

POPULATION AGING IN NIGERIA: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL POLICY AND FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Population aging has become a major demographic change in Nigeria, driven by improvements in healthcare, declining birth rates, and increasing life expectancy. This study examined the sociological implications of population aging in Nigeria, with attention to social policy frameworks and family support systems. The research was driven by the modernization theory of aging, which explained how socio-economic transformation, urbanization, and modernization weakened family structures that historically provided care for older adults. A qualitative research design was adopted, relying on secondary data sources, including scholarly literature, government and policy documents, national demographic reports, and international aging statistics. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that family networks continued to serve as the primary support system for elderly persons; however, factors such as urban migration, economic pressures, and changing cultural values significantly reduced families' capacity to provide adequate care. The study finds that existing social policies, including pension and healthcare services, remain insufficient to meet the growing needs of the aging population, leaving many older individuals vulnerable to economic insecurity, limited healthcare access, and social isolation. The findings underscored the need for Nigeria to strengthen institutional social protection mechanisms while simultaneously reinforcing community and family-based care structures. The study concludes that Nigeria's aging population demands stronger institutional support alongside sustained family care. It recommends inclusive pension reforms, improved geriatric healthcare, and community-driven initiatives that reinforce traditional values and enhance the wellbeing of older persons.

Keywords: Population Aging, Social Policy, Family Support Systems, Elderly Care, Modernization Theory, Nigeria

Introduction

The population aging phenomenon is one of the most important demographic changes of the twenty-first century. Declining birthrates and improvements in healthcare have led to rising life expectancy and an increasing proportion of older persons within national populations. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (2023), the global population of individuals aged 65 years and above is growing faster than any other age group. This demographic transformation has far-reaching implications for social policy, healthcare systems, and family support structures.

Although population aging was historically connected with developed countries, developing nations are now experiencing related demographic shifts. In many developing regions, improvements in healthcare services and disease prevention programs have contributed to

increasing life expectancy, thereby expanding the elderly population (World Health Organization, (WHO) 2021). Sub-Saharan Africa is gradually experiencing this demographic transition, though at a slower pace compared to industrialized countries. Recent reports by the World Health Organization also highlight that age related discrimination and limited social protection remain major barriers to healthy aging in many countries (WHO, 2023).

Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, has historically maintained a youthful population structure due to high fertility rates. However, recent demographic trends suggest that the number of elderly persons is steadily increasing as life expectancy improves and mortality rates decline (National Population Commission, 2022). Consequently, population aging is emerging as a social issue that requires attention from families, communities, and policymakers.

Historically, family-based support systems have played a crucial role in caring for elderly individuals in Nigerian society. The extended family structure ensured that aging parents and relatives received financial, emotional, and social support from younger family members. Respect for elders and the moral obligation to care for aging parents remain deeply rooted in many Nigerian cultures (Oppong, 2021).

However, rapid socio-economic transformation associated with modernization, urbanization, and migration is gradually weakening these traditional support structures. Younger family members increasingly migrate to urban centers in search of education and employment opportunities, leaving elderly relatives in rural communities with limited support (Aboderin & Hoffman, 2020). Economic pressures and changing family structures further reduce the capacity of families to provide adequate care for elderly members.

The institutional social protection systems made to support older persons remain limited in Nigeria. Pension schemes primarily benefit workers in the formal sector, leaving many individuals who worked in informal occupations without financial security during old age (International Labour Organization, (ILO) 2021). These developments highlight the need for a sociological examination of population aging in Nigeria, focusing on the interaction between social policy and family support systems.

Statement of the Problem

The growing population of elderly persons presents several social and policy challenges. In developed countries, comprehensive social protection systems such as pension schemes, healthcare programs, and social assistance initiatives help address the needs of aging populations. In Nigeria, however, institutional frameworks remain limited (ILO, 2021).

The primary source of care for elderly individuals has historically been the extended family system providing financial, emotional, and physical support. However, the ability of families to maintain this role has been weakened by the socio-economic changes such as urban migration, economic hardship, and the gradual shift toward nuclear family structures (Ogunmefun & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2021).

Furthermore, many elderly individuals, particularly those who worked in informal occupations in Nigeria lack access to reliable income sources during retirement. Limited pension coverage and inadequate healthcare services worsen the vulnerability of older persons. As the number of elderly individuals continues to increase, these challenges are likely to become more pronounced (ILO, 2021).

