

Rural Ageing: Iran is on the Brink of a New Social Problem

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Abstract: *The paper aims to examine the population ageing as a new phenomenon effecting rural areas in Iran. Population ageing is going up throughout the country especially in the rural areas by 6.8 percent. fertility decline, increase in the youth migration to cities, and coming back to rural areas after retiring are the major factors which involve in rural ageing. This may jeopardize the communities. findings derived from conducted research indicated as the rural population ageing increases the elderly who are the resident of the areas will be faced with challenges such as lack of social security, inadequate access to health care services due to lack of proper infrastructure, Social isolation and loneliness etc. On the other hand, the rural shrinkage leads to metropolitan centres and prefectural capitals expand very rapidly, which results in over- crowding in some urban districts. In addition, resistance to change production modes, lack of creativity, innovation, and production development, reduction in productivity, decline in fertility, vicious circle of rural ageing, limited agriculture land falling into disuse, and threatening the economic security are the direct consequences of rural ageing threatening the whole country. So, if the policymakers pay no attention the rural ageing, we will encounter serious problem in the near future.*

Keywords: *population ageing, rural ageing, social problem, Iran.*

Introduction

Statistics indicate that the global population especially who are 60 years old or more counted 962 million in 2017, more than twice as large as in 1980 when there were 382 million older people worldwide. The number of older persons is expected to double again by 2050, when it is projected to reach nearly 2.1 billion. Therefore, it is anticipated that every country will experience a sharp increase in the size of the population aged 60 years or over during these years (United Nations, 2017, p. 4). The IRAB⁴'s experts also estimate that in 21st century the global population is ageing, and most of countries will experience approximately 30 percent of old age in their own population. Researchers believe that decline in fertility and mortality rates and the increases in life expectancy has caused a majority of countries especially European ones are becoming weighted increasingly towards older age groups (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012, p. 1–2). Moreover, spatial distribution of the population is salient too. The rural population grown slowly since 1950 is now close to 3.4 billion and is expected to rise slightly and then decline to around 3.1 billion by 2050. Conversely, the urban population grown rapidly since 1950 has increased from 751 million to 4.2 billion in 2018. In other words, the people who live in urban areas increase more than rural areas. Statistics shows 55 percent of the world's population inhabits urban areas in 2018. There was 30 percent of the population was urbanized in 1950 but it will increase to 68 percent by 2050 (United

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Nations, 2018). This implies that the rural ageing brings about the number of population who are considered as agriculture producers will have been reducing in the near future. It jeopardizes not only the agricultural situation but also economic, social, and even political circumstances. As UNECE puts it:

"Rural and remote areas in many countries experience more pronounced population ageing than urban areas and subsequently, have a higher share of older residents. Lower population density and more geographically dispersed populations make it more difficult and expensive to create and maintain a comprehensive service infrastructure as common in urban areas. Consequently, rural populations have less access to services and activities and their situation may aggravate further when combined with poorer socio-economic conditions. This puts rural populations at a disadvantage compared to urban ones and can be particularly problematic for older people who may face a greater risk of social isolation, reduced mobility, lack of support and health care deficits as a result of the place in which they live (UNECE, 2017, p.1)".

