

# **AGEING ISSUES IN NIGERIA: CHARTING A NEW COURSE**

**BEATRICE IFEOMA AJUFO Ph.D.**

Department of Educational Foundation

Faculty of Education

National Open University of Nigeria

## **Abstract**

Ageing population has become a major concern especially in developing and middle income countries that are experiencing rapid shift from high mortality and high fertility to much reduced fertility and greater longevity. Nigeria has the highest number of elderly people in the sub-Saharan Africa. Available records show that elderly population in Nigeria will increase from 6.4 million in 2005 to 11.5 million in 2025 and 25.5 million in 2050. With this scenario coupled with the unpreparedness of the Nigerian Government to cater for the elderly population is the background on which this paper is based. In view of this, this paper critically examined the perception of old age in the traditional setting and what it is now including the changing family structure. The paper also x-rayed some psychosocial challenges faced by the Nigerian ageing population as well as Nigerian policy issues on ageing. The paper concluded by looking at ways by which the aged can be catered for by every stakeholder and integrated into national development process thereby giving them a sense of belonging. Implications for counselling practice were also discussed.

**Keywords:** Ageing, Issues, Nigeria, Charting, New, Course

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the ninth most populous country in the world. According to the United Nations estimates (2019), Nigeria has a population of 200,962,417. The country is culturally heterogeneous, housing over 350 ethno-linguistic groups with three notable groups namely Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Nigeria is a Federal Republic, consisting of 36 states, further divided into 745 districts. The Nigerian society is structured in a way that the Federal Government takes charge of the economy and direction of the country as a whole, the States only possess a significant amount of autonomy (Asagbe, 2005).

Nigeria as a society is characterized by endemic widespread poverty and inequality with over 69% of her population living below the absolute poverty line of \$1 per day (This Day Newspaper, July 2019), life expectancy at birth in Nigeria stands for 53.02 (InfoPlease, 2019). The growth in the older population is a relatively new phenomenon which began during the second half the twentieth

century in the developed and later in the developing world (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014). Globally, the number of the elderly has been increasing by 8 million per year since 2000; and by 2030, the increase is estimated to reach 24 million (NIA, 2012; UN, 2013). This is the consequence of a number of factors including declining fertility rates, decreased premature deaths, and improved life expectancies. Evidence also shows that the proportion of people aged 60 years is growing faster than any other age group and about 2 billion people will be aged 60 and older by 2050 (WHO, 2012; Oosthuizen, 2018). Population ageing has been described as one of the most significant trends of the 21st century.

Population ageing in Africa is growing rapidly too. It is estimated that by 2100; Africa will see a 15-fold growth in the number of older adults, from 46 million now to 694 million (Aboderin, 2006). Nigeria, although described as a ‘youthful population’ has an elderly projected population growth rate of 3.2% (Population Reference Bureau (2012, 2017) a rate that has been estimated to double by 2050 (Mbah, 2016).

**Table 1: Projected Population Ageing in Africa, West Africa and Nigeria from 2005 – 2050**

	Population 60+ (per cent)			Population 60+ (millions)		
	2005	2025	2050	2005	2025	2050
Africa	5.2	6.4	10.0	47.4	85.8	192.9
West Africa	4.7	5.5	9.0	12.0	21.8	51.6
Nigeria	4.9	6.0	9.9	6.4	11.5	25.5

Source: UN Population Division (2005)

According to reliable estimates, the elderly population in Nigeria will increase from 6.4 million in 2005, to 11.5 million in 2025 and 25.5 million in 2050 (United Nation, 2012). The question is how prepared is Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African nations for the inevitable ageing of its population?

The high potential rapid growth rate of the older population in the years ahead simply shows change in the age structure of the society which may have serious implication for the economy. In the second UN Assembly on Ageing in Madrid (8-12 April, 2002), an International Plan of Action on Ageing (IPAA) was adopted by the Assembly and a political declaration recommending that older persons must be full participants in the development process in the 21st Century. In Addition to this, the issue of population ageing has been of major concern in major international conferences in the past twenty-five years. However, despite the fact all these declarations and plans have presented great opportunities for countries to mainstream ageing within the context of current global development initiatives, the recognition of ageing population by government is till limited especially among Africa nations where other pressing priorities command most of the attention of

policy makers even though the process of population ageing is already visible in these countries (Togonu-Bickersteth & Akinyemi, 2014).

