

Change of the State of Family in Aging Society

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How will an aging society change the state of the family? What do you think about nursing care issues? Share your views with us through citing your country's institutions.

Aging is an unavoidable phenomenon affecting every single one of us, provided that we are healthy and lucky enough to survive the trials and tribulations of adulthood and grow old. Comparing life expectancies in 1971 and 2015, the life expectancies in Hong Kong have increased from 67.8 years for males to 81.2 years, while that for females have increased from 75.3 to 87.3.¹

So, how will aging change the state of the family, particularly the nuclear family? For those without children, 26.3% of the older population² who are in need of daily assistance received support from their spouses. For those with children, it is crucial to understand the impact of the aging society on individual families which may vary significantly in relation to the following variables, among others:

- (1) whether there are children who are willing to help;
- (2) whether family members can approach the problems positively;
- (3) whether the aged party or parties are physically and mentally healthy;
- (4) whether the family members live together in the same household;
- (5) whether the aged party is economically and financially independent.

Assuming that the family is a happy one satisfying criteria (1)-(5), aging may mean that family members such as adult children have to help their parents more by providing different levels of social support, such as driving their parents to work, performing housework, shopping for goods, providing emotional support, and studying information on new treatment and technology. However this role, though burdensome, is sometimes met with a smile by filial children who are glad for the opportunity to repay their parents' love and affection with words of comfort and acts of service.

Studies through a gender perspective of aging will find that aging often impacts women more harshly than man. According to professors Lee and Kwok of Lingnan University, who carried out a survey of 390 elderly persons³, compared to elderly man, elderly women are "less likely to live with

¹ Census Department, Hong Kong Government

² Census Department, Hong Kong Government

³ William Keng Mun Lee PhD & Kwok Hong-kin PhD (2005) Older Women and Family Care in Hong Kong: Differences in Filial Expectation and Practices, *Journal of Women & Aging*, 17:1-2, 129-150, DOI: 10.1300/J074v17n01_10

adult children”; and because of lower income in the past, more likely to have financial problems, and lack support. Indeed, I have heard stories from friends and relatives repeatedly that women in their 70s and 80s are still expected to perform the traditional gender role of caregiver and expected to cook and clean for their husbands, and care for their grandchildren when their sons and daughters are away at work.

Day-care facilities are provided by the government and some religious-based organizations, such as Caritas, enable the elderly to explore new hobbies and make new friends. Residential nursing-care institutions, both private and public, are popular choices for young adults today. The long waiting time for some of the public elderly homes of around 3 years has been associated with an increasing number of elderly applicants who have died (5,568 in 2014⁴) before setting foot in their new home for the first time. Despite the establishment of a specialized Elderly Commission, and the statutory licensing scheme supported by legislature, the level of private health care in Hong Kong is inconsistent. Indeed, many of those whom I visited at elderly homes as a volunteer seem to feel lonely and sometimes trapped, betrayed not only by their ailing bodies but by their family members, who entrusted them to these private nursing homes, believing that they would be taken care of, but end up with insufficient staff and medical care.

Many Hong Kong residents, myself included, were disheartened and outraged to learn that recently, residents in a Tai Po home were left unclothed or semi-unclothed on an open-air podium for up to 90 minutes while waiting for staff to take them to shower. This raises the question; how many elderly members are currently being silently abused and neglected in elderly homes, and what can we do to help them?

There is a Chinese saying: “Having an old person in your family is akin to having a precious treasure”. Rather than rebelling against the traditional Confucianism notions of “filial piety”, and sending their increasingly needy parents off to homes, young adults can choose to care for their parents by living with them or visiting them more often. Apart from providing discounts for visiting Disneyland for the elderly, the government should provide more training and support to encourage adult children to be more responsive to their parents’ needs. Together, we can work to ensure that the elderly in our society, who have worked so hard for most of their lives, can meet the challenges in the next phase of life with courage and dignity!

⁴ “Challenges of population aging” (December 2015), Research Brief Issue No. 1 of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong

