

## Aging and the future ahead

Mohammad Rahmani Zarvandi\*

\*Department of Islamic Jurisprudence, Faculty of Specialized Jurisprudence, Al-Mustafa International University, Qom, Iran.

\*Correspondence should be addressed to Mr. Mohammad Rahmani Zarvandi; Email: m.zarvandi2@gmail.com

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The population of the elderly in Iran already is 8 million and is rapidly increasing. Aging is a phenomenon with cultural, social, political, economic and religious dimensions. This phenomenon can be studied from various viewpoints, some of which are discussed here.

According to the head of the Department of Elderly in the Ministry of Health, based on the dominant practice in Iran, old age is equal to suffering from sickness, walking by the help of crutches, sitting on wheelchairs, and lying on the hospital bed. On the contrary, old age can be recognized as a time of vitality, efficiency and action.

Numerous pieces of news, statistics and reports have been published about the current situation of the elderly. But most of them bear negative and disappointing points. Furthermore, such reports do not propose a comprehensive and practical solution to overcome the elderly's problems.

Old people have a special place in the Iranian and Islamic culture. Old writings have many points about the importance of old age. For example, in Qabusnameh, which is a book containing suggestions on politics and society management, the issue of aging versus youth has been addressed. The author of this book has paid due attention to the value of aging.

In the Iranian culture, the elderly have an important place in social communication. In this culture, the management of affairs and the administration of society without the intervention of the elderly is impossible. The available proverbs in this regard further confirm this claim: "From the blessings of the elderly, there is a world of abandonment"; "The old manages, the young fights".

Also, in the Islamic culture, the elderly have a valuable place. In his famous book, Jericho Zidane writes, "Muslims from the beginning honored the elderly and whenever they wanted to consult somebody and people were equal in all aspects, the oldest became the head."

The Holy Quran regards Abraham, Sha'yb and Ya'qub as the elderly. In other words, they are considered as "Sheikh". They were prophets who were responsible for the leadership of the people and society. The Holy Qur'an, in the description of Prophet Zakaria, used the term "shaib" to mean old age. Therefore, the Qur'an does not have a negative view toward aging. Rather, it is a natural course in the lives of individuals, hence it is good to use it in worship and evolution.

Imam Ali (AS) also paid attention to an old blind man and laid down rules to help them. This narrative is a very important document for community leaders to come up with suitable plans for dealing with the elderly.

On the other hand, old age has various physical and mental harms. In a country like Japan which has a large population of old people, attempts are made to reduce harms and promote health via exercise, recreation and work.

Social harms are more important than physical or mental damages. In addition to biological aspects, Old age affects social life, family and relationships with others. These changes can create a phenomenon called "social exclusion." After sixty years of age, humans enter a new stage of life with a lot of experience, which should be utilized in a proper way.

According to some statistics, elderly people account for eight to ten percent of the population. They are national capital given the investments the society has made to increase their skills and experience.

If there are eight million elderly people in Iran, and at least four million of them are employed, they will be excluded from contribution to society after retirement, hence their lack of contribution to GDP. Therefore, the elite of the society should study aging and propose some plans to maximize the useful contribution of the elderly to the society. In this process, the responsibilities of people over 60 years of age should be redefined. Some of the viable solutions include

establishing a foundation for the elderly, proposing suitable laws for old age, asking for the elderly's participation in social issues, providing conditions for the elderly's involvement in various types of entertainment for their leisure time, suggesting jobs that are suitable for old people, and making attempts to prevent or treat lethal diseases among the elderly. The developed plans should be in line with the social and cultural demands of Iran rather than alien cultures. In designing plans for the elderly, it is of course incumbent to utilize the experiences of other countries too.

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