Relatively limited attention has been given to the sociological implications of this demographic change, despite the emerging nature of population aging in Nigeria. There is therefore a need to examine how social policies and family support systems interact to address the welfare needs of elderly persons in the country.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the sociological implications of population aging in Nigeria, with particular attention to social policy frameworks and family support systems.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the emerging trend of population aging in Nigeria and its demographic implications.
2. Analyze the role of social policies in addressing the welfare needs of elderly persons in Nigeria.
3. Examine the traditional role of family support systems in providing care for elderly individuals.
4. Assess the impact of modernization and urbanization on family-based care for older persons.
5. Identify sociological challenges associated with population aging in Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of sociological literature on population aging in developing countries, particularly in the African context. While aging populations have been extensively studied in developed countries, research on aging in Africa, and specifically Nigeria, remains relatively limited.

Second, the study provides insights into the changing dynamics of family support systems. By examining how modernization and socio-economic changes affect traditional caregiving arrangements, the study highlights the need to strengthen both family and institutional support structures.

Third, the study may inform policymakers and social welfare practitioners about the emerging challenges associated with population aging. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing effective social policies that promote the wellbeing and social inclusion of elderly citizens.

Finally, the study serves as a reference for future researchers interested in demographic change, social policy development, and aging in Nigerian society.

Conceptual Clarification

Population Aging

Population aging refers to the increase in the proportion of older persons within a population. This demographic phenomenon usually occurs as a result of declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy.

Social Policy

Social policy refers to government programs and institutional arrangements aimed at improving citizens' welfare and quality of life through services such as healthcare, pensions, and social protection.

Family Support Systems

Family support systems refer to the network of relationships within families that provide emotional, financial, and physical assistance to members of the family, particularly elderly individuals who may require care and support during old age.

Literature Review

Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Globally, population aging is becoming an increasingly important social issue. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2023), the number of elderly persons worldwide is projected to double by 2050. This demographic shift has major implications for healthcare systems, social protection mechanisms, and family support structures.

In many developing regions, particularly in Africa, population aging is occurring in contexts where institutional welfare systems remain relatively limited. As a result, families continue to

play a central role in providing care and support for older persons. Scholars such as Aboderin and Hoffman (2020) argue that in many African societies, family networks serve as the primary source of social financial and emotional protection systems for elderly individuals, especially where formal welfare programs are insufficient.

Empirical Review

Several empirical studies have examined the experiences of elderly persons in Nigeria. Togonu-Bickersteth (1987) observed that elderly persons traditionally relied on extended family networks for financial and social support. However, recent studies suggest that these systems are gradually weakening. Okoye (2022) found that many elderly individuals face economic challenges due to limited pension coverage and declining family support. Ogunmefun and Isiugo-Abanihe (2021) report that migration and urbanization have reduced the availability of family caregivers, thereby affecting the level of support provided to older persons. Akinyemi and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) also indicate that population aging will increase the demand for healthcare services and social welfare programs in Nigeria. Recent studies also emphasize the growing need for policy interventions to address the challenges associated with population aging in Africa (Aboderin, 2023).

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on aging in Nigeria, several gaps remain. Many studies focus on isolated aspects of elderly welfare, such as family caregiving, healthcare access or pension systems, without examining the broader sociological relationship between demographic change, social policy, and family support systems (Okoye, 2022; Ogunmefun & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2021).

Additionally, few studies have been given to how socio-economic transformations, urbanization, migration, and modernization reshape care giving arrangements in Nigeria (Aboderin & Hoffman, 2020). There is also limited application of sociological theory to explain the changing status and welfare of elderly conditions of elderly persons.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a sociological analysis that integrates demographic change, family support systems, and social policy responses, using modernization theory as a framework.

Theoretical Framework:

Modernization Theory of Aging

This study is anchored on modernization theory of aging, which explains how the status of elderly persons declines as societies industrialize and modernize. The theory suggests that in traditional societies, older individuals often possess respected social positions, earning them respect and care, due to their control of valuable knowledge, experience, and family authority. However, modernization introduces social and economic changes—urbanization, technological advancement, and formal education—that reduce society's reliance on traditional knowledge and weaken the status of the elderly.

