

Ageing, Vulnerability and Capability Approach: A Theoretical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Population of the aged is increasing across the world, India being no exception. The spike of greying population is on account of fall in fertility rate and the increase in life expectancy. The problem of this study focuses on, taking a bird's eye view on increasing number of old age population and geriatric challenges in their respective social settings. The objective is also to comprehend the theoretical perspective of vulnerability, deprivation and well-being of the geriatric persons. Elderly issues and challenges are highly diversified. The need of hour is to tackle it with proper planning and coordination, regarding the elderly care. Moreover, the demands of geriatric people, in rural as well as urban area, especially their economic security should be secured.

Keywords: *Elderly People, Ageing, Vulnerability, Potential Health Issues, Social Welfare, Old Age Home.*

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INTRODUCTION :

An ageing population refers to a demographic trend characterized by an increasing proportion of elderly individuals within a society. This trend typically occurs due to declining birth rates and increased life expectancy. As a result, a larger share of the population is made up of older adults, often defined as those aged 65 and above. Ageing is a natural and inevitable process that affects every individual. It involves a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors. As individuals age, they often become more susceptible to various challenges and vulnerabilities. The Ageing and Vulnerability Approach is a framework that seeks to understand and address the unique vulnerabilities and needs of older adults in society. But while older age has always been associated with vulnerability, these vulnerabilities can be mitigated, when modern societies respond appropriately. Older people do not suddenly become vulnerable: there is clear evidence that their vulnerability bears the long-term marks of early life experiences. This demonstrates the need for timely interventions that either mitigate the adverse impacts, or amplify the positive effects, of early life experiences.

Etymology:

The word 'vulnerability' derives from the Latin verb *vulnerare* (i.e., wounding) and from the Latin noun *vulnus* (i.e., wound). Therefore, etymologically, vulnerability mostly refers to the susceptibility of being physically or emotionally wounded¹. Vulnerability states the diminished capacity of an individual who feels that he does not have a strong social and physical ability to protect himself from any problem (personal, family, and social problems) (Hale, 1996; Vandeviver, 2011).

¹Ten Have H. Respect For Human Vulnerability: The Emergence of a New Principle in Bioethics. *J Bioeth Inquiry*. 2015;12(3):395–408.

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According to Powell and Wahidin (2007) and On Fung et al. (2009), there are four categories of persons that experience vulnerability: the elderly, women, the impoverished, and ethnic minorities. These groups also experience a greater sense of personal, familial, and social difficulties as a result of their vulnerability. In the past, the majority of vulnerable individuals have been older people. In the fields of clinical ethics, research ethics, and public health ethics, older persons are a vulnerable demographic. An older adult is defined as someone who is continuously declining in terms of both cognitive function and physical health from a pathophysiological standpoint in clinical ethics. Additionally, this illness causes a gradual loss of functional reserve mechanisms, impairs homeostatic capacity, and is typically accompanied by difficult comorbidities that are made worse by frailty.²

Psychosocially speaking, ageing is a life stage marked by conflicting demands (e.g., protection against acceptance of autonomy). Furthermore, issues including unstable income, limited access to high-quality healthcare, unwelcoming surroundings, and psychodynamic elements (such as a dread of dying and an unknown future) can exacerbate the instability and vulnerability of older persons. Lastly, isolation and, in certain cases, loneliness can also be traits of old age: A large number of elderly people, many of whom are widowers, live alone in nursing homes. Meanwhile, a few of their classmates stay in their own houses with carers who end up being their only companions³.

Factors Responsible for Vulnerable Ageing:

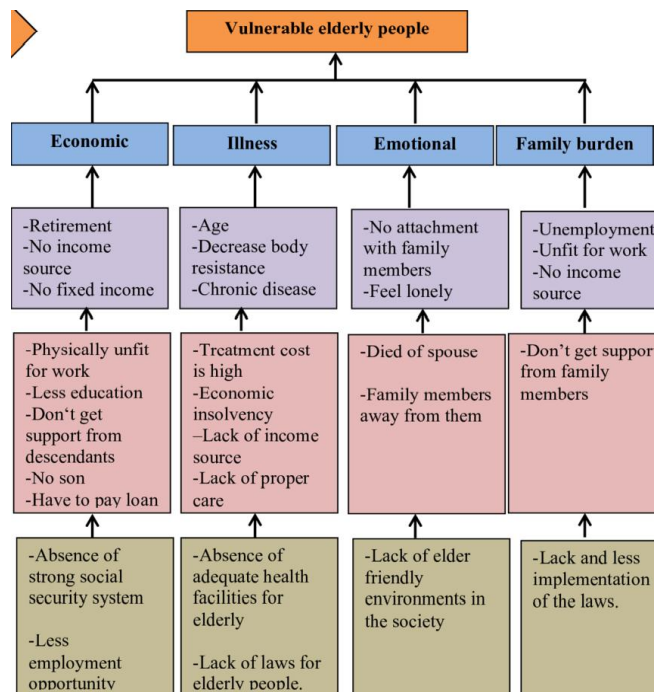
The following factors provide a comprehensive understanding of Ageing and Vulnerability:

- **Biological Changes:** Ageing is associated with a range of biological changes, including a decline in physical strength, sensory abilities, and organ function. These changes can make older adults more susceptible to illness, injury, and physical limitations.
- **Psychological Factors:** Ageing can also bring about changes in cognitive function and emotional well-being. Older adults may face challenges such as cognitive decline, depression, and anxiety, which can impact their ability to make decisions and cope with stress.

- **Social Factors:** The social context in which individuals age plays a significant role in their vulnerability. Factors such as social isolation, economic insecurity, and access to healthcare services can greatly affect quality of life of older people and increase their vulnerability to various risks.

Apart from the aforementioned factors, there are other factors described in the diagram below.

Factors leading to Vulnerability among the Aged Population:



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Root-causes-of-vulnerability_fig2_306137257

Ageing, Vulnerability and Suicide:

Of late, Suicide among the older generation is also being a cause of worry for the governments across. According to Sarvimaki and Hult (2014), the vulnerability approach describes how older people's fragility or weakness put them in a vulnerable position and cause a variety of difficulties, including suicide. The term "vulnerability due to frailty or weakness" describes the type of vulnerability that older adults experience, which is typically linked to both physical and social vulnerability (Sarvimaki and Hult, 2014). Elderly people's

²Hoogendijk EO, Afilalo J, Ensrud KE, Kowal P, Onder G, Fried LP. Frailty: implications for clinical practice and public health. *The Lancet*. 2019;394(10206):1365–75.

³Kahana E, Redmond C, Hill GJ, Kercher K, Kahana B, Johnson JR, Young RF. The effects of stress, vulnerability, and appraisals on the psychological well-being of the elderly. *Research on Ageing*. 1995;17(4):459–89

vulnerability approach aims to highlight unfavourable attitudes resulting from several variables, including physical and social issues in later life that contribute to suicidal thoughts (Bharati, 2021). The social vulnerability of older adults involves, on the one hand, the lack of social networks (attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief), which erodes the older adults and family members' sense of community. Conversely, the physical fragility of older adults relates to the bad conditions (sickness, lack of care, and basic necessities) that older adults face and that their family members view as a burden. A person's interpersonal interactions and their potential to contribute to suicidal tendencies are strongly correlated with both a weak sense of belonging and perceived burdensomeness.

According to Patel and Mishra (2018), elderly individuals feel socially vulnerable because, as they become older, they participate in fewer social activities and lament that people do not have time for them and that they no longer have the same "we feeling" that they once did. Elderly folks experience estrangement and isolation as a result of all these emotions. According to Patel and Mishra (2018), the materialistic lifestyle has also had a big impact on social structure and has exacerbated psychological and social problems that elderly people face. The emergence of nuclear families, working couples, and behavioural shifts in the community have left older people feeling neglected, alone, and abandoned. The elder population's social capital has diminished. This leads to a large number of old people being weak, exposed, and unable of providing for themselves. These elements increase the likelihood that older persons may feel isolated and alone, and they also lessen their sense of family connection.

As a result, elderly people take their own lives. In later life, elderly individuals experience a multitude of physical issues, including basic necessities and chronic illnesses. Physical issues prevent older individuals from engaging in physically demanding activities, thus they must rely on the support of other family members. Older adults frequently become aware of their burdensome nature to their family members due to physical illnesses and fundamental needs. After accepting the weight of their obligations, elderly individuals come to the conclusion that their departure will provide their families with more happiness than their ongoing presence.