Iran as one of the countries whose population is ageing must prepare to surmount the problems arising from the status quo. Population and housing census shows 74 percent of the Iranians live in the urban areas (equal to 59,146,847 people) while only the 25.94 percent inhabit rural ones (equal to 20,730,625 people) in 2016 (Statistical Center of Iran, 2018, p. 22). The ratio is predicted to reach 75.1 and 24.8 by 2021 in urban and rural areas respectively (Zanjani et al. 2016, p. 479). In addition, the data driven from Statistical Center of Iran also indicates that the elderly population has increased by 0.4 percent in five years. It was 5.5 percent in 2011 while today it amounts to 6.2 percent (Statistical Center of Iran, 2018). By and large, having reached 4.5 percent over the last 40 years on average, the Iran's older population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate. The population will quadruple until 2046. Therefore, this group experiences explosive growth more than others. The population it is expected to reach 25 percent by 2050, which is a quarter of Iran population. It causes them to wrestle with lots of problems. (Zarghami & Miezai, 2017). So, the question is that what has caused the condition? Studying Australia's population as an ageing one inhabiting up to 36 percent in rural areas by 2050, Anderson et al (2018) suggested that youth, left the rural, relocate to urban areas in order to find work and education opportunities. Conversely, the elderly move to rural areas seeking a quiet retirement or for financial reasons due to housing affordability. Using a "marginalization" conceptual lens, Studies show since there is lack of access to health care and resources to meet their needs the elderly living in rural communities are at risk (Anderson et al, 2018, p. 2). In others hand, the implementing of population policies and family planning in 1989 hastened both decrease in life expectancy and population decline, which resulted in major changes in the population pyramid up to now (Gheisarian, 2009). This means Iran population especially the elderly who are the resident of rural areas will be faced with challenges such as lack of social security, inadequate access to health care services due to lack of proper infrastructure, Social isolation and loneliness etc., though some have been facing with some of them. Furthermore, it can affect the country as a whole. So, it necessitates paying attention to the phenomenon more than past.

Literature Review

Although the study of adulthood and aging has emerged as a totally new field of study, it can fairly be argued that the field is moving forward at a great pace. We have been seeing increasing in bibliographic references, number of journals and books devoted to this broad field of study (Blackburn & Dulmus, 2007, p. vii). These attempts are called gerontology. This major is the study of old age and ageing. It has stemmed from some disciplines including psychology, biology, and sociology. Among those, Social gerontology examines social aspects of aging. It continues to explain the phenomenon. In doing so, social gerontologists have developed numerous theories to examine how people respond to the aging process. Seven theoretical perspectives including (1) social constructionist, (2) social exchange, (3) life course, (4), feminist, (5) age stratification (age and society), (6) political economy of aging, and (7) critical theory are the most commonly used theories in the social gerontology (Millier & Barrow, 2015, p. 87). However, it is important to mention that almost all of the theories pay no attention to rural ageing

in particular but generally. To be familiar with the social gerontology theories, we try to look at them in following paragraphs.

- **Social constructionism** tries to explain the social nature of phenomena and to debunk myths of naturalness and inherency (Ritzer, 2011, p. 649). Having root in Symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology, this perspective focuses on individual agency and social behavior within larger structures of society (Bengtson et al, 1997, p. S77). Using hermeneutic or interpretive methods, Social Constructionism emphasize on individual agent and social behavior within social institutions including the family, or retirement centers—and particularly on the subjective meanings of age and the aging experience in everyday life (Putney, 2005, p. 95)
- **Social exchange theory** assumes that people are rational, and their interactions are shaped by a reciprocal exchange of tangible and intangible resources like financial and emotional respectively. So, individuals seek to make a profit by calculating and subtracting the costs from the rewards (Wan & Antonucci, 2016, p. 2). Dowd (1975) says this approach examines how the elderly are able to maximize rewards and minimize the costs in their own transactions. Since the ability to benefit from an exchange depends on the resources an individual brings to an exchange, on account of older adults have fewer resources than the young, they are thus disadvantaged in the exchange. Finally, exchanges between the young and elderly decrease due to unequal resources between the two age groups. This explains why disengagement among the elderly increases (Street, 2007, p 153)
- **Life course perspective** refers to “the age-graded sequence of roles, opportunities, constraints, and events that shape the biography from birth to death. So, according to this perspective development is lifelong and no life stage can be understood in isolation from others (Johnson, 2011, p. 2). The perspective provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change. The life course consists of five principles: (1) The Principle of Life-Span Development: Human development and aging are lifelong processes, (2) The Principle of Agency; Individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance, (3) The Principle of Time and Place: The life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime, (4) The Principle of Timing: The developmental antecedents and consequences of life transitions, events, and behavioral patterns vary according to their timing in a person's life, and (5) The Principle of Linked Lives: Lives are lived interdependently and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships (Elder Jr. et al, 2003).
- **Feminist gerontology** focuses on power relations and intersecting oppressions across the life course. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on either age or gender, Feminist gerontology stresses the areas where income level and disability intersect (Lazar, 2017). “feminist gerontologists point to the value in analyzing aging from women’s life experiences, not just because they are women, but because this analysis reveals the power dynamics that contour the aging experience”(Hooyman, 2002, p. 5)
- From **Age stratification perspective** life course and historical dimensions place the individuals in the age structure of society. In the term of the first dimension, individuals at the same stage of the life course have much in common such as biological development, roles experienced by them, and the number of years behind and ahead. These people tend to differ in these very respects. Linking the biological and the social sciences, this dimension includes the age – related organic changes which affect physical and mental functions. The second dimension refers to the period of history in which the individuals live. People who are born at the same time – as a cohort – share a common historical and environmental past, present, and future. So, old age or any other stage of life is viewed as a unique point of historical time at which those age groups are standing (Riley, 1971, pp. 80 – 81).
- The **Political Economy of Aging** “attempts to explain how the interaction of economic and political forces determine to be allocated social resources, and how variations in the treatment and status of the elderly can be understood by examining public policies, economic trends, and

