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Al-Qālam القلم

P-ISSN: 2071-8683; E-ISSN: 2707-0077

Volume 29, Issue, 2, 2024

<http://alqalamjournalpu.com/>

An Islamic Perspective of the Challenges of Older People in Nigeria

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Abstract

KEYWORDS:

Islam, perspective, challenges, older, Nigeria

Date of Publication:

26-12-2024



Late childhood is accompanied by multifaceted problems in Nigeria. Hence, the challenges cut across all facets of life including spiritual, social and economic aspects. This paper therefore addresses these challenges using the provisions of Islam on the care for aged as a recipe for a way out. It assesses these challenges with the theoretical explanation of the duties of individuals and society to the aged. The paper advocates compliance with the dos and don'ts of Islam on the rights of older people and recommends the dire need for Nigerian government to introduce policies that would enhance social support to the elderly.

Introduction

Ageing is defined in the Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary as the process of growing old.¹ The definition of United Nations on the ageing is that it refers to those aged 60 or older despite the fact that there is no consensus on the acceptable definition as regards the precise number of years that depicts ageing.² The period embodies different changes experienced by a man over time. Ageing is a natural and a stage that cannot be reversed but accompanied by challenges and opportunities.³ Consequently, it becomes a global phenomenon that is receiving global attention from various governments.

It is important to state that remarkable efforts have been made globally to urge governments to intensify efforts towards improvement of the standard of living of older people in the society. This is no unconnected to the giant strides made by them in additiv

value to the national and communal development. The outcome of the first World Ageing Assembly held in 1982 as well as the second World Ageing Assembly in 2002 and the African Union Policy Framework serves as basis for promulgation of different policies on the rights of older people in the society.⁴

It is essential to affirm that the enthusiasm of the Nigerian government on the ageing as a social problem started in 1982 during the first World Assembly on ageing.⁵ However, it was in 1992 that the country keyed into the programme when the serving Minister of Health during the period led a delegation of the Federal Government of Nigeria to the international conference on ageing in Montreal, Canada. Consequently, the FEC constituted an Inter-ministerial Committee (IMC) comprising of Ministers of Health, Employment, Culture and Tourism as well as Labour and Productivity on aging. The committee was mandated to work on a Plan of Action on active Aging. Asagba recorded that every ministry made an action plan but national plan was not unveiled due to the lack of fund.⁶

In Africa especially Nigeria,⁷ ageing is very challenging to various governments as demonstrated in their inability to pay regular pensions to the civil servants who have served their lands meritoriously in various capacities. In addition, various governments cannot provide social services particularly health facilities to cater for the population of older people. In spite of the continuous growth of the number of aged people, the need for making provision for long-term care is important especially for women who live longer. Yet, aged people have multifaceted challenges in Nigeria. These challenges cut across all spheres of life including spiritual, social, and economic and health. However, Muslims hold that there is no stone unturned in the Glorious Qur'ān because of their firm belief in its sacredness. Thus, they find it compelling to explore the Book with a view to unfold its provisions on every lingering matter in order to find lasting solution to it. It is therefore essential to highlight the challenges facing the aged so that the teachings of Islam on the handling of the elderly people will be unfolded.

The Challenges of Older People in Nigeria

There are multifaceted challenges confronting the elderly in Nigeria. However, these challenges are not peculiar to the country but general among the developing countries. Daramola, et.al held that there are three basic challenges facing the elderly people in Nigeria. They identify poverty, suffering from chronic diseases and elder abuse as problems that preclude the older people from enjoying the remaining part of life.⁸ The first, which is poverty, is noticeable because it affects way of life due to reduction of earning power and low purchasing power. Poverty is very common among old people and is intensified by the discrimination in employment and the lack of appropriate social protection promoted on age-based. Revealing the extent of poverty among the older people in Nigeria especially the pensioners, a female participant in the research conducted by Abonyi Sunday lamented the meagerness of pension and delayment of the payment as follows:

“My pension is very meager and does not come when I need it; if I had relied on it, I would have died long ago; I just regard it as a mere allowance and that is why I am struggling’. I was not paid my initial pension for seven years and this really made my situation miserable and poverty everywhere in my life. This is unfair.”⁹

The poverty among older persons is attributable to low income, as observed earlier, as well as other factors like health, education, and labor market opportunities. Thus, poverty becomes an issue with many dimensions and probable causes that include: low income, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of financial planning, lack of support from children/family or community, and lack of intervention from the government.¹⁰

Hence, many Nigerian senior citizens are plunged into anxiety and depression instead of enjoying the fruits of their labors after retirement.¹¹ In fact, the only welfare package enjoyed by the elderly from the Nigerian government is pension and it can be benefitted only by those who worked and retired as civil servants while the elderly ones who never worked in the sector cannot benefit from the gesture. They therefore depend on their family or live in languidness.

In addition, prevalence of chronic diseases is also a noticeable challenge among the elderly. Thus, it increases utilization of health care and increases financial burdens. The burgeoning challenge associated with the health care among the elderly people is alarming in Nigeria. In contrast to what is obtainable in the developed countries, health care is accessed via public health facilities and nursing homes equipped by the government in the developed countries. For instance, older adults have a frequency of primary care visit of 50% hospital consultation, 80% home care services and 90% of nursing home bed in United States.¹² However, geriatric medical services are not given priority and patronized in Nigeria due to many reasons. The old people suffer different forms of ill health and many of them do not visit hospitals due to the long distance, poor mobility, transport fare, long period for booking appointments at the healthcare, low provider-patient ratio, high cost of the drugs prescribed by the expert as well as the charge for clinical card. Thus, they prefer alternative medicine to cure the age-related diseases that include hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, trachoma, cataract blindness and many others. The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) covers basically formal sector workers while a significant number of elderly who never worked in the sector were not attended to. Consequently, the families of the senior citizens bear the substantial burden. The ill health therefore becomes a source of worry and stress.

Elder abuse also gains momentum as a major social problem in many African countries including Nigeria. In other words, abuse of vulnerable old people is not a new phenomenon in the country, likewise other parts of the world. Older persons who should be dignified, free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse, now experience different forms of abuse. Elderly abuse is defined as the threat or infliction of harm whether physically in the form of beating or psychologically in the form of mentally or verbally terrorizing a person who has attained the age of 60 years.¹³ In fact, the rate of the menace cannot be determined in Nigeria but it exists. Modernization and industrialization have been identified as factors creating the gap that leads to the disrespect and abuse of elders in Nigeria today.¹⁴ On the other hand, Ajomale blamed cultural practices and structural neglect of the elderly. In his view, structural causes of abuse refer to the failure of the government to introduce implementable policies that can cater for the old.¹⁵

In the submission of Victor, the Nigerian family values premised on love and empathy are gradually being replaced by materialism and abandonment, which account for insecurity as well as increased physical or psychological abuse or neglect of elderly.¹⁶ The menace, which is considered as a taboo in African country because the cultural traditions accord esteemed regard for older people, is gaining momentum.

Specifically, the survey carried out in Ekiti state unveiled that about 42% of elders had never been subjected to any form of abuse while over 58% of the elders had been subjected to a form of abuse or the other with abandonment and neglect topping the list (60.9%), financial abuse (41.6%), physical abuse (37.2%), and sexual abuse (32.1%). Emotional abuse was associated with women that aged 70's and abandonment with low level education, good health and living alone was associated with men in their 80's.¹⁷

Many researchers have also viewed that development of implementable policies is one of the major challenges confronting the country. Although Nigerian government has developed various policies to improve the standard of living of individuals in the country and shaping their well being, the welfare of the older is not the overarching interest of the Nigerian government.¹⁸ Thus, there is no functional national policy on the care and welfare of the senior citizens. Admitting this, Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs identified challenges of ageing in Nigeria to encapsulate the lack of policies and experienced human resources to respond to the challenges of the ageing population. For instance, it used to be mandatory for the pensioners to appear in person for collection of their pension without minding the state of their health. They often collapse and die in the process of queuing up under the conditions that are not favourable. Sometimes they pay a kickback to incite the managers of their files as well as their accounts so that they can attend to them swiftly.