The Ageing and Vulnerability Approach comprises of holistic perspective, empowerment/capability approach and social inclusion. Holistic Perspective recognizes that ageing is a multifaceted process and seeks to address the entire spectrum of an older person's needs, encompassing physical, psychological, and social aspects. Promoting social inclusion is a core component of the Ageing and Vulnerability Approach. It aims to lessen social isolation and provide chances for senior citizens to engage in recreational, cultural, and social activities. Capability or empowerment approach views that instead of viewing older adults as passive recipients of care, this approach emphasizes empowerment. It aims to enable older individuals to maintain control over their lives, make informed decisions, and actively engage in their communities. Also, ensuring equitable access to healthcare services is crucial. This approach advocates for healthcare systems that are sensitive to the needs of older adults, providing age-appropriate care and support. Proactive measures, such as health screenings and interventions, are integral to reducing vulnerability in older adults. Identifying potential health issues early can prevent their escalation. The Ageing and Vulnerability Approach calls for policy initiatives that address the unique needs of older adults. It advocates for policies that promote healthy ageing, economic security, and social welfare.

The 20th century has witnessed a remarkable rise in longevity and our comprehension of the difficulties associated with the ageing population. It has taken society a while to recognise the benefits of longevity and to value the elderly as a resource. Older adults may undoubtedly require assistance with pensions, healthcare, social services, and infrastructure. However, under the correct conditions, individuals make up for this investment with longer working careers and more independent, self-sufficient lives. Nonetheless, it has become commonplace for possibilities to empower older persons to lag behind advancements in lifespan. All governments should make resolving these structural mismatches their top priority. Globally, more social policy work is needed to enhance older people's well-being and strengthen the sustainability of welfare systems. Making the distinction between policies necessary for future generations and those appropriate for the elderly of today is crucial. Because their opportunities are limited, today's seniors need

protection. The elderly of tomorrow will require improved retirement planning tools, greater work options during their working years, and savings.

Suggestions for Vulnerability Reduction and Resilient Older Population:

- Less exposure to events that are detrimental to human development is necessary for the elderly of future generations. Throughout life, it is equally crucial to develop one's own abilities. A human development, people-empowering strategy that prioritises lifelong health, education, and training is required to accomplish this. A stronger focus on active ageing policy discourse will enable individuals to make contributions to both their own and society's growth.
- Governments must fund both the creation of age-friendly, conducive conditions that foster communal resilience and the overall development of individual resilience. While there are many ideas for enhancing institutional, social, and physical infrastructure, some of the most important ones are access to vital public services like transportation, lifelong learning, social connectivity, physical safety, and safety in the physical world.
- Recently, many countries have strongly emphasised on basic non-contributory social pensions, which have helped attain income security for older people. A non-contributory pension scheme is a retirement plan or pension plan in which the employer bears the entire cost of providing retirement benefits to employees, and the employees are not required to make any contributions from their own salaries or wages to fund the plan. In other words, it is a fully funded pension plan where all financial responsibility for funding the retirement benefits rests with the employer.
- To improve the quality of life and well-being of senior citizens, specific public policy priorities are needed. Norway and Sweden, for example, made gradual investments in social security, health care, work and training, education, and employment and training long before they were considered "high income countries." Likewise, emerging economies and nations at a comparable stage of economic growth might benefit from the adoption of good practises from middle-income nations like Mauritius and Sri

Lanka. Long-term investments in health and education in Sri Lanka have given many elderly people a cumulative lifetime advantage, serving as a model for other South Asian nations like India and Pakistan. However, almost all of the over-60s in Mauritius receive a non-contributory pension, which can teach Africa a thing or two about giving older people a stable source of income.

As a theoretical framework, the Capability Approach can be applied to research involving and benefiting older adults, with the aim of highlighting the options available to them to achieve their objectives in light of potential influencing contextual circumstances. With its emphasis on people's actual opportunities, what they can actually accomplish, and what they should value in relation to the resources at their disposal, the capability approach significantly advances our understanding of the ageing process and its potential effects.