social structural factors” (Bengtson, 1997, p. S82). So, it can be argued that the inequality in old age mainly originates from political and economic forces which relegate elderly people to the margins of modern society by inadequate public policies. So, these theorists underscore how welfare state policies often perpetuate the social inequalities of earlier years rather than eliminate or minimize them (Street, 2007, p. 159). Therefore, the starting point for explanation of poverty among elderly people and dependent social status is the social institutions and processes which distribute resources prior to retirement. The class structure as an underlying institution, to a large extent, determines opportunities, life chances and lifelong social status at birth. On account of limited opportunities for social mobility, different cohorts of adults come to retirement with differentially distributed access to resources and therefore with different opportunities and post-retirement life chances (Walker, 1981, pp. 76 –77).

- The *critical theory* deals with social structure and order which view individual as a not willful autonomous person but social norm or “rule-bound zombies” defined as the sum of their family, work, and community roles (Luborsky & Sankar, 1993, p. 2). So, as a popular micro – level perspective, the perspective tries to understand the social meanings and self–conceptions of age and aging across cultures (Samanta, 2017, p. 9). By and large, critical theory focuses on humanistic dimensions of aging, structural components of aging; understanding subjective and interpretive dimensions of aging, processes creating practical change, and knowledge that helps people change (Hillier & Susan, 2014, p. 4).

Methodology

To analyze rural ageing, we have used both secondary data analysis and documentary one. Johnston (2014) defines secondary data analysis as the analysis of data collected by someone else for another primary purpose. So, the utilization of this existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources (p. 619). Corbin & Strauss (2008) also consider the method as a special kind of document consisting of the collected interviews or field notes of another researcher by which other researchers are able to code these materials too, employing theoretical sampling in conjunction with the usual coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 146). Documentary analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and materials (Bawen, 2009, p. 26). In doing so, we have gathered latest data and information from the different sources such statistical center of Iran, carried investigation throughout the world, official documents, etc., then appreciate contexts were extracted from them.

What is ageing?

There is a lot of definition of population ageing but most of them emphasize on biological aspect. United Nations Population Fund puts the following:

"When talking about ageing, it is essential to distinguish between population and demographic ageing as “the process whereby older individuals become a proportionately larger share of the total population” and individual ageing, the process of individuals growing older. This individual process of ageing is multidimensional and involves physical, psychological and social changes. ... The United Nations uses 60 years to refer to older people. This line, which divides younger and older cohorts of a population, is also used by demographers. However, in many developed countries, the age of 65 is used as a reference point for older persons as this is often the age at which persons become eligible for old-age social security benefits. So, there is no exact definition of “old” as this concept has different meanings in different societies"(United Nations Population Fund, 2012, P. 20).