Also noted as one of the challenges being experienced by older people is social isolation despite the fact that the lack of isolation is very important for an improved living and the risks associated with the social menace.¹⁹ The risks of social isolation include depression, anxiety, disorder, suicide²⁰, deprivation of people the choices and opportunities to escape from poverty and deny them a voice to claim their rights.²¹ Social distance, defined as the distancing of an individual from older persons and their well being, is therefore associated with many detrimental effects. This danger grows as a result of the increase of the aging population. The evidence also abounds that social isolation has been identified as a factor contributing to different health challenges including heart disease, health decline, and decreasing physical activities.²²

One of the challenges of elderly people in Nigeria is also difficulty experienced in the course of participating in the religious activities. Some elderly Muslim people, whose offspring are not affluent to make provision for either car to convey their parents to mosque or give them transport fare, find it difficult to observe Friday congregational *Jumu'ah* prayer due to the long distance to be covered before reaching the mosque. Thus, some miss the religious exercise. Also constituted a challenge is their inability to observe Ramadan fasting due to the agedness or ailment propelled by the age.

Lack of stable income is also conceived as part of the social challenges experienced by old people in Nigeria. The old people engage in casual labouring, begging or hawking in order to survive except a few people who receive pension as a result of their retirement from the government sector or those worked with private sector that is eligible for contributory pension.

In the area of housing, the elderly people in Nigeria mostly live under the care of their family members because there is no shelter provided by the government. In addition, the rate of unemployment in the country that has increased drastically exposes the elderly to suffering due to the fact that the children are victims of the search for white collar. Lack of water for older people especially in rural areas in Nigeria is also not uncommon. Thus,

older people resort to contaminated water because of long distances to be covered in order to fetch portable water.

Attitude of Nigerian Government towards Older People in the Country

The African continent has the lowest rate of adults aged 60 and older among all regions in the world. Still, the number of older Africans is anticipated to triple between 2020 and 2050. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, has an elderly population growth rate of 3.0%.²³ The growth rate is employed because the last population and housing census was conducted in 2006. It is however presumed that the elderly population in Nigeria will be the world's third-largest by 2050.²⁴ The situation of older persons in most parts of the world is precarious and it makes one to consider it as a conspiracy by the people manning the affairs of government at all levels targeted at punishing the elderly people.²⁵ This therefore suggests that the increase in the number of older people in Nigeria is associated with extreme poverty, socioeconomic inequality, the epidemic, and a decline in the traditional care and support of older adults as observed earlier.²⁶

Olabiya observed that many Nigerian retirees and some other African countries' retirees live no longer up to 10-20 years after their retirement from service and the short life span after the exit from various social services is attributable to their inability to access their entitlements to sustain livelihood and other social demands.²⁷

In addition, many scholars have underlined the neglect of the Nigerian government on the care and support of older adults and condemned the absence of a robust and implementable national policy on the welfare of older Nigerians.²⁸ For instance, Dokpesi lamented the indifferent attitude of the government to the care of older people since the country's independence and uncovered that the country's aging population is insignificant compared to the total population of the country.²⁹ In the same vein, Togonu-Bickersteeth and Akinyemi observed that the lack of a functional national policy on aging implies the lackadaisical and careless attitude of the nation for older people.³⁰ The dons argued that the country needs to incorporate aging issues into diverse developmental agendas, which would then result in committing actual resources to aging issues. In his reaction to the government's attitude towards older people, Osai Ojihho submitted:

Older people have been ignored in the Northeast and deprived of aid provision. He held that inclusion implies holding the rights of people with high esteem especially those with different needs. He submitted that the older people are treated by the government as an afterthought.³¹

The implication of the above statement is that the care for the aged is carried out via informal system. In other words, there is no social security and this makes the segment of population vulnerable. It is reported that Amnesty International interrogated older people from 17 camps in Borno State and none of them expressed satisfaction over the assistance as an older person. The old people were treated as a "burden" and they were given neither enough food nor medicine. Others submitted that they could not access essential medication. Many older women in particular face further challenges as they care for grandchildren whose parents were killed, abducted, or detained by Boko Haram or the Nigerian military.³²