This change can weaken traditional family structures and reduce the level of support provided to aging individuals (Aboderin, 2023). In Nigeria, these modernization processes are reshaping family relationships and caregiving arrangements. This has also led to increased migration of younger family member to urban centers in search of employment, thereby limiting their ability to provide care for elderly relatives.

Relevance of the Theory

Modernization theory is relevant to Nigeria because it explains the changing nature of family support structures, due to rapid social and economic transformation which is weakening the traditional extended family system. Urban migration, nuclear family prevalence, and economic pressures reduce the ability of families to care for elderly members. The theory helps explain why institutional social policies are increasingly necessary.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach based on secondary data. Relevant data were obtained from academic journals, scholarly books, policy documents, government reports, and international publications related to population aging and social policy. These sources provided existing empirical and theoretical insights into the dynamics of aging population and support systems in Nigeria.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring themes and patterns relating to population aging, social policy, and family support systems. This method allowed for a systematic examination and its approach enabled a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge on the relationship between demographic change, family care giving, and institutional policy frameworks. The approach also made it possible to identify existing gaps in the literature, regarding integrated welfare strategies for addressing the needs of Nigeria's aging population.

Sociological Implications of Population Aging

Population aging in Nigeria presents a number of emerging sociological challenges that have significant implications for social policy and family support systems. As the proportion of older person increase, issues including elderly poverty, social isolation, and increased demand for healthcare services are becoming more visible in the Nigerian society (UN DESA, 2023). Many older adults face economic insecurity due to limited access to stable income after retirement. In addition to economic vulnerability, older persons increasingly experience social isolation as traditional family structures undergo transformation. Processes such as urbanization, migration, and changing socio-economic conditions have gradually weakened family support systems that historically served as the primary source of care for elderly individuals. As younger family members move to urban areas in search of employment opportunities, many older adults remain in rural communities with reduced access to consistent familial support (Ogunmefun & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2021). Furthermore, the growing elderly population underscores the need for healthcare services, which are often not adequately equipped to address the specific needs of older persons. The absence of geriatric care and limited access to affordable healthcare services further exacerbates the vulnerability of the elderly population. The combination of weakening family support systems and limited institutional social protection creates a situation in which many older persons are exposed to multiple forms of social and economic vulnerability. These developments highlight the urgent need for coordinated responses involving government institution, community organizations and families. Strengthening social policy frameworks while supporting community and family-based care systems will be essential in addressing the challenges associated with population aging in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Population aging is emerging as a significant demographic and social issue in Nigeria. This study examines the population aging in Nigeria from a sociological perspective, focusing on the relationship between social policy framework and family support system. The findings reveal that while Nigeria continues to maintain a youthful population the proportion of older adults is steadily increasing due to improvements in healthcare and declining fertility rates are increasing the number of elderly individuals.

The analysis indicates that family support systems remain the primary source of care for older persons. Extended families continue to provide emotional, physical and financial support, consistent with long standing cultural norms of responsibility (Aboderin & Hoffman, 2020; Okoye, 2022). However, traditional family support systems remain important but are weakening due to modernization, urbanization, and economic pressures. Institutional social protection is limited, leaving many elderly individuals vulnerable to economic insecurity, poor healthcare access, and social isolation. Addressing these challenges requires collaboration

between government, families, and communities. Population aging, therefore, must be understood as both a social and phenomenon, where institutional interventions are necessary to match the traditional roles of family support.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of this study, practical and effective recommendations are proposed to improve the wellbeing of older persons in Nigeria. First, there is a need to develop comprehensive social protection policies that specifically target elderly citizens. Such policies should address income security, access to healthcare, and social inclusion in order to reduce the vulnerability often experienced by older persons.

Furthermore, there should be expansion of pension systems to include informal sector workers, who constitute a significant portion of the Nigerian labour force but are often excluded from formal retirement benefits

In addition, the healthcare services should be strengthened with specialized geriatric care. This includes training healthcare professionals in age-related health issues and ensuring that medical facilities are better equipped to respond to the physical and psychological needs of older adults. There is also a need to establish community-based support programs to complement family care giving. Such initiatives, including community care centers and support networks, can provide assistance to older persons while reducing the burden placed on families.

Finally, it is essential to promote cultural awareness of respect and care for elderly persons. Public education and community engagement programs can help reinforce positive attitudes towards aging and encourage younger ones to actively support the elderly ones in the society.

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