



Original Research Article

Views on Ageing: A Qualitative Study among Malay Middle-Aged Women in Urban Setting in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Ageing is an inevitable process. Objective: This study aimed to explore the views of the middle-aged women on ageing.

Methods: Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted among 36 urbanized women aged between 35 and 59 years old, conducted for an average of 1 to 2 hours each. Respondents were selected using the maximum variation sampling involving five age categories which include 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 to 49, 50 to 54 and 55 to 59 years old.

Results: The identified themes were concentrated on three main changes that occur with ageing process which were physical, emotional and hormonal changes which were frequently expressed and discussed among the younger age categories (35 to 49 years old). These were manifested as declining physical ability, healthy and changes in physical appearances (physical), having a more sensitive feeling, like attentions from others and the emotional change associated with having married children and grandchildren (emotion) and also menopausal symptoms (hormonal).

Conclusion: The middle-aged women involved in this study perceived a person is said to be old once they experiencing physical, emotional and hormonal changes. They should be made aware of the possible changes associated with ageing and also the changes are part of normal process and should not be anxious or worried to go through the ageing process. The perceptions of the middle-aged women play an important role in preparing them to face the later life and also to ensure they are undergoing a successful and healthy ageing process.

Keywords: Ageing, Middle-aged Women, Urban, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a continuous process. It is an inevitable phase of human life and yet very few feel elated to face it. ^[1] According to Goswami (2013), ageing is the physical, psychological and social change in a person over a period of time. As people live longer and the ageing population grows worldwide,

it becomes increasingly important to identify prevailing attitudes towards older people in society. ^[2] How older people are perceived can have implications on how they are treated in society. ^[2]

For elderly people, their self-perceptions on ageing is an important predictors of physical health and mortality.

[3,4] On the other hand, among the middle aged individuals, it will be an important knowledge to actually prepare them facing the ageing process. Elderly people who have positive views about ageing are having healthier and more quality life compared to otherwise. Two distinct dimensions to ageing perceptions have been identified – positive perceptions of ageing as ongoing personal growth and development, and negative perceptions of ageing as a time of physical decline, [5] with positive perceptions leading to better outcomes, and negative perceptions leading to worse. [3,4]

For many people, ageing is often perceived and viewed in a negative way which include declining health and physical function, frail and to burden others. Individual's perceptions on ageing are often influenced by observation of others and surrounding areas, and also from their personal experience. Physical factors such as facial looks, hair colour and body image have been highlighted in the literature as defining features of ageing. [2] The age of the perceiver has been identified as a factor that has considerable impact on the perceiver's understanding of when someone is defined as 'old', [2] in which older people tend to judge the onset of old age to occur later in life than do younger people. [6]

Experiences and perceptions of ageing are of substantial importance for middle-aged and older people as they relate to health, behavioural outcomes, and well-being. [7-9] The perceptions involve a dynamic process and often influenced by individual experiences and observations, which may vary between cultures. Women are said to be anxious about ageing process compared to men. Since women have longer life expectancy compared to men, the elderly population will be overpopulated with women especially among the centenarians group. According to O' Reilley et al. (2004), research on women's

perceptions of ageing is a necessity because of women's increasing longevity, and also because attitudes and perceptions are central to satisfaction, self-image, self-esteem, cognitive function, and emotional wellbeing. [10] This study aimed to explore the perceptions and understanding of the middle aged women on on ageing in order to shed light on how individual middle-aged women feel about getting older.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Series of 6 focus group discussions were conducted among middle aged women, aged between 35 and 59 years old, residing in the area of Federal Territory, Putrajaya and Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia. A total number of 36 middle aged women were consented for the interviews and selected using the maximum variation sampling, focussing on five age categories which are between 35 to 39, 40 to 44, 45 to 49, 50 to 54 and 55 to 59 years old. Representative from several residential areas in Precint 8, 9 and 16 in Putarajaya and also Bandar Putra Permai seri Kembangan, Selangor were appointed in the selection of required respondents.

The focus group discussions involved exploration on aspects related to the respondents understanding and views towards ageing. The respondents were also asked is there is any age limit to consider a person is old. Each discussion lasted 1 to 2 hours and was conducted in a room without any interruption from others. The contents of the interviews or discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim following each interview and field notes of reflexive observations were recorded by the rapporteur. Individual transcripts were analysed using standard methods of qualitative thematic analysis. The material was read through twice and later coded. The codes were further collapsed into several key themes related to contributing factors of

ageing anxiety among the respondents. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Medical Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Putra Malaysia prior to data collection.

Statistical Methods

This study is a qualitative study. Therefore there were no statistical analyses involved.

RESULTS

The focus group discussions involved a total of 36 middle-aged women aged between 35 and 59 years old. Table 1 is showing the characteristics of the respondents according to age group, marital and income status, which is dominated by those less than 55 years old.

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents (N=36)

Factors	Age group (n)				
	35 – 39	40 – 44	45 – 49	50 – 54	55 - 59
Marital status					
Single	0	0	0	0	0
Married	8	6	9	9	2
Divorced	0	0	0	0	0
Widow	1	0	1	0	0
Total	9	6	10	9	2
Income					
No income/ housewife	3	4	8	5	0
< RM1000	0	0	0	0	0
RM 1000 – RM 2000	0	0	1	2	0
> RM 2000	6	2	1	2	2
Total	9	6	10	9	2

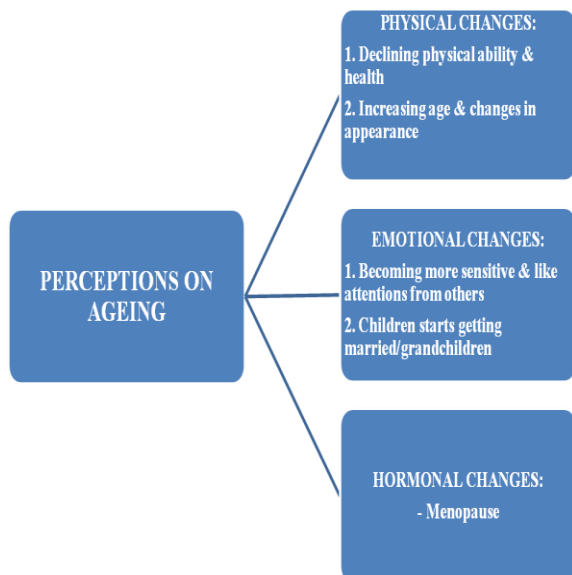


Figure 1: Factors affecting perceptions on ageing among middle-aged women.

Each of the respondents involved in the group interviews or discussion were asked on their understanding on ageing process or when is a person considered an elderly. The content of the discussion

revealed three main themes related to perceptions on ageing as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Although majority of the respondents involved were less than 55 years old, but the three themes that were identified were mainly expressed by those younger, aged less than 50 years old. In other words, the findings represent the ageing views or perceptions of the younger proportion of the middle-aged women. The three main themes that were identified are physical, emotional and hormonal changes that occur as the age advances. Among issues that were frequently discussed under physical changes were declining physical ability and health, increasing age and changes in the physical appearance. In general the physical changes aspects were mainly discussed by the younger age categories compared to otherwise. Meanwhile, the emotional changes were reflected by the fact that individual will become more sensitive as they become older, they seeks and needs

more attention and also more likely to perceive they are old when the child starts getting married or having grandchildren. According to the respondents an individual is considered old when he or she is experiencing changes stated above.

Physical changes

a. Declining physical ability and health

Majority of the respondents involved in this study stated that declining energy level that usually portrayed with tiredness and lethargic are often associated with ageing. Most of them who had this perception were from the younger age category. These are some of the expressions given by few of the respondents when they asked about their understanding on ageing,

“When the old body feels tired and lethargic...sometimes it can be tiring and exhausting. Body aches...That’s why need to take supplement to avoid getting tired....”
(35 years old)

“For me, as our age gradually increases, we will be physically slow. Not the same during younger days anymore. Can’t do work like before. Lesser activities too.”
(39 years old)

“As we get older we are not tough anymore. Energy level decreases.”
(41 years old)

“When the body started to ache... One more thing is that even when there were a lot of things to do during younger times, didn’t really feel tired...now feel exhausted, fatigued ..gets tired easily..”
(44 years old)

There was also respondent who associate ageing with the development of disease or declining health status,

