

Securing a Dignified Future for the Elderly

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The issue of an aging population in Bangladesh is rapidly becoming one of the most pressing concerns for both the government and society at large. As the elderly population grows, many face profound challenges due to factors such as poverty, malnutrition, illness, geographic location, and limited access to healthcare and social support. Tragically, not all elderly individuals have the privilege of spending their later years surrounded by family members. In many cases, old age becomes synonymous with living in elderly homes, shelters, or facing total neglect, with little to no familial support.

The elderly population in Bangladesh has been steadily increasing over the years. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), those over the age of 60 made up 5.7% of the total population in 2021, up from 9.25% in 2020. This shift is indicative of two critical trends: the growing number of elderly individuals in the country and the concurrent decline in the working-age population. In the coming decades, this trend is expected to continue, putting significant pressure on the country's labor market and social infrastructure.

This situation is not unique to Bangladesh. The global population is aging, with the United Nations projecting that by 2050, over 1.5 billion people will be over 60 years old. The majority of this increase will take place in low- and middle-income countries like Bangladesh, where the elderly population is expected to rise substantially. This demographic shift demands urgent attention and solutions to address the challenges faced by the elderly.

Several factors exacerbate the challenges faced by Bangladesh's aging population. Many elderly individuals live in poverty, struggling to access basic healthcare, nutrition, and housing. In rural areas, the lack of infrastructure, healthcare facilities, and social services leaves elderly people particularly vulnerable. They often face loneliness, social isolation, and neglect, especially as the traditional system of joint families gradually gives way to nuclear families.

The practice of extended families providing care and support for elderly members has been a cornerstone of Bangladeshi society for generations. However, as the country undergoes rapid urbanization and migration, these familial structures are weakening. Young people are increasingly moving to cities or abroad in search of better economic opportunities, leaving the elderly behind in rural or suburban areas. Without the support of their children or extended families, many elderly individuals are left to fend for themselves.

Moreover, the healthcare system, though improving, still faces significant challenges in adequately serving the needs of the elderly. Medical services and elderly care facilities are scarce, and there is a shortage of trained healthcare professionals who specialize in geriatric care. As a result, elderly individuals often face long wait times for treatment and struggle to find appropriate care.

In response to the growing need for elderly care, the government of Bangladesh has initiated several measures. These include social welfare programs such as the introduction of retirement pensions and adult programs. The government has also provided support for social organizations like the Bangladesh Senior Citizens Association, which offer medical care, companionship, and community activities for the elderly. International initiatives, such as the United Nations' International Day for Older Persons, which is celebrated annually from October 7-8, also help raise awareness of the issues facing older adults and promote policies for their welfare.

Furthermore, the government has established national policies, including the National Veteran Policy and the Parental Act, which aim to ensure the rights of the elderly and provide better services for their care. However, despite these initiatives, the infrastructure and services required to meet the needs of an aging population remain inadequate.

One of the biggest gaps in addressing the needs of the elderly is the shortage of trained professionals and caregivers who specialize in elderly care. This is a critical challenge that Bangladesh must confront, particularly as the elderly population continues to grow. The demand for geriatric care professionals will only increase in the coming years, and addressing this gap can provide multiple benefits.

First, by investing in training programs for caregivers and healthcare professionals, the country can create a new workforce, helping to reduce unemployment among young people. Second, a well-trained workforce can provide elderly individuals with the high-quality care they deserve. This, in turn, would allow elderly people to remain more independent and integrated into society, preventing them from becoming a burden.

Moreover, the development of the elderly care sector has the potential to become a profitable business. Private sector involvement in elderly care facilities, home-based care services, and health services for the elderly could stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and improve the standard of living for both the elderly and the broader population.

The younger generation must play a vital role in supporting the elderly and ensuring they are treated with respect and dignity. In many ways, the future well-being of the elderly is tied to the social values and actions of the youth.

With the current and future demands for elderly care growing, young people must become more involved in initiatives that support the elderly, whether through volunteering, pursuing careers in elderly care, or simply being more active in caring for elderly relatives.

The experiences and wisdom of the elderly are invaluable assets for society. The younger generation must recognize the importance of maintaining strong intergenerational bonds and learning from the elders who have paved the way for them. By integrating the elderly into society and ensuring their dignity, Bangladesh can build a more inclusive, compassionate, and prosperous future for all.

The aging population in Bangladesh presents both challenges and opportunities. While the increasing number of elderly individuals may strain the country's labor market and healthcare system, it also provides an opportunity to create a more inclusive and equitable society. To ensure the elderly live with the respect, care, and dignity they deserve, the government, society, and young people must work together to address the challenges they face.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a clear framework for addressing the needs of the elderly and ensuring their inclusion in society. The elderly are like the trees that have weathered many storms—providing shade, wisdom, and guidance to the younger generation. By fostering collaboration and investing in elderly care, Bangladesh can ensure that the golden years of the elderly are not marked by neglect and hardship but by respect, care, and fulfillment. In this way, the younger generation can bridge the gap between youth and elder, driving the pace of development and creating a more inclusive society for all.

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