### **Statement of Problem**

In Nigeria, the elderly suffers a lot of hardship in our contemporary society (Hamilton, 2006). They constitute the poorest segment in the society, as there is visible evidence of destitution and begging among them (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014). A cursory look at the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the Federal Government of Nigeria shows that there was little or no consideration for this vulnerable population group. This poses a big problem. More so, available statistics shows that developed nations have experienced the most significant extent of ageing while many developing nations have only just begun to experience the ageing transition in full (Aboderin, 2006; South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), 2012; UNDESA, 2013; Goodrick & Pelser, 2014). Ageing being a silent process, its very obvious consequences are however difficult to anticipate. Also, it is a new process in developing societies, for which there is no historical antecedent. The developed societies even as experienced as they are with all the policies and programmes put in place indicate that the adjustment to the challenges posed by population ageing has not been smooth. Given that large shifts in age structure are being compressed into a relatively short period in developing countries, it means that developing countries will have less time than the developed countries to adapt to the problems posed by the changing structure (United Nations, 2001). Consequently, the speed of population ageing has important implications for government policies, such as health care, social security and economic growth (National Population Commission (NPC), 2003; Tanyi, Andre & Mbah, 2018). With relatively low levels of social and economic development and little access to adequate healthcare, a country like Nigeria will find it difficult to meet the challenges of a large population of elderly people especially as traditional family systems for the elderly are breaking down (Abanyam, 2013; Okoye, 2012). The government of Nigeria therefore has to position itself to face and deal with the economic, health, social and psychological challenges that will be unleashed as a result of these demographic changes. Against this background, the paper therefore explores the following two questions. First, what are the challenges faced by the elderly in Nigeria? And second, what is the way forward in guaranteeing better living conditions for the elderly?

### **The Concept of Ageing**

Ageing is a universal human experience. According to Edeh (2014), ageing is defined as changes that significantly decrease the probability of survival caused by processes within the individual that are universal, inevitable and irreversible. It is a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social accumulation

of change in a person over time.

Ageing is the progressive attainment of ages towards the last degree of maximum life span of a human being (Taber's Encyclopedia Medical Dictionary, 2004). It is a process that begins from conception and continues for as long as one lives. Changes that accompany ageing occur in people at different chronological ages and progress at different rates. Some of these changes include obvious visible changes in physical appearance and in physical abilities, while some of the changes are internal and not readily perceivable (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014). Ageing is inevitable and accompanied by physical decline in every part of the body. Population ageing, on the other hand is a process in which older persons become a proportionally larger share of the total population.

### **Perception of Old Age in the Traditional Setting**

In the traditional Nigerian society, old age was highly valued and celebrated as “the age of wisdom and teaching”. Old people were highly respected as the repositories of inherited wisdom and experience and they were seen as the principal decision makers (Adeleke, 2014; Eboiyehi, 2015). According to Apt (2000), old age in the African traditional societies was seen as a sign of blessing and the aged were respected and held in high esteem. They were also regarded as the representatives of the ancestors and creators and guardians of the cultural traditions (Sagner, 2001). However, nowadays, the story is no longer the same.

With modernization, the younger generation sees old age as a period of hardship and “problematic” phase of life (Eboiyehi, 2015; Edeh, 2014). The elderly people are seen as not very useful in the society any more. With the advent of modernization, even the accumulated knowledge of the elderly is rarely viewed as the source of wisdom but rather as something out dated and obsolete (Pesic, 2007).

In addition, the elderly persons in traditional Nigerian society were usually happily connected with and cared for by the family unit. The extended family system was responsible for the care of the elderly. The care and support of the elderly was provided by the family members such as wives, children, sons and daughters-in-laws etc (Edeh, 2014; Asiyanbola, 2009). However, as a result of modernization, there was a change in family structure in Nigeria which led to disintegration of the concept of extended family system (Abanyam, 2013; Okoye, 2012). This traditional function of the family like the care and social support of the elderly family members is gradually collapsing (Aboderin, 2006). The concept of extended family system is gradually being replaced with the nuclear family as the care and support of the aged is becoming the specific responsibility of the children. In the traditional society, the parents made their own preparation for old age by having large families who worked on the farms. Today, in modern times, the reality is that having a large number of children is no longer seen as an asset but rather a liability. Also, rural-urban migration, high unemployment rate has made it difficult

for the younger generation to remain in the rural areas where the majority (95%) of the elderly live (Ajomale, 2007).

### **Psychosocial Challenges of the Elderly in Nigeria**

‘Older people’ are defined by the United Nations as the group of persons aged 60 years and over. Growing old is a normal phenomenon but for Nigeria, it constitutes a painful process attended by poor health, poverty and helplessness (Asagba, 2005). Old age is a period of life with unique challenges (National Ageing Institute, 2013).