“One of the reasons people say I am old is because of the diseases I started to get. One after another of the disease attacked. If there

is support from the family, especially the husband at this point of time, you will not feel so old. If there is no attention from them, you feel even older...”
(53 years old)

b. Increasing age and changes in physical appearance

Some respondents placed a certain age limit to classify a person is old especially among those from the younger age category. According to one of the respondents, she considered herself an old person very early just because she is a housewife. Similar age limit was also stated by another respondent, though she is younger, still working and has a steady income. These were their expressions,

“When I enter my 30s, I already felt old. You know, it’s because we are housewives. Stay at home. Unlike those who go to work..”
(48 years old)

“As for me, 30 years and above could give you the feeling. Heading towards older age...”
(41 years old)

Meanwhile, others had a higher age limit but still very early compared to what has been proposed in the definition of elderly by World Health Organization (WHO) or United Nation (UN).

“My understanding is when we are old, it means our age increases.... Meaning if we reach 40 years and above, we are considered as aged.”
(44 years old)

“Old for me... 50 years old and above is considered old. If they say they don’t look old, it may be that the person is healthy..no disease”
(39 years old)

“For me old is when my age increases.. 50 years and above is considered old for me..”

(43 years old)

"I feel.... If it's 50 years and above.

Because at that time all physical changes will occur to the body.."

(48 years old)

Changes in the physical appearance were also among aspects that affecting the respondents perceptions towards ageing. However, it was only expressed among very few of the respondents. These were among the statements identified from the conversations,

"When we are old, many physical changes occur. From being thin, we will gain weight. Then, pigmentation on the face. Younger days, didnt have that but now, it is a different story...."

(39 years old)

"Changes on oneself...on the hands, the face starts to wrinkle. Hair turns grey. Everthing aches. Knee pain, sole of the foot, heel..so many parts"

(52 years old)

Emotional changes

a. More sensitive and likes attentions

Being more sensitive is one of the aspects that were frequently said by the respondents when expressing their perceptions on ageing process. The sensitive feelings were also linked with seeking attentions from others. Here are some of the expressions given by the respondents,

"Our character changes. Emotionally unstable. Sensitive... Usually this changes are obvious when you are 55 and above"

(36 years old)

"Started to feel sensitive. Maybe that's the sign of aged people. Gets sensitive easily. Being isolated makes us feel much older too ..."

(53 years old)

"I think as we get older, we tend to get hurts easily.. Even we feel sad when the children don't come back. Something like that."

(50 years old)

"The problem with the elderly is that, they need more love. Attention... more than others. Especially from their children. The way the children treat them."

(53 years old)

b. Married children and grandchildren

The aspect that was frequently discussed among the respondents was having married children and grandchildren. Most of them stated that, a person will feel and perceive they are old when their children starts discussing about getting married or they starts having grandchildren. These were among the content of the discussions related to this issue,

"Watching the children all grown up, you can really feel...ooo I am old now."

(41 years old)

"At first, you feel old when you got married. When the children are married and then the grandchildren started to come, that makes you feel older. That title changes. You become a grandmother. Usually that's the time when you really feel old"

(45 years old)

"When the children are all grown up, they will leave the house..all are married. We will be left alone.. just me with the husband only..."

(47 years old)

"When there are grandchildren who call us grandma..we would feel old"

(47 years old)

Hormonal changes: Menopause

Hormonal changes which are often associated with menopausal symptoms were also perceived as sign of ageing by most respondents. It was not only mentioned by respondents from the older age categories who may have experienced the symptoms of menopause but also among the younger age categories. The menopausal symptoms were also linked to other aspect that previously

discussed such as being more sensitive and changes in skin texture or physical appearance. These are among the contents of the discussion identified,

“After menopause, I feel old. This is because it’s difficult to sleep, becomes angry easily, more sensitive, getting hurt easily. Physical too..flabby ”

(40 years old)

“As for me, the aging process happens due to hormone instability. That’s why wrinkles started to appear on the face. Skin becomes dry too.”

(45 years old)

“As we get older, we stopped getting menstruation. Menopause happens. The body feels different. The skin too.. Easy to get disease. When we get a particular disease, we feel as if we are a burden to our husbands..our children. We feel troublesome..Feel more sensitive”

(49 years old)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Women are more sensitive when it comes to discussing about ageing issues compared to men. This study revealed that the younger age categories of the middle-aged women perceived being old is commonly related to three main changes which occur at old age, which include physical, emotional and hormonal changes. Declining physical ability and health and also changes in physical appearances which closely related to increasing age were the main aspects identified under the physical changes during the interviews. According to O’ Reilly et al. (2004), women portrayed a dominant concern about getting older. ^[10]

This is probably because women are consistently judged based on their physical appearance and relationship status, while men are measured more by their accomplishments and wealth. ^[11] Apart from concerns related to declining of health and loss of appearance or attractiveness, women

were also reported to have main concerns about not having enough money, being alone, loss of psychological or emotional well-being, and concern about their ability to take care of themselves in later life. ^[10]

Increase age will increase the likelihood of disability. As people live longer and do not encounter fatal diseases or death, their illnesses will become chronic, and associated with various implications of ageing. The association between increasing age and increasing disability has led to a negative image of aging. ^[12] Disability is usually defined in terms of restrictions in the ability to perform activities of daily living (ADL), or, the inability to function independently in terms of basic ADL or instrumental ADL. ^[13] Certain chronic conditions are particularly related to disability including stroke, diabetes, cognitive impairment, arthritis and visual impairment. ^[14-16]

Overall, women experience more disability in old age than do men. ^[12] This gender difference has been reported in a study conducted by Jegger et al. (2007a) in United Kingdom, ^[14] with older women less likely to be disability free than older men. Similar findings were also reported among elderly in the United States of America and Canada, ^[17] Netherlands, ^[18] Spain, ^[19] and Mexico. ^[15]

Meanwhile, this study also showed that emotional instability is also perceived a unique feature of being old by the middle aged women. This was frequently manifested with increasing sensitive feelings, the need for more attentions and also the sense of loss that occur when their children is getting married or the feeling of exhilaration when having grandchildren. These emotional feelings are strongly related to fear of loneliness. Compare to elderly men, older women are more likely to live alone in later life. It is not surprising that women ages 80 and older are more

likely to live alone than men of the same age group, [20] which is mainly due to the increased life expectancy of women and the tendency for women to marry men older than themselves, as the death of a spouse is a primary reason people transition into living alone. Various problems and risks are linked with living alone. Elderly women who live alone are considered at greater risk for loneliness, depression, and decreased mobility. [21] A strong positive relationship between living alone and loneliness was also reported, [22] which may have influenced the perceptions of younger women.

Women should be made aware on the existence of national and international policy recognizing the need to decrease social isolation and loneliness among older adults to improve elders' quality of life. [23] In some culture, living alone is a highly valued way of life for older adults who desire to remain independent. [24] Although some may assume that these elders living alone are in need of special intervention services, a body of research suggests that they may not have greater physical and mental health needs when compared to older adults in other community living situations. [25] However, to prevent to possible impact of living alone, elderly women should be encouraged to socialize. It was proven that friendships and care centres for senior citizen may have positive outcomes towards the physical and mental well-being of the elderly. [21]

Another aspect that was perceived peculiar to elderly people was hormonal change that is frequently linked with menopause. Many women relate menopause with ageing and being old. A local study conducted among women in the Federal territory, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia revealed that, despite having good knowledge about menopause women expressed feelings of sadness and nervousness upon the approach of their own menopause [26] which is

probably due to the significant effect of menopause on women's quality of life. The same study also reported that, majority of the women involved in the study held a positive attitude towards menopause and regarded menopause as a normal transition in the ageing process (78.2%; 95% CI, 74.2 to 82.3%) and it is just a sign of ageing (76.7%; 95% CI, 72.5 to 80.9%). [26]

Similarly, a study conducted by Ikeme et al. (2011) on knowledge and perception of menopause and climacteric symptoms among Women in Enugu, South East, Nigeria showed that 70% of the respondents were experiencing hot flushes and night sweats. [27] However, 58.3% of the women did not regard them as a medical problem and took them as part of aging process. Meanwhile, a study among Iranian women found that, "the beginning of new phase of life" was one of the main themes emerged from a qualitative study conducted on menopausal experiences. [28] Some of the women involved in that interviews perceived menopause as a bad phase in their life, and as an end to generation creation. [28]

In conclusion, being old is perceived as experiencing physical, emotional and hormonal changes by Malay middle-aged women whom involved in this study. Their personal experiences and observations play an important role in structuring their perceptions and feelings towards ageing. The women should be made aware that ageing is a continuous process and not a negative experience. In order to grow old happily, healthier and successfully, ones should adapt a positive perceptions towards ageing.

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