

Challenges of Golden Years

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My grandfather was a quiet, serious and short tempered man. The earliest that I remember of him was when I was about 5-6 years old. He was skinny, had a goatee, and biked to everywhere. As one of the richest landlords in his village, he was feared and respected by the villagers, many of whom worked for him, primarily in the paddy fields. I was afraid of his temper and tried my best to stay away. My grandma, on the other hand, was very affectionate and all smile. Whenever we went to visit them in the villages from Dhaka, where my father was practicing medicine, most of my time flew by doing chores with her – picking vegetables from the garden to feeding the chicken and ducks that she kept. Those are some of the best days of my life.

When my grandma died at the age of eighty or so, my grandfather, who was in his early nineties, became lonely and insecure. My father, not having much confidence in the hired caretakers, had brought him to stay with us in Dhaka. I ended up sharing a room with him. He, even at that age, had a very sharp mind but a fragile body, often ended up wetting his bed or even worse, defecating. Mom patiently tolerated all that, quietly cleaned things up, but I could see the unbearable pain in grandpa's face. Once a very proud landlord, he was imprisoned in his fragile body, unable to perform even the most basic chores of life. I'd never forget that time. During his short stay with us, I had cranked up a nice friendship

with him, often listening to the stories from his far past. He is long gone but the memories are everlasting.

Not just in Bangladesh, my country of origin, but possibly in most developing countries the aging population rely heavily on their children to support them and take care of them in their final years, when either they have no income or nobody to take care of. In villages usually the male children stay in the parental house even after marriage and eventually take the ownership of the properties and the living parents continue to live with them. However, in the cities things are often quite different. Most people can't afford large living space and accommodating an aging parent can become challenging. Often siblings separate the parents and have each of them stay with different child. While this may be convenient for the children, unfortunately, such arrangement can throw the elderly couple into a situation where they feel helpless and lonely.

In addition, such arrangements do not necessarily come without any obligations. More often than not the parents are expected to help in daily chores like taking the kids to the school , doing groceries, baby sitting etc., which for some may not be an issue while for others can be burdensome. Unfortunately, considering the very few affordable senior care facilities present in developing countries, public or private, there are rarely any other options open for most middle class and low income families.

In comparison, most developed nations have relatively better system to support and care for the retired, senior population, at the top of any help their families or children may offer. In Canada, there are many nursing homes serving the aging population who are on average 85 or older, suffer from chronic diseases, challenged with

movement and memory, and need long term care. Just in Ontario currently there are about 640 such nursing homes.

Few days back, I caught up with one of my long time friend, John. I haven't seen him for a while. At one point in our conversation I inquired about his father, who is in his nineties, a widower, suffers from severe osteoporosis, and can barely walk. He had moved out of his house and stayed into an apartment for many years. However, recently due to his deteriorating health, he needed full time care. John, a devoted son, had offered his father to stay with him and his family but he (father) simply rejected the idea. He wasn't ready to inconvenience his son. So, there was only one option open for John. He placed his father into a government subsidized long-term care home where he would receive around the clock nursing and supervision. I understood this would cost John a considerable amount, even after the subsidy. John wasn't worried about that at all. He was actually looking for a single bed room, even though that would cost him quite a bit more. For families who are well off, like John, this type of setup works well. There are more affordable retirement homes and nursing homes that are also available but those are usually for seniors who don't have any serious physical conditions. However, despite all the support that the government provides, there are still large gaps in services. Especially for families with little affordability can have hard time finding suitable places. Also, there have been many reports of abuses and negligence in nursing homes, often widely reported by media, which can make it more unwelcome to some.

It is the unavoidable fact of life to age and become old, just about the same way anywhere in the world. However, what happens during the golden years can vary by a large margin. In Canada, with

average life expectancy almost around 90, for both men and women, a very good infrastructure is needed to support and care for the seniors, especially the ones with varying degree of disability and other physical or mental issues. While it appears that our governments are generally attentive to the needs of the aging population, there are always room to improve. Even now, in a country like Canada, there seems to be too many seniors who are homeless, either struggling for a space in the shelters or simply pan handling and sleeping on the streets or parks. Admitted, the government may not have sufficient funding available to make it very best for all of the seniors but at minimum it is expected that it would provide the older generation a safe roof and all the simple necessities of life. At the same time, more families need to take responsibilities of their senior members. They deserve the very best from the societies and countries that they have served in their respective capacity.