ignore them now*'. The latter consist of 47.6 percent of the elderly parents who are of the opinion that their children do not respect them. However, it was found that the elderly believe that during their own youth, their parents and grandparents were more respected by family members in comparison to the present situation.

Theoretically, old age support is positively associated with high fertility (Hugo 1997; Caldwell 1982). However, one can reasonably hypothesise that even in low-fertility situations, old-age support deriving from children can still be strong in the absence of any other assistance coming from the government or relatives/neighbours. This is mainly because in developing societies like Sri Lanka those categories are highly burdened with financial constraints. In this context, it is important to examine whether respect for the elderly will continue in the future by examining whether present day parents (i.e. adult children's generation) expect old-age support from their

children in the future. The survey found that 53.5 percent of the adult children do not expect old-age security from their children in the future but most strikingly, a large proportion (46.5 percent) still do. This suggests that the breakdown of the extended kin networks in the modern society today, which will continue further in the future, will make the elderly less dependent to a greater extent on their children for security. This is still possible because of the availability of a larger proportion of adult children at present because of the high fertility that existed in the past. Although Sri Lanka's fertility has declined to near replacement level, the old-age support ratio in 2012 was still 4 adult children (20-59 years of age) to one old person (60+ years). In other words, theoretically, one elderly person in Sri Lanka still has 4 adult children to support him/her.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that traditionally the cultural norm in Sri Lanka has been for the elderly parents to be looked after by their adult children, but the busier lifestyle of the children including formal employment outside home and increasing costs of living have made adult children move away from such a norm. This paper further revealed that half of the adult children respondents are of the opinion that the reason for not living with elderly parents is to have a free life after marriage without kin influence, whilst one fifth of them want to maintain the privacy of their immediate family. This means that the cultural norm which supported children to look after their elderly parents has been fading away in Sri Lankan society and a new norm is emerging over recent decades. Therefore, family relations between elderly parents and adult children have become much more vulnerable and less stable. At the same time, it was also found that respect for aged people has not changed over the years, and that a large proportion of parents still expect their children's support in old age. This suggests that parents still tend to depend on their children to some extent in their old age although the family system has changed over the years.

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