Social Welfare Issues of Older Population in Malaysia

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Abstract: In recent years, older population is growing globally. The growth of this population is said to be the 21st century phenomenon. Never before in the history of demography has the world contained a high number and proportion of populations living to the age of 65 and over. This article, originated from a qualitative study, discusses the growth of older persons in Malaysia and attempts to explore social welfare issues arising. To explore these issues, this qualitative study was conducted in an in-depth interview with three key informants. The interview was recorded. Upon completing the interview, five issues of the welfare of older persons are traced which are the changes of family, youth migration to city, support and care system, health problems and employment and financial security. These issues will be facing by all if one reaches older ages.

Keywords: Welfare • Population aging • Family • Migration • Older persons

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many governments and policy makers have increasingly focused on the rapid growing number of older population that taking place all over the world and the impact of this growing on the welfare of older persons. This article discusses the growth of older persons in Malaysia and attempts to explore social welfare issues arising. The social welfare issues of older persons need to be well addressed because older persons in Malaysia, as older persons in other developing countries, tend to be dependent on their family members when they reach old age. Thus, social welfare issues are of immense interest to demographers as well as gerontologists.

We now notice that the world’s older population is growing at an unprecedented rate. From the book, an aging world: 2008 written by Kevin Kinsella and Wan He [1], we found a wide range of information about the world’s older population today. Although the speed of aging varies widely by geographic region, with data collected from all over the world, Kevin Kinsella and Wan He [1] show that all nations are now experiencing the growth of their older population. The writers also highlighted that the estimation of the world’s population age structure indicates that in fewer than 10 years, time from now people aged 65 years and above are expected to outnumber children under age 5. In the past, children under age 5 have outnumbered older population. It is also highlighted that in 2008, the older population aged 65 years and older globally was estimated to be 506 million, which was about 7 percent of the world’s population and by 2040, this category of population is projected to be 1.3 billion, accounting for 14 percent of world’s population. In recent years, the world’s older population was estimated to increase by an average of 870 000 people each month. Moreover, Joseph Troisi and Yesim Gokce Kutsal [2] highlight that the world’s older population is increasing by 1 000 000 people every month.

The growth of this population is said to be the 21st century phenomenon. Never before in the history of demography has the world contained a high number and proportion of populations living beyond the age of 65 and over. Demographic revolution, or particularly demographic transition occurred in developed countries due to the declining in birth rates, couples with advances in medical technology in the eighteenth century following the industrial revolution process, leading to the decline in mortality rates, promotes an increasing of older persons worldwide. The demographic revolution can also be regarded as the stages of growth of older persons in the
population. Thus, the demographic revolution has increased interest and awareness on problems, potential and reality of the aging population [3]. Population aging is not an evenly process. Some countries not only have many older persons in their population structure, but also receive a very rapid increase; while other countries have a relatively small elderly population. Since demographic revolution started in developed countries, the increasing number of older population of the world starts there, followed by developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

As in other parts in the world, the older population is also growing in Malaysia. The proportion of older people in Malaysia today is still small when compared with Western countries [4], but there are signs that Malaysia is heading towards aging due to the steadily increase in elderly population in the population structure. In 1970, the population 60 years and over in Malaysia accounted for around 539.118 people, rose to 745.152 people in 1980 and 1,450,000 in 2000. This figure is expected to increase to 3,216,000 (2020) [4].

In terms of percentages, it increased from 5.2% (1970), to 5.7% (1980) and increased further to 6.6% (2000). In 2020 this percentage is expected to increase further to 11.3% [4]. As Malaysia becomes more industrialized, a welfare issue of the older persons will become a significant issue. The presence of older person poses a particular impact on family, community and country. Therefore, this article describes some social welfare issues arise in the family, which explored through the eyes of three key informants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The growing number of older people results in different implications and it is also felt by family, as well as community or country. With the older people in family, adult children certainly have additional tasks. These adult children have to divide the task of caring their own children as well as of the older parents. Problems can arise here. Not all older parents are well cared, while their physical capacity to be active in the workforce to earn their living is declining. This article, based on information from key informants, found five themes that become a major issue related to older persons; that are changes in family, youth migration, support and care system, health problems and financial security.

Changes in Family Institution: All key informants agree that family institution in Malaysia is now undergoing rapid changes in their functions. Modernization, industrialization and now globalization, have lead to the changes in the family institution. Modernization which started some decades ago, in the middle and the second half of the XX century, that all nations and cultures go with the same path [6], has created the changes in family institution. The changes in family institution certainly result in certain negative effects on the welfare of the older persons. Family has to adapt itself to these changes. Among the salient aspect of this changes, are the family size become smaller and the number of families headed by single mother increase, which eventually gives certain impact on the welfare of the older persons. This is largely

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article, as stated in the introduction, aims at discussing the social welfare issues arise. In recent years we found some of older parents in Malaysia are neglected and forced to live homeless eventhough they have many children. This goes against the value systems of the Malays. To explore the issues of older persons in Malaysia, this paper utilized the materials from in-depth interviews with key informants. Our primay intent is to examine several major issues related to older persons following the growing number of older people in community, from the point of view of key informants.

This is a qualitative study. There are many traditions or approaches of qualitative designs, among which includes biography, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, or case studies. After the conceptualizing of the research questions and the formation of the purposes of the study, we then go to the selection of research participants and data collection. Data collected were then analyzed to enable the researcher come to the conclusions and writing a report. Books on research methodology use the term research design to refer to this sequences or phases of activities. Yin [5] writes that the design is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study’s initial research questions and ultimately, to its conclusions.

