



The Gendered Politics of Aging: Older Women and Structural Subjugation

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Received: 20.06.2025; Accepted: 09.07.2025; Available online: 31.07.2025

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Abstract

Most feminist scholars, after drawing upon various structural inequalities that remain pretty evident especially the identities which are masked behind invisible and intangible ideas, especially gendered inequalities, did carry forward the idea being quite uniform even in the older ages. R. W. Connell, in her writings, try to highlight the ideas of hegemonic masculinity which manifests itself in such concrete ways that it generates a structural gendered imposition of roles as well, especially when it reaches the older ages. This paper would examine the gendered contours of inequalities, especially, in the later life, focusing on the disproportionate subjugation experienced by the older women compared to the older men. These inequalities have been embedded/ rooted in traditional patriarchal norms, so much so, that these social facts are neither accidental or coincidental, not even isolated, but rather glorified. In this paper, the researcher points out how evidently the traditional patriarchal ideas penetrate the concept of ageing as well, where women are still bound to foster an environment of nurture, which definitively sticks to the idea of marginalization.

Keywords: Collateral subjugation, older women, structural inequalities, glorified sacrifices, patriarchy, traditional roles, reproductive labour

Introduction

This paper is an attempt at understanding how the concept of aging works differently for different genders in a particular life course. The concept brings in a great number of dilemmas while explaining how society has been functioning according to gendered norms, rather the monolithic patriarchal ideas that have made itself quite concrete and manifested into long recurring, yet unequal ideas. It indicates, thereby, that older women's subjugation is not merely the result of individual prejudice or cultural attitudes, but is deeply embedded in structural systems that shape everyday life. The discourse attached to older women in general mostly inclines towards concepts linked to caregiving, nurturing, limiting in a way which not only creates a huge gender disparity, but also closes the space for creating new knowledge, emerging out of the same ideas. Additionally, it has been noticed that older women are being excluded from discourses that cater to social inclusion, as well as human rights, generally promoting youth and productivity which ultimately negates the idea of productive human mind and bases itself on the concept of bodily experience, or productive abled bodies.

The segregated idea of being the "Second Sex" (Beauvoir, 1949), again, manifests the prolonged traditional discourse that women are generally not 'victims' but are part of the

societal expectations which create a different kind of space for them, especially in the domestic sphere. However, we see that women have been trying to crawl out of that space through representation, and visible vocal gestures in their youth, but again, confined to the idea of preserving herself to the private sphere becomes more mainstream, as traditional roles suggest.

Arriving from Walby's public and private dichotomy (Walby, 1989), it can also be mentioned that confining the 'weaker' sex to the 'household' made the idea of victimizing women or create vulnerable positions for them to acquire even easier. Again, restricting the boundaries to the household and not letting women explore opportunities or creating new discourse other than their reproductive labour or qualities paved a path towards a more concrete and hegemonic patriarchal idea. Thereafter, making these expectations almost sound like pre-requisites for women to adhere to, to fit into the traditional definition of a 'woman.'

When we try to move out of the traditional idea of structural inequalities, which has been backed up by linear ideas of a 'man' and a 'woman', we enter into the age of globalization, we notice the admittance of women in the labour market, per say, noticing how the gender regimes, which were previously quite concrete and was almost indoctrinated as to how gender performances should be, hit with a new and modern idea. However, the gender regime, going under the process of globalization, does not bring in any kind of knowledge that eliminates structural inequalities, but rather reshapes them and creates newer discourses of inequalities. "The gender regime is undergoing transformation from private to public patriarchy under conditions of globalization" (Walby, 2009). She indicates how these gender regimes move from private spaces and starts navigating public spheres in a manner which creates foundational spaces for new public forms of patriarchy.

