A transition from 'Ageism' to 'Agevism'

A future policy tension for Bangladesh

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KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh is rapidly ageing, with older adults projected to form over one-fifth of the population by 2050.
2. Deep-rooted ageism marginalises the elderly socially, economically, and culturally.
3. Family-based care is weakening, increasing dependence on inadequate state support.
4. Existing laws protect elders partially but reinforce vulnerability rather than dignity.
5. A shift to "Agevism" demands rights-based, inclusive, and empowering ageing policies.

With a population (rising from 75 million in 1971 to 169.4 million in 2021) intensity of 1,119 people per square kilometre (BBS, 2023), Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world, ranking as the eighth-most populous nation globally. Over the same period, the total fertility rate declined sharply, dropping from 6.3 in 1971 to 2.3 in 2017–18 (NIPORT, ACPR, ICF, & Inc., 2020). As a result, the proportion and number of older adults are expected to rise steadily. The elderly population is projected to grow from 1.94 million in 1951 to 44 million by 2050, representing around 22% of the national population (Kabir, Khan, Kabir, & Rahman, 2013; Khan & Leeson, 2006; Rahman, 2020). At present, Bangladesh has approximately 15 million people aged 60 and above (BBS, 2023). Consequently, the increasing number of older individuals is anticipated to become a significant demographic challenge in the coming years.

Ageism in Bangladesh

The concept of Ageism is a global concern that is haunting both developed and developing countries. The terms refer to stereotyping and discrimination against people in various aspects of daily life, simply because of their age. In fact, age discrimination is a result of this Ageism. From the earliest stages of human existence, some people have survived into old age, suggesting deep roots in the ageing myth. The Antediluvian theme (refers to the longer life of ancient periods portrayed in the Bible), the Hyperborean theme (long life portrayed by distant cultures), and the Rejuvenation theme (searching for eternal youth) are all most common in ageing myths. Moreover, another common theme running through human history is 'Gerontophobia', which includes all types of fear of ageing and anti-ageing initiatives taken by human beings.

Like other countries in the Global North and the Global South, the concept of 'Ageism' persists in Bangladesh's socio-economic, cultural, and legal norms. In our country, 'Ageism' is observed severely due to low economic capacity, poverty, loss of work and authority, reduced physical mobility, rapid changes of social norms and values, the breakdown of ancient family patterns, preference of individualism, more women's outdoor economic engagement, inter-generational cultural transition and decaying morality, etc. Like other 'Isms'—Racism, Sexism— 'Ageism' is now an invisible and commonly accepted social virus in our country, hindering the true well-being initiatives both in national and local tiers.

An old-age home at Gazipur. FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

From the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of ageism in Bangladesh, the elderly people are portrayed as a vulnerable and marginal group within the population. This vulnerability is facing new risks while the average household size in Bangladesh has decreased from 5.6 members in 1973 to 4.2 in 2022 (BBS, 2023). This shift has contributed to the rise of nuclear family structures, which in turn are reshaping social attitudes toward older adults. Although many elderly individuals still prefer living with family—particularly with married sons and grandchildren, with whom they can preserve emotional bonds—they increasingly face marginalisation within these changing family systems. Traditionally, older people supported their households through financial contributions and unpaid labour (Khan & Leeson, 2006). Yet research shows that this long-standing support system is weakening, leaving many older adults more vulnerable to neglect, reduced care, and negative stereotypes associated with ageing (Kabir, Rahman et al.). As the conventional family-based care model diminishes, older people are increasingly seeking government assistance for healthcare and financial security (Khan & Leeson, 2006; Khan, 2009). Given these demographic transitions and the growing risk of age-based discrimination, a thorough assessment of Bangladesh's ageing policies is essential—particularly in areas such as intergenerational equity, retirement and labour force participation, long-term care, social inclusion, welfare, and the protection of elderly rights.

On the other hand, the legal arrangements for elderly rights protection in Bangladesh are based on a mixed public-private and family services model. The constitution, focusing on non-discrimination principles, incorporates a few necessary human rights that can be directly applied to anti-ageism. However, the judicial unenforceability of necessities is a significant threat to the conditions for smooth elderly well-being. Additionally, the National Policy on Older Persons (2013) addressed crucial socio-economic issues affecting the well-being of older persons, such as poverty alleviation and social inclusion. However, it portrayed the elderly as vulnerable across all aspects, a prevailing perception in many countries. Moreover, the Universal Pension Scheme, 2023 and the Maintenance of Parents Act, 2013, were both addressed as positive legal mechanisms for the protection of elderly people's rights through legal tools. However, critics also noted that both initiatives shifted responsibility for the elderly's well-being from the state to the family and to individuals themselves. Even these legal approaches largely failed to reduce the prevailing 'Ageism', skipping the notion of empowering the elderly with dignity for their long-term contribution to the nation-building.

Across the national welfare and social support programmes, the Old Age Allowance (OAA) is a targeted, means-tested programme that provides a monthly stipend (as of the last proposal, 650 Taka per month) to financially vulnerable older adults. Adding more detail, the Pension Systems and Retirement Benefits includes government employee pensions and other retirement initiatives under the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS).

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