Arshad & Ahmad Bhat (2012, p. 56), mentioned United Nations definition of an ageing society being more than 7 percent of the population is over the age of 65, describe population ageing as a decline in the proportion of children and young people and an increase in the proportion of people age 60 and over (p. 56). Baker and Spratt (1988) define ageing as a biological parameter of an organism that either alone or in some multivariate composite will, in the absence of disease, better predict functional capability at some late age, than will chronological age (Lord, 2014, p. 4). Statistical Center of Iran (2019) also clarifies the population ageing ratio as following:

$$\text{Population Ageing Ratio} = \frac{\text{people aged 65 and over}}{\text{total population}} \times 100$$

Using a biological index in "World Population Prospects", UN (2019) also refers to the people aged 65 years or over as an aged population. In this study we used this item to describe the phenomenon. So, in this study we use definition derived from Statistical Center of Iran as an instrument to measure the population ageing in rural areas.

Spatial distribution of population

Censuses conducted in Iran from 1956 to 2016 show the continuous decline in the size of rural population but in urban areas this trend is increasing in reverse. In other words, today 26 percent (20,730,625 people) of the country population involves the people who are living in rural areas and 74 percent (59,146,847) people are in the urban areas, while the census carried in 1956 shows the amounts were 69 and 31 percent respectively. So, if current trend continues to exist, we shall see most of the people leave the rural areas in order to inhabit cities. The table 1 and diagram 1 have depicted these trends in detail.

Table (1): Spatial distribution of population

| Year | Rural | | Urban | | Total |
|------|------------|---------|------------|---------|------------|
| | frequency | percent | frequency | percent | |
| 1956 | 13,001,141 | %69 | 5,953,563 | %31 | 18,954,704 |
| 1966 | 15,994,476 | %62 | 9,794,246 | %38 | 25,788,722 |
| 1976 | 17,854,064 | %53 | 15,854,680 | %47 | 33,708,744 |
| 1986 | 22,600,449 | %46 | 26,844,561 | %54 | 49,445,010 |
| 1996 | 23,237,699 | %39 | 36,817,789 | %61 | 60,055,488 |
| 2006 | 22,235,818 | %32 | 48,259,964 | %68 | 70,495,782 |
| 2011 | 21,446,783 | %29 | 53,646,661 | %71 | 75,149,669 |
| 2016 | 20,730,625 | %26 | 59,146,847 | %74 | 79,926,270 |

*Source: Statistical Center of Iran

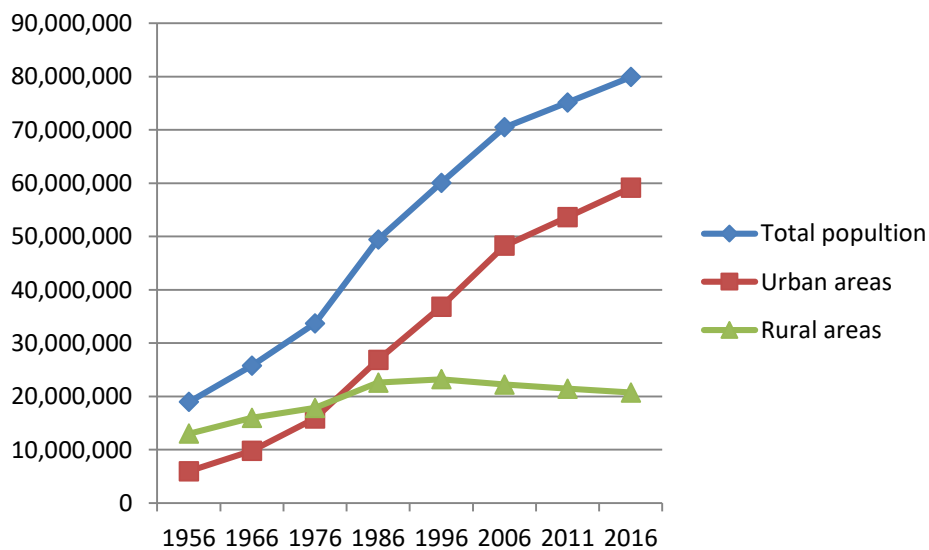


Figure (1): spatial distribution of population

Ageing trend in Iran

As the United Nations (2015) has considered Population ageing as one of the most significant trends and social transformations in the 21st century, many countries, including Iran, are subject to experience the phenomenon due to the increasing share of older persons in the population. Table 2 indicates population ageing is going up throughout the country. In 1956, the rate was 3.97 percent but today is 6.1. So, we can say within 60 years the amount has doubled. Surprisingly, since there is a difference between rural and urban areas in terms of population ageing from 1956 to 2016, it implies the elderly proportion living in rural areas is more than urban. It is absolutely against the United Nations estimating "the older population is growing faster in urban areas than in rural areas" (United Nations, 2015, p. 21). In fact, when the rate of population ageing in rural centers is 1 percent than cities the figure itself indicates the rural areas must be paid attention more than before.