It is important to note that Nigeria passed the National Senior Citizens Centre Act 2017, which established the National Senior Citizens Centre (NSCC) in Abuja. The objectives of the centre include identification of the various needs of the aged people, development

and implementation of programmes as well as schemes to attend to the needs. Surprisingly, the NSCC has not achieved any of its spelt-out objectives. In addition, little was done in the implementation of the legislative enactment until 2021 when former President Buhari approved a N2.5 billion take-off grant for it. He also approved the establishment of National Senior Citizens Centre in accordance with section 16 (2) (d) of the Nigerian 1999 constitution that charges the states to make adequate provision for social services for the elderly in the society in order to enhance the quality of living of senior citizens.³³

It is however interesting to note that President Tinubu ratified the protocol on human and peoples' rights on the rights of older persons in Africa on 23rd Oct, 2023. The Older Persons (Rights and Privileges) Bill considers the rights and privileges of older persons and seeks to halt discrimination against them. It establishes justice and equal protection before the law, right to make decision, protection against discrimination in unemployment, social protection, protection from abuse and harmful traditional practices, protection of older women, provision of incentives to family members that give care and support to the older people, provision of residential care, support for older persons taking care of vulnerable children, protection of older persons with disabilities, protection of older persons in conflict and disaster situations, provision of access to health services, access to education, participation in recreational activities, access to infrastructure, development of awareness on ageing and preparation for older age, provision of national data on older persons and etc. Despite the fact that the Presidents ratified the protocol in 2023, no concrete step has been taken to ameliorate the suffering of older people in the country. The senior citizens are yet to have access to all the rights promulgated in the acts.

The Care for the Older People in Islamic Teachings

The Qur'an depicts stages of human development and affirms old age as the last stage (Q40:76). The Book portrays the stage with weakness and white hair (Q39:54) as well as the demeaning part of life (Q16:70).

It is important to state that Islam protects dignity of human beings in all these stages since birth. The honor bestowed on man is emphatically stressed in many verses of the Qur'an especially Q17:70 which unequivocally state that every human being irrespective of the race, colour, tribe and age is ennobled. This therefore implies that human beings deserve reverence in every developmental stage but the good and virtues embedded by him would influence the respect received by him. This position of Islam on the care for all is epitomized by two daughters of a righteous aged man who responded to Prophet Musa's enquiry about the reason why they could not water. They replied that they could not water until the shepherds take away (their sheep) from the water, and our father is a very old man" (Q28: 23). It is interesting to note that the female children burdened not their father because of their understanding that the elderly people deserve care especially parents. In this regard, the Qur'an 17: 23-24 says:

And your Lord has enjoined that you serve not (any) but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either of them or both attain old age with you, say not to them "Ugh" nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word. And be submissive to them with compassion and say: O Lord! Have mercy on them as they nurtured me when I was little

The above quoted verses urge children to be righteous to the parents especially when they grow older. The emphasis made by the Qur'an on that stage is an indication that the elderly people are in need of kindness as well as humanitarian services. The link of extension of benevolence to them with the faith and worship underscores prominence of the goodness to them. Commenting on the verses, Tabari writes:

إِذَا بَلَغَا عِنْدَكَ مِنَ الْكِبَرِ مَا يُبُولَانِ فَلَا تَتَفَذَّرْهُمَا وَلَا تَقُلْ لَهُمَا أُفٍّ حِينَ تُمِيطُ عَنْهُمَا الْخَلَاءَ
وَالْبَوْلَ كَمَا كَانَا يُمِيطَانِيهِ عَنْكَ صَغِيرًا.

