LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: TOWARDS PROMOTING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE ELDERLY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conditions of the elderly with particular reference to the Nigerian situation. It notes that the population of the elderly is heaviest in advanced countries than the developing ones. However, the burden which this group of people faces appears to tilt towards the developing nations than the developed ones. This is because in advanced countries adequate policy frameworks are in place which regulates the burden the elderly face giving greater part of the job to government and their agencies and other organizations. In Africa, Nigeria inclusive, the traditional support which the extended family systems use to give has been seriously threatened by the forces of modernization and industrialization which appear to be the epoch countries in Africa are presently going through. Specifically, this paper reviews the conditions of the elderly globally and locally. Attention is also given to the issue of old age as asset. The abuse of the elderly in Nigeria is chronicled in details in addition to the probable causes of these abuses. The paper concludes with a set of policy recommendation which can tremendously improve the conditions of the elderly in Nigeria in the near future.

Keywords: Ageing, Social Security, Population, Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

Countless activities in the life of human specie are associated with glamour. The process of being born, given a name, walking as a child, vocalising/talking, admitted into the school system at various stages and graduating or being certified. These occasions radiate pleasure. When eventually one matures and gets married, the joy is even greater. However, there is the other phase when the same individual becomes despondent, less happy (sad), grapples with life’s challenges and perhaps, decline the option of dying if this had to be the alternative. This is usually the mental image society paints as far as getting old is concerned.

As one of the life cycles, aging is a special phase. It is a universal phenomenon. The proportion experiencing this condition relative to the general population may vary from country to country. This does not preclude the fact that it exists sui generis and the problems the process creates need to be resolved.

The conditions of the aged came into the front burner in 1982 in Vienna, Austria when the United Nations adopted a set of Principles for Older Persons. It enjoined member states to incorporate these principles into their countries’ respective programmes for the elderly. Perhaps, this is not unconnected with the assumption that as people age, they are subjected to several unpleasant conditions including being prone to diseases.

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This paper explores the conditions of the elderly in Nigeria. It draws heavily from the findings of researchers and public policy analysts. It discusses global and national issues/perspectives relating to the elderly. Contrary to popular opinion, this paper affirms the idea that, rather than being liabilities, the elderly can indeed be an asset. Other issues handled in the paper include the general profile of the elderly in Nigeria, cases of elderly abuse reported in the literature and their underlying causes. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations, which it hopes will enhance the status of the elderly in Nigeria.

2. GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE ELDERLY

The proportion of the aged in the world has changed radically since the last sixty years (1950s). As noted by Waite and Hughes (2004); “globally, the population is aging rapidly. Both the number and proportion of people age 65 years and above are increasing, although at different rates and in different parts of the world. The number of older adults has risen more than threefold since 1950.” Statistics has it that as at 2010 there were 373 million elderly persons worldwide. 12 countries had above 10 million persons in their population. China topped the list with 160 million. Others are India (89 million), USA (56 million), Japan (38 million), Russia Federation (25 million) and Germany (21 million).

In 1982, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a set of principles for older people and recommended that all Member States should integrate them in their national programmes for the protection of old people.

In Nigeria, Section 142(b) of the 1999 Constitution provides that: “The security and welfare of its people shall be the primary purpose of the government” and Section 16(2)(d) states: “That suitable and adequate shelter and suitable and adequate food, reasonable national minimum living wage, old age care and pensions and unemployment, sick benefits and welfare of the disabled are provided for all citizens.” Nigeria is reputed to have the largest number of elderly people south of the Sahara, over the age of 60 years. The population of Nigerians aged 65 years and above was about 4.3% of the total population according to the 2006 population head-count. This translated to slightly above 6 million (as at 2006). According to Adebowale, Atte and Ayeni (2012), aging in Nigeria is occurring against the background of socio-economic hardship, widespread poverty, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the rapid transformation of the traditional extended family structure. The reason for such high number is not unconnected with the fact that life expectancy has improved owing to better awareness of hygiene and medical advancement.

3. GENERAL PROFILE OF THE ELDERLY IN NIGERIA

Much as one agrees with the fact that the elderly are persons who have spent at least 60 years of their existence (Okumaga, 2011), some discussants have stuck to the 65 years of age and above, thereby extending the latitude (Oluwabamide and Eghafona, 2012; Odama and Ibizugbe, 2014). These slight disagreements notwithstanding, a number of physical, psychological and emotional features have been found to be associated with the elderly across cultures. Some of them include, though not necessarily restricted to those listed below:

- Grey-headedness
- Frail Personality
- Low productivity
- Inefficient body mechanism
- Lack of concentration/articulation
- Memory loss/dementia
- Frequent ill-health
• Failing dentition/loss of teeth
• Flacid muscles
• Low appetite
• Depression
• Arthritis
• Hypertension
• Osteoporosis
• Musculoskeletal disease
• Respiratory problems
• Body pain
• Joint pain
• Nervous tension
• Decreased mobility
• Diabetes

It was also noted by the United Nations (2002) that Nigeria was even worse off than some other African countries like South Africa, Mauritius, Botswana, Kenya and Namibia in terms of social welfare policy. Still on cultural factors, the same document listed factors such as social isolation, the depiction of old age as weak, frail or dependent, the erosion of intergenerational bond, the inferior status of women reflected in discrimination and inheritance, land distribution and widowhood practices as combining to weaken the bargaining power of the elderly. Moreover, older persons, especially women are labelled or accused as witchcraft resulting in their abandonment, beating and banishment from their communities, occasioning death in some cases.

4. OLD AGE AS ASSET

Contrary to popular feeling that old age is uneventful, it indeed can be an asset as the elderly still contribute massively towards the socio-economic, political and emotional development of their nations (Nigeria inclusive). Granted that majority of the elderly have worked and left service or other forms of active livelihood, it is not sufficient to brandish them or label them as unproductive, lacking energy and outright liability. Indeed the aged/elderly can still or are still useful to their society and their community. Studies have also documented occasions where the elderly undertake household chores cooking, washing and cleaning (Mudiare, 2013). Other areas where the elderly have demonstrated being assets rather than liability includes:

• Indirectly or directly stimulating the investment portfolio of their children - businesses and landed properties; purchase and development of parcels of land which they also supervised in most cases.
• Food processing and gardening.
• Voting during election thereby helping to promote the process of good governance and democratization.
• Starring in movies as actors, playing various roles thereby helping to boost the processes of employment, wealth creation and promoting the psyche and leisure of the citizenry.

The elderly are reservoir of knowledge and experience. They are usually the last reference to be consulted in certain matters when dealing with society’s tradition, customs, procedures and standards. They play a lot of role in local administration and dispute resolution. They are readily available to make peace between feuding neighbours, partners or
groups of people thereby averting crises which have immediate and long-term consequences. They serve as national ambassadors and help to project societal values within and outside their countries. A good example is the famous Chief Chika Okpala a.k.a Zebrudaya. They serve as emergency resource persons in assisting with raising children. Sometimes they act as watchdogs when everyone is out of the house (couples go to work and children are away to school) (Abidemi, 2005).

5. ABUSE OF THE ELDERLY IN NIGERIA

According to the United Kingdom elder abuse monitoring network, mistreatment or abuse of old age people is "a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person" (Cook-Daniels., 2003:19). According to the United States Social Services network, every year, “hundreds of thousands of older persons are abused, neglected, and exploited. Many victims are people who are older, frail, and vulnerable and cannot help themselves and depend on others to meet their most basic needs. Abusers of older adults are both women and men, and may be family members, friends, or trusted others” (Jackson and Hafemeister, 2012). In essence, elder abuse is a term referring to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act by a caregiver or any other person that causes harm or a serious risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. The National Centre on Elder Abuse (NECA, 2005) defined elder abuse as “any knowing, intentional or neglect, act by a care giver or any other person that causes harm or any serious risk of harm to an older person.” According to Asagba (2005:40):

“While lacking political will and different priorities are the factors directly underlying Nigeria’s failure so far to ratify let alone implement the draft National Ageing Policy, a closer look suggests that the major cause is, in fact a different one. Law makers are not sufficiently sensitized to the scope, nature or seriousness of older people’s problem nor to the broad economic and social development implications of leaving these problems unaddressed in the context of rapid population ageing. The key cause of Nigeria’s failure to act on ageing is thus the dire lack of comprehensive, high quality evidence of the magnitude, nature and implications of the population ageing challenge that would serve to sensitize policy makers.”

In the debate that has raged for some time now, modernization and industrialization have been said to create the gap that usually lead to disrespect and consequent abuse of elders in Nigeria today. These arguments were heavily canvassed in the works of Oluwabamide and Eghafona (2012) and Egwu (2013). Ajomale (2007) hinged his argument on what he called cultural practices and structural neglect as accounting for the high prevalence of abuse among the elderly. While cultural practices and their roles in this regard appear obscure, he harped on the fact that government’s inability to put in place necessary structures to cater for the old is a major challenge in the fight to ensure the elimination of elderly abuse in our society. As to the seriousness of the issue, Bailey and Turner (2002:11) noted: “In general, the African social security system, are ineffective both in the percentage of the workforce covered and in the level of protection they provide even for the small minorities of workers they cover...”. The causes of abuse of the elderly in Nigeria include but not limited to the following:

- Bad governance resulting in failure to provide for citizens high quality social amenities which can be enjoyed by all including the elderly.
• Widespread unemployment which has been the bane of the Nigerian nation. A situation where able-bodied men roam the streets looking for jobs that are not forthcoming is not the ideal.
• Poverty which has exerted its toll on the Nigerian masses. A decade ago, it was already observed that 70.2% of the Nigerian population lived below the absolute poverty line of $1 a day while 90% lived below $2 per day (UNDP, 2004).
• Widespread corruption especially those associated with Pension Fund in Nigeria. A case that cannot be easily forgotten is that of John Yakubu Yusuf, who pleaded guilty to a 3 count charge of stealing N2.3billion pension fund, given an option of N750, 000 or two years imprisonment by an Abuja High Court Judge, Justice Abubakar Talba.
• Civil unrests and ethno-religious crises which has led to the displacement and/or death of hundreds of thousands of Nigerians including the elderly.
• Lack of political will to enforce and actualise legislative enactments relating to the elderly in Nigeria.
• Penchant for denigrating the aged or elderly in Nigeria; absence of free medical health policy, insurance facilities or similar back-up, housing policies, rebate on local transport and air fares.
• Unpaid pension, lack of payment of gratuities, unremit wages and frequent cases of screening lasting for days or weeks without providing shelter or befitting accommodation.

6. CONCLUSION

We recognize that though the crisis of aging is global, the conditions of the aged vary significantly from country to country. Whereas in developed or advanced nations, growing old has elements of pleasure due to the cumulative institutional mechanisms for dealing with the crisis, the exact opposite is the case in most African countries, particularly, Nigeria. One thing is clear; the extended family system has terribly become irrelevant and disappointing in dealing with the elderly and their problems. The high wave of migration of Nigerians to Europe and other parts of the world since the last three decades has created a situation where thousands, if not millions, of the elderly are left without adequate support from family members. There is also the challenge of massive unemployment, premature retirement and pervasive poverty which deprive the elderly from the expected support from their kindred. Government at all levels in Nigeria must review their strategies for dealing with the elderly. Family members likewise must re-enact the real African values which accord the elderly their rightful place in society. This prospect looks bright. The time to begin is now.

7. THE WAY FORWARD

Thus far, it has been well established in this discourse that growing old in Nigeria presents a lot of challenges. We have also seen that bulk of the variables accounting for this situation are government or institution-based. The question we need to address now is what policies do we need to float in Nigeria henceforth so as to reduce the level of penury of those in that bracket presently and those who will gravitate to the cohort in the near future. It is on the basis of this reasoning that we suggest the following measures.

• Appropriate health measures should be taken to enhance the medical status of the elderly in Nigeria. Such measures should include:
  o Free healthcare for Nigerians age sixty (60) years and above.
  o Construction and designation of at least one standard medical facility in each state of the federation specifically for the elderly. Such facility should be equivalent of a secondary healthcare (SHC) category. It should be well furnished
with the best of medical equipments such that they are able to handle all shades of ailment associated with the elderly.

- There is need to lift the legislative enhancement of the elderly beyond the proposal stage. Several legislation(s) have been advanced in Nigeria regarding the elderly, but none seem to carry the needed force or potency to uplift the conditions of the elderly. Any connected with the business of legislation, should, as a matter of dedication and urgency, finalise the necessary procedures and display the political will backing such mandate to fruition. In addition, individuals or groups within the Federal Republic of Nigeria, who go against such policies should be appropriately and decisively sanctioned.

- For those who are at the brink of retirement, 30% of their entitlement should be paid to them at least one year before retirement. This has a double effect. First, it sets them up for the challenges ahead in terms of groundwork needed to fit into the society when they retire and second, it boosts their confidence that their entitlement is guaranteed when they eventually exit from the world of work.

- Related to the above is the fact that those who worked with the public service or other organisations where retirement is the norm, should there be need for periodic verification exercises, these should be well decentralized. In addition, adequate arrangements should be made; such that exercises of that nature are conducted within the shortest time possible and under very hygienic environment.

- Any connected with or found to be meddling with pension funds should be prosecuted promptly. Any judicial officer who colludes with such individuals to perpetrate injustice should be dismissed by the Nigerian Judicial Council or such other bodies that are vested with such responsibilities.

- Perhaps, we key into the observation made by Mudaire (2013) when she said that, at the community level, senior citizens should be involved in some inter-generational extra-curricular activities with the youths, such as playing table tennis, golf, lawn tennis and even polo. This will help to rejuvenate them periodically. In addition, traditional leaders and community opinion leaders should pay more attention to the issues of the elderly particularly those relating to destitution and abuse in their respective domains.

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