Table (2): Spatial distribution of population ageing

| Rural | Urban | Country | Year |
|--------|--------|---------|------|
| 4.18 % | 3.5 % | 3.97 % | 1956 |
| 4.8 % | 3.51 % | 3.86 % | 1966 |
| 3.68 % | 3.34 % | 3.52 % | 1976 |
| 3.13 % | 2.96 % | 3.04 % | 1986 |
| 3.62 % | 3.21 % | 3.39 % | 1991 |
| 4.84 % | 3.99 % | 4.32 % | 1996 |
| 6.1 % | 4.77 % | 5.19 % | 2006 |
| 6.51 % | 5.4 % | 5.72 % | 2011 |
| 6.82 % | 5.84 % | 6.1 % | 2016 |

*Source: Statistical Center of Iran

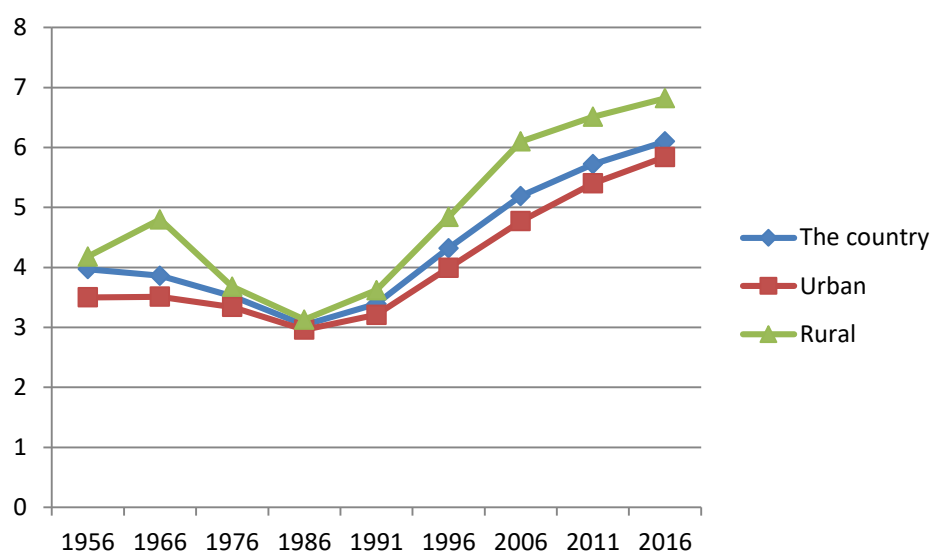


Figure (2): trend of population ageing

Reasons of Rural Ageing

Researcher depending on their context work and interests have provided divers reasons for sharp increase in rural ageing. So, it is vitally important to examine some studies to find what happened in the areas where people are getting older more than before continuously. As two researchers worked on migration and rural population ageing in Iran, Taghdisi and Ahmadi Shaporabadi (2012) have suggested that rural migration, urbanizing the rural areas, and integrating some of rural settings into urban

development are the major factors resulted in reduction of rural population, but migration is the most important factor forming the age and gender indices in rural areas. As the youth leave the rural, children, the elderly and women remain there, which leads to imbalance between the rural and urban population. It finally causes the rural areas to be populated mainly by the ageing than the urban (pp. 154–155). In other words, aged by migration, the rural areas are not able to substitute their young, active people who have migrated to urban ones (Ibid, p. 141). On the other hand, although fertility decline and expansion of life expectancy/ mortality reduction alongside the migration are treated as components causing population ageing the entire country, the high costs of living in urban areas, in comparison to rural, operate as a barrier to older population moving from rural to urban centers, which brings about the rural population ageing more than that of urban (Zarghami & Farimane, 2015, p. 160). In other countries, Carried Research to identify factors involved in the rural ageing has concluded that rural population ageing reflect an array of complex factors. The age-selective nature of rural-urban migration, upon which younger people try to leave rural centers, has caused older people abandoned behind. Furthermore, in some cases, return migration of older adults from urban cities back to their rural homes is also considered as a reality has brought about rural ageing (Heide-Ottosen, 2014, p. 7; Kikaniki, 2017, p.14).

