

Explain the Power and Status of Older Persons

Introduction

Power and status are two important dimensions of social life. For older persons, both of these change significantly as they age. In traditional societies, the elderly were respected and held high authority. However, in modern societies, their power and status have been declining due to various social, economic, and cultural changes. Understanding the power and status of older persons is essential in gerontology and social work practice.

Meaning of Power and Status

Power refers to the **ability to influence others, make decisions, and control resources**.

Status refers to the **position or rank a person holds in society** — the respect, prestige, and recognition they receive from others.

For older persons, both power and status are closely linked to their **roles, resources, health, and the cultural values** of the society they live in.

Power of Older Persons

1. Traditional / Historical Power

In earlier times and in traditional societies (especially in India), older persons held **significant power** because:

- They were seen as **custodians of knowledge and wisdom**
- They made important **family decisions** — marriages, property, disputes
- They were the **heads of joint families** with full authority
- Community elders resolved conflicts and guided the village
- Elders in tribal societies held **political and religious power**

Example: In Indian villages, the **Panchayat** was traditionally led by elderly men whose word was final.

2. Economic Power

Older persons who **own property, land, savings, or businesses** retain considerable power within the family and community. As long as financial resources remain in their control, they are respected and consulted.

Example: An elderly farmer who owns agricultural land continues to hold power in family decisions.

3. Decline of Power in Modern Society

In modern, urbanized societies, the power of older persons has **significantly declined** due to:

- **Retirement** — loss of income and occupational role
- **Nuclear families** — reduced authority in smaller family units
- **Technological change** — younger generations are more skilled and valued
- **Physical decline** — reduced health leads to dependence on others
- **Financial dependence** — when savings run out, power shifts to earning children

Example: A retired government officer who was once highly powerful may feel powerless in his own home if he becomes financially dependent on his son.

Status of Older Persons

1. High Status in Traditional Societies

In traditional and collectivist societies like India, China, and African cultures, older persons enjoyed **high social status** because:

- Age was associated with **wisdom, experience, and authority**
- Respect for elders was a **cultural and religious value**
- Joint family system gave elders a **central place** in family life
- Concepts like "**Pitru Devo Bhava**" (father is God) elevated elderly status
- Elders were seen as **moral guides and role models**

2. Factors That Determine Status of Older Persons

Factor	How it affects status
Wealth & Property	More wealth = higher status
Education & Knowledge	Educated elders are more respected
Health & Independence	Healthy elders retain higher status
Family Structure	Joint families give more status than nuclear
Cultural Values	Traditional cultures respect elders more
Gender	Elderly men often have higher status than elderly women
Caste & Religion	Religious elders (priests, pandits) have higher

Factor	How it affects status
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3. Declining Status in Modern Society

Several modern forces have led to a **fall in the status** of older persons:

- **Industrialization** — machines replaced experience-based knowledge
- **Urbanization** — people moved to cities, breaking joint family ties
- **Modernization** — youth-oriented culture devalues age
- **Ageism** — negative stereotypes and discrimination against the elderly
- **Globalization** — Western values of individualism reduced respect for elders
- **Retirement** — loss of productive role = loss of social identity and respect

Example: An elderly grandmother who was once the decision-maker of the household may be seen as a “burden” in a nuclear urban family setup.

Role of Gender in Power and Status

Elderly women face a **double disadvantage** — they are discriminated against both for their **age and their gender**.

- Widowed women lose even more status after husband's death
- In patriarchal societies, elderly women have always had less power
- They are more likely to face **poverty, neglect, and abuse**
- However, in some matrilineal societies (like Meghalaya), elderly women hold higher status

Theories Related to Power and Status of Elderly

1. Age Stratification Theory (Riley) — Society ranks people by age; older people are placed lower in the social hierarchy, leading to reduced power and status.

2. Disengagement Theory (Cumming & Henry) — As elders withdraw from roles, they also lose the power and status associated with those roles.

3. Role Theory — Loss of key social roles (worker, parent, spouse) directly leads to loss of status and influence in society.

Power and Status of Older Persons in Indian Context

India presents a **mixed picture**:

- **Rural India** — Elders still hold considerable respect and authority in joint families and village communities
 - **Urban India** — Rapid modernization has reduced elder status; nuclear families, old age homes, and neglect are increasing
 - **Legal Protection** — The **Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007** recognizes the declining status and provides legal rights to elderly persons
 - **Religious Significance** — In Hindu culture, seeking blessings from elders is still a strong value
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Social Work Perspective

Social workers play an important role in protecting and restoring the power and status of older persons by:

- **Advocating** for elderly rights at family and community level
 - **Challenging ageism** and promoting positive images of aging
 - **Empowering** older persons through participation in decision-making
 - **Connecting** them to legal aid, pension schemes, and support services
 - **Facilitating** intergenerational programmes to rebuild respect between young and old
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Conclusion

The power and status of older persons are not fixed — they change with age, health, economy, family structure, and cultural values. While traditional societies honored the elderly with high status and authority, modern societies have increasingly marginalized them. It is the responsibility of families, communities, governments, and social workers to ensure that older persons are treated with **dignity, respect, and recognition** — not as burdens, but as valuable members of society who carry the wisdom of a lifetime.

"Old age is not a disease — it is strength and survivorship, triumph over all kinds of vicissitudes and disappointments, trials and illnesses." — Maggie Kuhn