

Demography of Ageing in India

Introduction

Demography refers to the statistical study of human populations — their size, structure, distribution, and changes over time. The demography of aging in India refers to the study of the growing elderly population in India — how many older persons there are, where they live, what their characteristics are, and how this population is changing over time.

India is currently undergoing a significant demographic transition — with a rapidly growing elderly population that is placing new demands on families, communities, and government systems. Understanding the demography of aging is the first step toward effective policy planning and social work intervention. Understanding the demography of ageing — who the elderly are, how many there are, and where they live — is essential for social work practice and policy planning.

1. Size and Growth of the Elderly Population

Data from the **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) India Ageing Report 2023** shows that India's current elderly population (aged 60 and above) stands at **approximately 153 million** and is expected to reach a staggering **347 million by 2050**. According to the UNFPA's India Ageing Report 2023, the **share of elderly persons** is estimated to **grow from 10.5% in 2022 to 20.8% by 2050**, and the **decadal growth rate** of the elderly population is **currently estimated at 41%**.

As per the PIB report citing the **Technical Group on Population Projections (TGPP)**, India's elderly population is projected to reach **230 million by 2036**, representing a profound societal transformation. By 2036, nearly **one in seven** Indians will be aged 60 years or older.

The projected growth of the "**oldest old**" — **the population aged 80 and above** is expected to grow at a rate of around **279% between 2022 and 2050**, with a predominance of widowed and highly dependent very old women.

UNFPA projects that by **2046**, the elderly population will **likely surpass** the population of **children aged 0 to 15 years** in India.

2. Sex Ratio Among the Elderly

The elderly population in India shows a distinct gender composition. The sex ratio for the elderly aged 60 and above in India stands at **1,065 females per 1,000 males** — **higher in urban areas (1,084)** than in **rural areas (1,055)** — indicating that women outlive men.

By 2036, the elderly segment will become increasingly feminine as per improved sex ratio. The UNFPA India warns this will lead to a high concentration of widowed, socio-economically vulnerable women needing specialized social safety.

Women constitute 58% of the elderly population, and out of these, **54% are widows**, making widowed elderly women one of the most vulnerable demographic groups requiring social work intervention.

3. Rural-Urban Distribution

Around **71% of elderly Indians** reside in **rural areas**, while **only 29% live in urban centres**, creating significant challenges in healthcare accessibility and social support services.

This rural concentration is important for social workers, as rural elderly people face greater barriers — limited transport, fewer hospitals, and weaker social protection networks.

4. Regional Disparities

Ageing is not uniform across India. There are stark regional differences reflecting different stages of demographic transition.

Southern states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh already have a high proportion of elderly people, similar to developed countries. Kerala is expected to see its elderly population surge from 13% in 2011 to 23% by 2036, making it the state with the oldest population.

In contrast, Uttar Pradesh has a relatively younger population, with the elderly segment projected to grow from 7% in 2011 to 12% by 2036.

States reporting higher fertility rates, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, expect to see an increase in the share of the elderly population between 2021 and 2036, but the level will remain lower than the Indian average. Most states in the southern region, along with Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, reported a higher share of elderly population than the national average in 2021, a gap expected to widen by 2036.

5. Dependency Ratio

The Longitudinal Ageing Study of India (LASI) estimated the overall dependency ratio at 62 dependents per 100 working-age individuals, indicating rising economic and caregiving pressures on the productive age group.

This ratio signals a growing burden on the working-age population and highlights the urgency of social security systems, pension schemes, and community-based elder care.

Conclusion

India stands at a critical juncture in its demographic transition. The rapid growth of its elderly population — projected to reach 347 million by 2050 — presents immense

challenges for healthcare, social security, and community care. The LASI survey and UNFPA Ageing Reports provide valuable data to guide evidence-based social work practice and policy. Social workers must be equipped to understand and respond to the unique and diverse needs of India's ageing population, keeping in mind the dimensions of gender, region, and socioeconomic vulnerability.