According to Wearne (2007), the prevalence of psychosocial challenges of the elderly in Nigeria is increasing in an alarming rate. It is estimated that the prevalence will increase four-fold by 2030 compared to what it was 30 years ago. Studies have shown that a majority of the elderly persons experience psychosocial challenges resulting from loss of social contacts and interaction, financial dependence, cognitive disorders etc (Stebby & Lyles, 2009; Tijani, 2009; Oladeji, 2011). According to them, these psychosocial problems if not adequately handled could lead to serious psychosocial distress.

Some of these psychosocial challenges of the elderly are discussed below:

#### **Social Challenges of the Elderly**

Ageing in Nigeria is characterized by poverty and isolation. The isolation described here is an environment where there is no social security for this increasing vulnerable group (Aboderin, 2006; Ayodeji, 2015). Studies have shown that feeling of isolation with a sense of social marginalization is becoming a major challenge for the majority of the elderly persons (Moore, 2009; Singer, 2007; Ebersole & Hess, 2009). According to the findings of these studies, the biggest challenge for the elderly in dealing with loneliness due to loss of partner, loss of friends, career, home, loss of mobility or a combination of these. Social isolation according to Ebersole and Hess (2009) which disintegrates the elderly from social issues presents a major social challenge for the elderly. The progressive disintegration of the extended family system also poses serious threat to the psychosocial wellbeing of the elderly. According to Ajomale (2007), the traditional bonds between the elderly and their young family members which serve as a form of social security are gradually collapsing thereby exposing the elderly to the challenges of various dimensions. This state of neglect makes a number of elderly people to engage in begging for alms in parks, public functions in urban centres and even take up odd jobs (Togonu-Bickersteth, 2014).

The Federal Government shows no consideration for this vulnerable population group. According to Animasahun and Chapman (2017), the absence of national social security schemes makes it difficult for the elderly to receive care; they are therefore left at a disadvantage. Studies have shown that the elderly suffer

from problems including boredom, stress disorders, neglect, insufficient care and troubled relationship especially neglect by their children (ALshawaman, 2008; Edeh, 2014).

### **Emotional Challenges**

Grief and loss of partner constitute a serious challenge for the aged. Women becoming widows is a common occurrence in old age, so also are deaths of beloved ones in extended family and acquaintances in their larger social network. All these losses leave them emotionally isolated (Fry, 2004). Inadequate coping with the corresponding losses makes elderly people see life as meaningless (Moore, 2009). According to Fry (2004), about 1 million spouses of 60 years and above were widowed in 2002 and about 1.5 million people are estimated to be bereaved of their spouses in 2030.

The single most important and often devastating challenge facing the elderly is the sense of loss of identity besides health issues (Fry, 2004). The elderly also experiences loss of self-worth and self-esteem as well as loss of valued social roles. This is because a majority of them for years have been providers for their homes and suddenly, they find themselves dependent on others (Blazer, 2005; Parker, 2004).

Studies have revealed that social and emotional isolation in old age is critical as it leads to depression, nervousness, anxiety and other physical health issues (Singer, 2007; Ebersole & Hess, 2009). Another major ageing issue in Nigeria that often leads to emotional breakdown among the elderly is the delay and non-payment of pensions and gratuities to the elderly, which is their main sustenance apart from their children (NPC, 2003).

### **Mental Challenges**

Studies have shown that depression is one of the most common disorders encountered in old age and which can result in cognitive impairment (Richman, 2008; Boston, 2005). According to the studies, the elderly persons have the highest rate of suicide than any other age group. Dementia, a cognitive disorder is also prevalent among the elderly (Benedict, 2013).

### **Health Challenges**

Ageing is associated with changes which may culminate in health problems necessitating provision of appropriate preventive, curative and rehabilitative services. With the increase in life expectancy in Nigeria, many individuals can now look forward to longer lives. Although, many people can now live longer, the risk of having at least one chronic disease such as hypertension or diabetes increases with age. According to Abegunde and Owoaje (2013), old age can be likened to a hospital where one can find various ailments. The common health challenges of the

elderly in Nigeria are hypertension, diabetics, decrease in muscular efficiency, arthritis, visual impairment, loss of teeth, osteoarthritis, cancer, deformed knees and ankles, stroke, dementia, hearing impairment, pulmonary tuberculosis, depression, physical exhaustion, loss of short term memory and urinary incontinence (Abegunde & Owoaje, 2013; Cadmus, Adebuseye, Olowokere, Oluwatosin, Owoaje & Alonge, 2017; Benedict, 2013). The elderly experience many chronic diseases which contribute to the age-related physical incapacitation. However, there is limited information on the morbidity pattern of the elderly in Nigeria. Surveys carried out so far in Nigeria have been mainly hospital-based and therefore have not provided sufficient information on the health problems especially among the elderly people in the rural areas (World Health Organization, 2004). The elderly people in Nigeria are often denied access to health services especially those in the rural areas (Aboderin, 2006).

### **Policy/ Institutional Issues on Ageing in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, there is no government policy or legislation that specifically provides for the aged. Although a bill seeking to establish a National Centre for Elderly Persons for the general purpose of providing welfare and recreational facilities for the elderly in Nigeria was passed by the 6th Senate into law on July 14, 2009, yet not much seems to have resulted since the law has not been implemented (Mudiare, 2013).

Hospitals in Nigeria are not adequately equipped with the human and infrastructural resources required to meet older adults' special healthcare needs. There is paucity of specialized health services for the elderly in Africa. Nigeria with a population of over 200 million, did not have any healthcare facility with dedicated services for the elderly until 2012 (Akoria, 2016). Similarly, with this huge population, only thirteen (13) old people's homes exist in the country and are being managed by faith-based and Non – Governmental Organizations. Although Nigeria is said to have an interest in the aged group, yet this group of people are being marginalized since no attention is given to their welfare rather attention is focused on younger adults, children and youths (Ogwumike, 2001; McIntyre, 2004). There are no social security policies for the elderly at present. It is a big problem for retirees to obtain the severance benefits, let alone the elderly people who were not workers to be entitled to any form of allowances for their upkeep (Dimkpa, 2015). Many of the elderly people live from hand to mouth and month-end to month - end.

There is lack of policy action on the part of the Nigerian government to implement the National Policy on the care and wellbeing policy of the elderly despite the fact that all African nations including Nigeria are signatory to the Madrid International Plan for Action (Aboderin, 2007). Lack of political will and different priorities are the factors directly underlying Nigeria's failure to implement the policy (Asagba, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the appeals to governments in Africa to recognize older people's vulnerability and to protect their fundamental human rights and despite the fact that all African nations are signatory to the Madrid International Plan of Action, Nigeria has no concrete and comprehensive policies and programmes put in place to deal with the myriad of problems and challenges that are being experienced now by the elderly and the challenges that may emanate from the rapid increase in the elderly population. Neither does she have social institutions to cater adequately for the changing age structures. This therefore calls for a 'rethink' and active policy implementation by the government and all stakeholders to see to the total well-being of the elderly who have contributed their own quota to the development of the nation during their youthful period of life.

## **Implications for Counselling**

There is the need for advocacy to improve the total well-being of the elderly people by providing counselling services for them on how to handle the challenges that accompany ageing. This can be achieved by organizing workshops, seminars and symposium especially in the rural areas (where the majority of the elderly people resides) so as to educate the elderly themselves, family members, caregivers and the community on how best to cope with challenges associated with old age. In addition, Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) should make a case for the study of Geriatric Counselling by encouraging the Government to consider training counsellors in this area.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are proffered as the way forward:

The Nigerian government should train doctors in geriatrics healthcare delivery. In addition, geriatric medicine should be incorporated into the curriculum for medical training to take care of the health needs of the elderly because at the moment, it is not included in Nigerian medical school curriculum.

In terms of policy for the elderly people, there is the need for urgent involvement of the Federal Government in expediting action on the bill on social security formulation of a state policy on the care for the elderly and also to help remove the bureaucratic bottleneck that is hampering implementation of the draft National policy on the care and welfare of elderly persons.

In order to ensure better quality of life for the elderly people especially with the diminishing role of the extended family care-giving, there is the need to create public awareness on the needs of the elderly with emphasis on the traditional roles and responsibilities of the family on the care of the elderly people.

Civil/recreational centres should be provided for the elderly to help them gather together to discuss issues of common interest and other issues affecting them

and by so doing, they are able to cope with the challenges of the ageing process.

The pension scheme in Nigeria is faulty and the monthly pension is not paid regularly to retirees. There is therefore the need for the government to incorporate new ideas into the scheme so that pensioners who are mostly the elderly are paid regularly and promptly without stress.

Homes for old people should be established in every local government area where elderly people who do not have anyone to care for them or any elderly person who wishes to stay can go and stay. In order to run such homes effectively and efficiently the local governments should partner with some NGOs. A number of faith-based institutions and NGOs are already involved in old age care provision including residential hospice care. Government should support these organizations by setting minimum standard, monitoring their activities and provide reasonable subventions to assist them in their activities.

In addition, to establishing homes for old people, Neighbourhood Adult Day Care Centres should be established where elderly persons can meet one another during the day and discuss the challenges associated with ageing process. These Adult Day Care Centres should be managed by trained and qualified social workers and health care professionals.

In order to meet the challenges of the increasing ageing population, policy makers need reliable data (which is lacking) about the elderly people on which to base their policy formulation. There is therefore the need for a number of research work to be carried out in order to make available data for appropriate social interventions on issues relating to the elderly.

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