The researcher needs to be sure what approach to use in research. Thus this qualitative study employed case studies as an approach to reach the conclusions. Three key informants were selected. These informants were aged between 38 to 42 years, have a PhD education and are working as university lecturers. From in-depth interviews with these informants, there were five issues that must be addressed if we want to maintain the welfare of the older persons in Malaysia in the future.
because the fact that family is very important to older persons. The basis of support and care for them is family. Family members, especially adult children, are a primary source of care. Thus, family size becomes an important issue relating to the welfare of older persons.

With a decreasing in family size results in the decreasing of sources to provide care. At the same time, because of urbanization that has taken place, adult children who get married will soon build their own lives away and separated from their parents’ home, eroded the extended family further. In other words, the member of family nowadays is not only smaller, but also moved more often and separated by geographical distances. Since these older persons often lack of income and do not have the ability to live independently, these changes are undoubtedly resulting in certain effects on their welfare.

**Youth Migration to Urban Areas:** Migration is a sociological concept refers to the geographical movement seasonally or permanently. Many adult children in Malaysia nowadays move either for education or for economic reasons. Whatever the motives are, the movement of young generation from rural to urban areas has an impact on the welfare of older persons. According to key informants, the migration of youth to cities is a common phenomenon that can not be avoided. The younger generation should get a strong economic position for their future and therefore some, in searching good job opportunities, have migrated to cities.

As a result, the elderly parents at the traditional village is losing source of care. The young who have migrated to cities, because of geographical distance, faced problems in taking care of their elderly parents at home. While there are certain types of care do not need the presence of children at home, there are times children need to be at home to provide a proper care. Many studies have documented geographical distance plays an important role in determining the frequency of younger generation to visit the elderly parents. Based on this many older persons in Malaysia sooner or later have no alternative but facing later life alone without the presence of adult children.

**Support Systems and Maintenance:** Because old age is usually accompanied by the decline in physical health, older persons are eventually weak in physical ability. While there are older persons who still healthy and vigorous, many of them will become physically weak. Due to the physical capabilities has decreased, the economic resources they have will also be diminished. Many of older persons are no longer able to work and this eventually will produce certain impact on their quality of life. They need care from family members, friends and neighbours as well as from the government. The older persons generally need two types of support: informal and formal support. Formal support can function as providing services aimed at adding, or to supplement informal support from family members and others [7].

In other words, the responsibility to provide support to elderly parents need to be shared between the informal with formal support system. Litwak [8] points out that all the needs of elderly parents will be met effectively when there is a close and balance cooperation between the informal and formal support system. Informal support itself is considered not able to function well without the cooperation of formal support. As there is a balance cooperation of these two types of support, the elderly in developed countries prefer to live and stay independently in their own homes than to live with their children. Except for the poor elderly and those who require intensive medical care, the elderly who are healthy and have their own financial resources prefer to live with their spouses independently. Many older persons in Malaysia have no strong income. Most of them are economically dependent. Many of them have to continue working even after attaining the very old age [9], leads the children and family members are fully responsible for the care and well-being [10].

**Elderly Health Problems:** The problem of the growing number of older people in society is also very much related with health problems of older persons. This is particularly true because in much of the developing countries, the growth of older persons is taking place in the period where the public health and nutritional consciousness are low. Thus, health is a major problem for older persons. Health issues are considered to be related to many aspects of life of older persons. In fact, health is considered as the main determinant of the quality of life of this category of population. Medical facility is an important aspect in the context of addressing health problems of older persons. Is the medical facility, particularly public hospitals in Malaysia can be considered adequate to older persons? Accessibility of older persons and their family members to health service centers are also an issue that needs serious attention.

The majority of older persons in Malaysia are currently residing in rural areas. The accessibility of rural people, particularly older persons to modern medicine center is very low. If they face any health problems, they generally prefer to find other alternative sources instead of modern medicine. Other problems related to elderly
health care are high costs of modern medicine. There are many types of diseases that require substantial financial support. Kidney disease, for example, needs a lot of money, while the facilities for the treatment in government hospitals are very distressing. Many older persons have to get treatment in private hospitals or private homodealysis centers that requires very high costs.

**Employment and Financial Security:** Employment and financial security is another issue related to social welfare of older persons. Many older persons in Malaysia whether like it or not, have to continue working even after attaining the very old age. They will only stop working when they are no longer able to do any work. Employment opportunities are limited or not available and if it is available it also offers wages that are not compatible. As a result, older persons are lack of suitable income and will be facing the problem of poverty as they do not have financial security. Only a few has accessed to pension schemes for their old age security. Because of low wages while in public sector, the allowances received after pension will also be very low and sometimes not enough for a proper life. This has forced older persons to rely on children for financial security during old age. The contribution from the Social Welfare Department is relatively low to accommodate the needs of older persons and all these circumstances forced older persons to rely on their children and families for a suitable life.

**CONCLUSION**

Older population is growing globally. Never before in history of demography has the world contained a high number and proportion of populations living to the age of 65 and over. There are signs that older population in Malaysia is also growing. One of the significant aspects that will be facing by family in any society, particularly in developing countries, is the welfare of older population. Up to the present day, most of developing countries still do not have a comprehensive pension scheme for all older persons. This article originated from a qualitative study discusses the growth of older persons in Malaysia and has explored social welfare issues arise. In the context of family, not all older parents are well cared. This article found five themes that become a major issue related to older persons in family. Five issues of welfare of the older persons are the change of family, youth migration to the city, support and care system, health problems and employment and financial security. All these issues will be facing by all if we are living reaching older ages.

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