When they reach old age with you to the extent that they mess up via passage of urine, never you turn away with disgust from them and say “Ugh” while cleansing the restroom and urine as they used to cleanse it when you were little

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In the commentary of Al-Ma‘ālim, Al-Baghawi explains:

لِنْ لَهُمَا حَتَّى لَا تَمْتَنِعَ عَنْ سَيِّئِ أَحَبَّاءُ مِنَ الشَّفَقَةِ

Be lenient with them so that you will not deprive them of the affection they love³⁵

The view of Al-Qurtabi is also not dissimilar to the above explication offered by the above exegetes. He holds:

خص حالة الكبر لأنها الحالة التي يحتاجان فيها إلى بره لتغيير الحال عليهما بالضعف والكبر،
فألزم في هذه الحالة من مراعاة أحوالهما أكثر مما ألزمه من قبل³⁶

The old age was specifically mentioned because it is a situation they need his affection due to the change of condition as a result of weakness and old age. It is therefore compelling to pay attention to their conditions more than before.

The Muslim jurists therefore agreed unanimously that it is one of the duties of the children towards parents to assist them financially. This is evident in the hadith of Jābir bn ‘Abdullāh that a man lodged complaint to the Prophet that he has money and children while his father was in need of his money. The Prophet answered: You and your wealth belong to your father.³⁷

This position of Qur'an is not unconnected to the natural love of living eternally in human being. It therefore calls for demonstration of love to them. In fact, Islam considers longevity as a virtue bestowed on the chosen servants. Abu Hurayrah reports: The best among you is he who lives longer and engages in righteous acts³⁸.

Thus, Prophet Muhammad submitted in the report of Al-'Ash'arī that it constitutes part of showing respect to Allah to accord respect to the aged Muslim. The implication of this is that the stage is held with high esteem and displaying carelessness to them individually or collectively is against the teaching of Islam. In another tradition, the Prophet says: “He who venerates not the elderly and shows not clemency to the young one is not part of us”.³⁹ In his remark on this hadith, Al-Badr stated that it signifies that the violator of the teaching ceases to be on the path of the Prophet.⁴⁰ He furthered in his exposition saying that the respect advocated by Islam is not limited to the aged Muslims but to all human beings because Islam seeks to protect their right as well.⁴¹

Manifesting the teachings of Islam on the care for the elderly, ‘Umar bn Khaṭṭāb gave tax exemption to an aged non-Muslim, who was not buoyant to pay *jizyah*, and ratified payment of a stipend to him from the public treasury.⁴² It is also recorded that ‘Umar bn ‘Abdu’l-‘Azīz built assisted living facilities for the aged people who had no means to take care of themselves.⁴³

In the kind gesture of Islam, it gives concession to the old people on the acts of worships. For instance, it relaxed the obligation of fasting and prescribed redemption for the aged during Ramadan (Q2:184). It also allowed them to observe prayer while sitting if standing will be burdensome or observe two prayers together.⁴⁴ Performance of *tayammum* is also legislated instead of *wuḍū’* if difficulty is experienced on it. Hajj by proxy was also institutionalised to take care of the aged.

According to Muhammadu’l-Wāṣil, extending righteousness and care to the elderly people, according respect to them, fulfilling their needs, solving their problems, providing aid to them and relieving them of the difficulties guarantees divine blessings.⁴⁵ He quoted Prophet Muhammad saying: “You shall be victorious via rendering assistance to the feeble”.⁴⁶ He contended that the elderly people constitute a vast number of the weak people in the society because weakness of the body is integral in the old age. There might be shrivelling of the skin and exsiccation, hearing loss, refractive error and many others in the organs of the body. He held further that the stage is associated with changes in the colour of the body and changes in the vertebrae at the top of the spine. Thus, urgent efforts need to be taken to ensure that the elderly people have substantial financial security during the period so that they can enjoy their rights.

Tackling the Challenges from Islamic Lens

Having highlighted the teachings of Islam on the elderly care, it is imperative to explore its teachings on how to tackle the challenges of older people in Nigeria as well in order to nip the menace to the bud.