Navigating Spaces in the Older Age

Aligning with feminist ideas, it is often realized how women at their prime, that is in their age of youth, are more inclined towards being included in the purview of public achievements. Consciously, or maybe unconsciously, the pattern of older women not being able to navigate public spaces becomes more common in nature, almost labelling them as 'invisible identities,' as if they are lost somewhere. "Feminist analyses have, for the most part, rendered old women invisible" (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006, p. 3), making it even more difficult for the older identities to come about and fix their own positions in the public spaces. This perception, yet again, brands the societal image of 'submission' that is aligned with being a woman. Patriarchal social structures have historically assigned women roles rooted in care, self-sacrifice, and emotional labour, which are performed diligently and internalized as normative expectations rather than contested impositions. The glorification of female sacrifice, in which, women are celebrated for compromising aspirations and subordinating personal desires, is emblematic of what can be indicated as an idea of "glorified subjugation," a cultural mechanism that reinforces gendered compliance under the guise of virtue, making it more evident that women should be supposedly proud of the fact that they have been sacrificial, which continues throughout their life course.

The patriarchal system, seeks both to appropriate the reproductive labour of women and deny that a woman can do anything but gestate, thereby, not out to outlive her reproductive usefulness. Yet, women, in majority, tend to remain important to the society as invisible productive and reproductive forces, most often adhering to 'feminine' qualities, and catering

to occupations which align with the concept of nurture. Despite their enduring contributions as workers, caregivers, and intellectual agents, women often remain entrenched in patriarchal expectations that undervalue their autonomy and labour.

Even as many women achieve economic independence and social mobility, they continue to encounter structural and symbolic forms of subordination deeply embedded within gendered norms. The process of ageing further compounds this dynamic. While both older men and women may become socially dependent on their children in later life, older men frequently retain a hierarchical status through control over private property and decision-making power, reinforcing traditional gender asymmetries in later adulthood.

Older men supposedly enter a 'new' phase of life bringing in refreshing ideas and still do have a lot to offer, or contribute to society, their lives do not remain subject to a certain schedule as it does for older women, remaining 'virile,' 'potent' and 'bold,' immediately pertaining to a higher status/position in the society boiling down women's 'identities' merely to caregivers or nurturers.

Understanding Glorification of Sacrifice in the Older Ages

The most common trait of patriarchal societies adheres to the understanding of 'sacrifice' as a notion completely attached to feminine qualities. So, a woman, regardless of what social status she holds in that society, will only be able to bloom into a 'seamless' woman or will fit into the textbook definition of a woman. The role in which the woman should fit in, comes from a greater idea of glorifying the same traditional concepts, catering to a complete idea of indoctrination, where it is believed that being a woman, must bring in some kind of guilt even in a situation of pleasure. Therefore, the very act of women claiming pleasure is intricately mediated by socio-cultural prescriptions that often position pleasure as a conditional and morally regulated domain.

Jay examines the ritual of blood sacrifice as a singular cultural practice and argues that, throughout history and across diverse societies, its primary function has been to legitimize and reinforce patriarchal authority. Her case studies stretch towards a greater area of cultural zones in Africa and Hawaii, where she takes on the accounts of women correlating sacrifices with 'womanhood.' Nancy Jay's seminal work, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, explores how sacrificial rituals in patrilineal societies serve to reinforce male dominance and marginalize women's roles. Jay argues that these rituals symbolize a transition from maternal lineage to paternal authority, effectively sidelining women's contributions and reinforcing their subjugation (Jay, 1992).

In the early years of socialization, women ingrain the idea that their value lies in their capacity to provide, compromise, and to endure qualities that are often romanticized in religious, literary, and cinematic narratives. The ideal woman is portrayed as someone who sacrifices her ambitions for her family, endures hardship for her children, and suppresses her desires for the stability of the household making it more difficult to make space for 'transgression' (Ortner, 1974). These sacrifices, however, are seldom recognized as the product of unequal power relations but are celebrated as signs of inherent feminine strength or divine motherhood. Throughout the life course, it remains quite evident that feminine ideas backed up by societal regulations are quite monolithic in nature, making it harder to ease it out in later adulthood.

The Social Devaluation of Older Women

In contemporary cultural discourses, the aging process is deeply gendered, with men and women experiencing divergent trajectories of social visibility and value. Men, in contrast to women, are afforded the privilege of aging without undergoing symbolic or social erasure. The aging male body and mind are often normalized and even valorised within dominant cultural narratives. This is exemplified through the trope of the “midlife crisis,” wherein men are permitted to engage in activities symbolizing rejuvenation, such as purchasing luxury goods or adopting rigorous physical routines, acts that reinforce their perceived continued vitality and relevance. In stark contrast, aging women are more prone to a regime of invisibility and marginalization, thereby, coercing the idea of collateral subjugation. Their bodies and intellects are more readily seen as deteriorating and outmoded, a perception shaped by patriarchal aesthetic standards and normative life course expectations. While men over fifty are often cast as wise, experienced, and professionally competent, women of the same age are frequently dismissed as redundant, their contributions framed as obsolete or a situation of emotional overreaction (Woodward, 2006). This cultural yet gendered standards reflect and reinforce structural gender hierarchies, wherein age intersects with gender to disproportionately disadvantage women in both symbolic and material ways.

Connell (2005), for instance, argues that masculinity is not a fixed biological trait but a socially constructed performance embedded within hierarchical gender regimes. Similarly, Fausto-Sterling (2000) challenges essentialist notions of sex and gender by demonstrating the fluidity and complexity of human biology, arguing that science itself is often shaped by prevailing gender ideologies. The cultural stereotype of older men as enduringly potent, virile, and intellectually productive, juxtaposed with the portrayal of older women as barren, completely intellectually spent, serves to reinforce enduring gendered hierarchies in both public and private domains (Marshall & Katz, 2012). These narratives reflect broader societal investments in the symbolic power of masculinity and the devaluation of aging femininity. Such perspectives position older men as inherently more capable, suggesting that age-related changes are merely a challenge to be managed through male competitiveness, assertiveness, or rejuvenation. Entering the phase of ‘male menopause’ evidently inclines towards the notion of a ‘fresh start’ manifesting the positioning of older men at a pedestal and yet leaving more subordinate roles for the older women to cater to, once again, paving the path towards a gendered hierarchical structure.

Conclusion

As feminist scholars have long emphasized, gender roles are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Theories of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, such as those advanced by Connell (2005), underscore the ways in which societal norms and institutions privilege men’s power and dominance, including as they age. Hegemonic masculinity, as defined by Connell, situates men in positions of social and institutional authority, enabling their continued relevance and participation in public and private spheres even as they age. In contrast, the aging process for women is often framed as a decline, both physically and intellectually, that renders them invisible or obsolete. For older women, the cultural narratives surrounding age and gender often intersect to deprive them of social recognition, economic security, and the opportunity for continued personal or professional contribution. This is compounded by the phenomenon of cultural scripts, where women’s sacrificial roles as caregivers and nurturers are glorified as virtuous and selfless, even as these roles are

poorly compensated or entirely invisible in socio-economic terms (Chodorow, 1978, Gilligan, 1982).

Older women from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds often face compounded layers of discrimination, which further exacerbate their social ostracization. Additionally, intersectional frameworks emphasize that the aging process for women is not homogeneous but varies significantly based on socio-economic status, access to resources, and societal attitudes toward race and ethnicity, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of aging and gender. It is further noticed that the intersectional ideas incorporate an even more discriminatory idea where supposedly the older women, pertaining to lower rungs of the society, cater to more racial problematic attitudes to climb the social ladder per say.

The idea, which Beauvoir argues, in her “The Second Sex,” has permeated all facets of life, establishes a dichotomy that perpetuates women's social subjugation. The concept of the other is profoundly relevant when examining aging, as older women are often relegated to secondary status in comparison to men. Aging becomes a reinforcing mechanism in this duality, where the value of women, particularly in older age, is diminished to a state of invisibility. As de Beauvoir argues, women's roles have historically been shaped around their reproductive capacities and, once that phase is perceived to be over, society reduces them to a status of irrelevance or decay. This relegation to the idea of otherness endures throughout a woman’s lifespan and becomes particularly pronounced in old age. Reaching that age creates another sense of responsibility which is more mechanized because of the uniform practices through the younger ages as well, making it look more of an invisible personality trait, but has been established through rehearsal.

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