Consequences of Rural Ageing

The findings derived from the research conducted throughout the globe suggest the rural elderly are different from the urban elderly in some respects including education level, economic condition, and access to healthcare services. They are more subject to disability by reason of doing tough and intense jobs (Mozafari et al, 2016, p. 49). Additionally, apart from leaving the rural areas in order to inhabit the urban has a negative impact on the quality of rural life on account of carrying over the needed consumption into the city; the youth migration put a great burden on the farmers. Since they have to work for many hours they are lack of enough time for leisure or participation in various social activities. In other word, what is deeply affected by the rural ageing is labor shortage (Kikaniki, 2017, p. 13). So, It militates against the agricultural development in rural areas because the young people have abandoned their own role in the farms, engaged themselves in the urban areas (Amrevurayire & Ojeh, 2016, p. 43). On the other hand, as Matanle (2014) correctly says (1) the rural ageing has placed enormous pressures on urban areas in accommodating ever rising demand for housing, infrastructure, and services.

Considered as hyper-aged societies unable to sustainably reproduce their own populations, the rural areas are lack of vitality in order to increase the rural numbers. This even leads to collapse and disappearance these centers altogether, and (2) to some extent at the expense of rural shrinkage, metropolitan centers and prefectural capitals expanded very rapidly, which results in over-crowding in some urban districts (Matanle, 2014, p. 32). In comparison to urban, since few the rural ageing people live on social security most of them are obligated to work for many years, even without retiring from their occupations (Gheisarian, 2009, p. 21). A conducted study clarifies (1) conservative views, resistance to change production modes, (2) lack of creativity, innovation, and production development, (3) reduction in productivity, (4) decline in fertility, vicious circle of rural ageing, (5) limited agriculture land falling into disuse, and (6) threatening the economic security are the direct consequences of rural ageing (Taghdisi & Ahmadi Shahporabadi, 2012). Furthermore, research findings has characterized older residents have a strong preference to age in their rural community. It implies they are dependent upon the availability of in-home care support. Therefore, it forces policymakers to provide proper services for them. However, these serviced are faced with some general challenges exacerbating meeting older resident's needs. First, Lower population density impedes increasing per capita unit costs for service delivery. Second, distance from providers in cities to rural service users effects higher travel costs, opportunity costs, and unproductive time for staff. These issues can be treated as problematic when older users don't have adequate access to public transportation as well as vital health and social care services because for age people interaction between transport and health services access is a pressing issue (Connors et al, 2013).

Conclusion

As a new phenomenon, population ageing has increased in on an unprecedented scale in Iran. Having reached 4.5 percent over the last 40 years on average, today Iran's older population is 6.1 percent. Furthermore, there is difference between rural and urban areas. While the former is 6.82 percent the latter equals to 5.84. If the trend preserves, the population will quadruple by 2046. It is expected to hasten it in rural areas on account fertility decline, increase in the youth migration to cities, and coming back to rural areas after retiring. So, the phenomenon may jeopardize these communities because they will be faced with challenges such as lack of social security, inadequate access to health care services due to lack of proper infrastructure, Social isolation and many others. On the other hand, this rural shrinkage leads to a rapid expansion of cities and over – crowding. In addition, when the young people leave the rural areas to join the prosperous centers, resistance to change production modes, lack of creativity, innovation, and production development, reduction in productivity, decline in fertility, vicious circle of rural ageing, limited agriculture land falling into disuse, and threatening the economic security are the consequences which the country has to wrestle with. So, it is necessary for policymakers to deal with this phenomenon more than before.

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