Understanding Capability Approach:

The Capability Approach is a significant and influential framework in the field of economics, ethics, and development studies. Developed primarily by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and further refined by Martha Nussbaum, the Capability Approach provides a unique perspective on human well-being and social justice. This approach goes beyond traditional measures like income or GDP to assess the quality of people's lives and their freedom to lead a life they value.



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/components-of-the-capability-approach_fig1_324254230

Key principles and concepts of the Capability Approach:

- **Focus on Capabilities:** Instead of solely relying on material resources or utility as indicators of well-being, the Capability Approach emphasizes people's capabilities. Capabilities refer to the real opportunities individuals have to do and be what they value. This approach considers what individuals can do with the resources and freedoms available to them.
- **Freedom and Agency:** The Capability Approach places a strong emphasis on individual agency and freedom. It is not enough for people to have certain resources; they must also have the freedom to choose how to use those resources to pursue their own goals and lead a life they value.
- **Human Diversity:** The approach recognizes that people have diverse values, preferences, and life goals. It aims to be value-neutral and does not impose a singular conception of a good life on individuals. Instead, it seeks to create conditions in which people can pursue their own visions of a good life.
- **Evaluative Space:** The Capability Approach provides an evaluative space for assessing the well-being and development of individuals and communities. It acknowledges that well-being is multi-dimensional and cannot be reduced to a single metric or economic indicator.
- **The Role of Functionings:** Functionings are the various things a person can do or be, such as being healthy, educated, employed, and socially engaged. These are essential for well-being and are influenced by a person's capabilities and the resources available to them.
- **Social Justice and Policy Implications:** The Capability Approach has significant implications for policy and social justice. It calls for policies and interventions that enhance people's capabilities and freedoms, reduce inequality, and create an enabling environment for individuals to flourish.
- **Measurement Challenges:** One of the challenges of the Capability Approach is operationalizing and measuring capabilities. Researchers and policymakers often use a variety of indicators and surveys to assess people's capabilities and well-being.

- **Global Perspective:** The Capability Approach has been applied to issues of global development, including poverty reduction, gender equality, and social justice, emphasizing the importance of expanding capabilities worldwide.

The ageing population and the capability approach are two important concepts in the fields of economics, sociology, and public policy. Let's explore how these two concepts are related and their implications. As understood, the capability approach is a philosophical and economic framework developed by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen and further developed by Martha Nussbaum. It focuses on evaluating well-being and development based on the capabilities and freedoms that individuals have to lead the kind of lives they value. Instead of solely measuring well-being in terms of income or material goods, the capability approach emphasizes people's abilities to achieve various functioning and capabilities.

Connection between Ageing Population and Capability Approach:

The capability approach is relevant to the ageing population in several ways:

1. **Quality of Life:** When addressing the needs of an ageing population, the capability approach can help policymakers and society focus on improving the quality of life for older individuals. This includes not only addressing their material needs but also ensuring they have the capabilities and opportunities to live fulfilling lives.
2. **Healthcare and Long-Term Care:** The capability approach underscores the importance of healthcare and long-term care services that enable older individuals to maintain their health and independence, ensuring they have the capability to engage in activities that matter to them.
3. **Social Inclusion:** The capability approach emphasizes the importance of social inclusion and participation. It highlights the value of policies and programs that combat social isolation among the elderly and promote their active engagement in society.

In summary, an ageing population presents unique challenges and opportunities, and the capability approach provides a valuable framework for addressing the diverse needs and aspirations of older individuals in

society. It shifts the focus from purely economic considerations to a more holistic view of well-being and human development. While the Ageing and Vulnerability Approach recognizes that ageing is a complex process that can bring about vulnerabilities, the Capability approach highlights the potential for resilience and empowerment among older adults. By adopting a holistic perspective and implementing policies and interventions that address the specific needs of older individuals, societies can work towards ensuring that the later stages of life are characterized by dignity, well-being, and social inclusion. The Capability Approach offers a holistic and human-centric perspective on well-being and development. It highlights the importance of individual freedoms, choices, and the ability to pursue a life in accordance with one's values and aspirations.

Both the vulnerability and capability approaches has had a profound impact on the fields of economics, ethics, and social policy, shaping discussions and actions aimed at improving the quality of life for individuals and communities around the world.

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