On the issue of poverty that is rampant among the older people in Nigeria especially those living in the rural area, the Qur’ān does not shy away from affirming the natural law of uneven distribution of resources among human beings (Q43:32). It therefore calls on the affluent people to extend kindness to the downtrodden masses to bridge the gap created by the nature. In fact, it regards poor people as the first category of people to benefit from *Zakāh* (Q9:60) and those that deserve to receive *Sadaqah* (Q2:271), among other charitable acts. Therefore, the elderly people are not exempted from accessing the righteous acts. Indeed, they deserve preferential treatment during the disbursements. This is evident in the instruction given by the Prophet (SAW) to the companions that the elderly people should be given water and served chewing stick before others.⁴⁷ In addition, Islamic state is expected to cater for the elderly who cannot work as a result of the old age. This was demonstrated by ‘Umar bn Khattab who enjoined his chief accountant to allocate a certain portion of wealth to an aged person, found begging at the door step. He considered abandonment of elderly during his administration as a form of cheating, saying⁴⁸

فوالله ما أنصفناه إذا أكلنا شبيبته

The ill-health, that is also common among the elderly people, is not unrecognised by Islam. The Qur’an affirms that the stage requires attention because of the feebleness of the body and diminishing state of health. It therefore enjoins children to be considerate in

the treatment of their parents (Q17:23). The implication of this is that the children are enjoined to cater for the needs of the parents including taking them to the clinics for medical check-up when the need arises.

On the elderly abuse, Islam advocates fair treatment of the elderly and calls on all to revere them, show humility and respect while addressing them. The Prophet of Islam reported that it is antithetic to the principles of Islam to humiliate them and even considers it as an act capable of bringing Muslims out of the fold of Islam.⁴⁹ The hadith of Anas also establishes that shunning domestic violence against them be it financial abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, or physical abuse is capable of elongating life span of the person that ignores those acts. Condemning the acts of demeaning and cursing them, the Prophet declared:

من الكبائر شتم الرجل والديه فقالوا كيف يشتم قال يشتم الرجل فيشتم أباه وأمه⁵⁰

It constitutes part of the grave sins that a child pours abuse on his parents. They (the companions) enquired, how could he pour the abuse? He abuses a man who in turn abuses his father and mother

Thus, ill-treatment of parents, harming them and neglecting them constitutes one of the major sins that a Muslim must avoid. Hence, the Prophet warns:

The major sins are: ascription of partners to Allah, disrespect of parents, murdering of a soul and taking false oath.⁵¹

Muslim children are therefore interdicted to cause any inconvenience to their parent, let alone insult them. They are also charged to observe their manner in addressing other parents, for any of their insult towards them is tantamount to demean their parents.⁵² Showing compassion and respect towards them is therefore one of the important elements of Islamic conduct. Prophet Muhammad states unequivocally: “He who fails to show tenderness to the young and respect to the elderly is not among us”.⁵³

Social isolation, which is also enlisted as one of the challenges bewildering the elderly, is not unattended to by Islam. The religion cautions against resentment of the elderly and calls for exercise of restraint.

As for the spiritual challenge, Islam is a religion that only imposes what a man can bear. In other words, a man is free from obligation of what he cannot bear. Therefore, Islam prescribes observance of *Zuhr* prayer in lieu of it. They are to also feed sixty people during Ramadan fasting as atonement for the missed fasting as well.

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discourse that Islam regards agedness as one of the stages of human development that leads to withdrawal of strength, ability and physical beauty as a form of test to achieve spiritual excellence. Hence, the elderly people are granted high status in Islam and every human being is urged in Islamic teachings to embody the characteristics of respecting them, treating them with kindness and helping them to bear difficult burdens. It is also important to note that the Qur’anic verses laid emphasis on kindness to them during the period from the children because they are the closest relatives to the aged. However, this does not imply that it is a sole responsibility of the children to bear the burdens of providing care to the parents especially during the period when

resources of the children are very lean as said earlier. It is therefore imperative to state that the challenges of the aged are addressed in Islam as demonstrated in its teachings. In line with its philosophy, this paper recommends that a course on aging in accordance with the teachings of should be taught as one of the General Studies (compulsory) courses in the tertiary institutions as well as other levels of education. The states should also strategize on how to implement fully the rights of the aged people to social security and allocate required resources for its achievement.

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