

„HUMANITIES GREY HAIRS” – ASPECTS OF THE AGEING OF SOCIETY

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Abstract. Modern demographic transformations that take place in European societies cause the process of ageing to become irreversible and persistent. This is happening as a result of the simultaneous occurrence of such factors as average life expectancy growth, fertility decrease and a negative birth rate. As a result the structure of European population changes, the amount of people in pre-productive age decreases and simultaneously the amount of those in post-productive age grows. The process of the ageing of many societies, as well as Polish society, creates many economical, political, social and cultural consequences. An increasing number of seniors cause them to become an important, although specific type of consumer. A growth of demand for health services, education and artistic services should be expected. But the most alarming is the problem of rapidly growing fiscal deficiency and the insufficient financing of the Polish retirement system. In order to prevent retirement system bankruptcy it is necessary to constantly monitor such areas as: reform of retirement system, introducing later retirement, increasing the effectiveness of work and the professional activation of seniors as well as the liberalization of immigration regulations.

Key words: ageing, seniors, discrimination, retirement, employment.

The characteristics of the ageing process in society

The ageing of societies has become a demographic, social, economical and cultural fact. The first symptom to be observed is the systematic growth of the percentage of elderly people in the whole population. It is the result of an increasing average life expectancy, which on global scale grew from 47 years in 1955 to 65 years in 1995 and according to the UN, will reach 73 years in 2025. Another factor which stimulates this process is the prosperity of countries, which results in better social security and easier access to health care, which leads not only to an increased percentage of elderly people in the society but also to an extended life expectancy (Synak 2002, 12). The highest percentage of elderly people occurs in such countries of Western Europe as Sweden, Germany, Great Britain and France (Kowaleski 2006, 30). In these countries the number and percentage in the population of the so called “old-old”³⁰, which means people above age of 80, is also growing and currently constitutes 25% of the senior population. To sum up, the ageing of society can be analyzed in two dimensions – extensification, which means the probability of living till the age assumed as a borderline for old age, and intensification, understood as extending life expectancy of those who have already crossed this borderline.

Another issue is the time range of the process of ageing in society. Spreading this process in time has its crucial social and economical advantages. In many countries in Western Europe the

³⁰ It is a notion introduced to demography for describing those, who are incapable or capable to some limited degree to independent function in society.

process of ageing has been taking place for at least 25 years and paradoxically the long lasting nature of this process allowed for a relatively advantageous adaptation to the situation. In countries where the ageing process is now accelerating (like e.g. Poland), it will become more intense in the near future, when large numbers of people crosses become older than 65. This situation may cause the intensification of social problems at a much larger scale.

The social causes of the ageing of society

One fundamental factor that influences the process of ageing is a constant decrease in child birth, creating a smaller percentage of children in society and at the same time increasing the percentage of adult and elderly people. Additionally the long-lasting tendency of decreasing child birth rates leads to a decrease in amount of children, teenagers and also adults, whereas the amount of elderly people relatively increases, which results in the growth of the index of societal ageing.

It is worth while to emphasize that the registered changes in population growth have a social explanation – they are the result of the transformation of the current model of family life. Accepting – especially by young people – the so-called Western model of living results in a decreasing birth rate. The causes of this situation are amongst others the increasing interest in education, difficulties in the job market, smaller allowances for families, dysfunctional families and difficult social and economical conditions which people in a procreative age find themselves. These negative tendencies are additionally strengthened by transformations in the field of performing social roles, an increase in the number of informal relationships and the number of divorces.

Intense economical stabilization pressures, aiming at the constant raising of the social status of an individual, generating ones own success and treating the factors above as a main factor of self-assessment has become a social fact that influences mainly the young generation. Family and children, as chosen values, loose their meaning to some degree. Even more common are decisions to put off having children and reduce the number of children. What is more, the process is not finished and applies to following generations.

All the reasons above not only atomize society, weaken family relations but in consequence contribute to disadvantageous demographic changes. The ageing of societies intensifies, leading to constant changes in the structure of the population. As a result it is the population of people in their productive years that is more burdened with the generation of their parents and grandparents than the generation of children – and that leads to an obligating dependence of a persistent character, deepening with time.

Characteristics of the process of ageing in Poland

During the last 25 years ageing has also become a part of Polish society, although as a result of changing child birth rates the process has differed in its dynamics. Among basic parameters that create the demographic picture of Poland the decrease in the child birth rate should be counted, which causes a systematic decrease in the percentage of children in the population and intensifying, especially at the time of transformation, the emigration index. This situation overrates the condition of the whole Polish society, moreover it creates new challenges both in social and economical fields. The borderline of demographic „old age”, set by the UN as 7% of the people at the age of 65 in population was crossed by Poland in 1967, while in the same time in Sweden it was 13% of people over the age of 65, almost 13% in France and Belgium, 13,5% in Austria and over 15% in the former German Democratic Republic.

The Polish pyramid of the population of the XX century indicates at a phenomenon of fluctuation of the following generations, numerous or obviously less numerous. The mechanism of the fluctuation of demographic occurrences is embedded in the process of the reproduction of population. The less numerous years fell in the time of I World War, after which in the period between wars an increase in the birth rate occurred. But soon after World War II began, so that the generation born during I World War, being at their period of best fertility, had unfavorable conditions to realize it. The post-war period was the period of the baby boom; the first one took place in the 50's. At that point the reproductive plans of women were being realized both who had just entered the age of highest fertility and those older, who postponed those plans as a result of the war. So between 1950–1960 Polish society was young, of a relatively big and growing number of births, which mainly resulted in the constant growth of population (Holzer 2003, 16-17). Additionally, the large number of births after the war inhibited the growth of percentage of the elderly people in Polish society. In the following years the same effect was observed thanks to the baby boom population coming of age. Between 1955 and 1975 the child birth rate was gradually decreasing. In Poland the percentage of people over the age of 65 in the population increased every year since 1967. In 1968 the share of people over the age of 60 was over 12%, which according to Rosset scale³¹ means reaching the state of demographic old age in Poland. According to Sauvy's³²

³¹ According to Rosset a scale of 4 degrees should be assumed I demography, which enables counting an index of ageing for society. The so called demographic youth is characteristic for a population, in which people over the age of 60 constitute less than 8% of population. The so called foreground of ageing means when the percentage of people over the age of 60 is between 8-10%, when its between 10-12% we call it the proper ageing of population. The last, fourth level means so called demographic old age, when the percentage of people over the age of 60 is over 12% of all population.

old age index, Poland is counted among ageing countries and in the future the ageing process will intensify as a result of the gradual growth in the number of elderly people and a decreasing number of the young and children. In the specialist literature another measure of the ageing process' dynamics is the so called Bourdelais' variable verge of old age. According to it, the border of old age is the age, at which the statistical individual is left with the last 10 years of life. In such cases those years are the period of real old age. The percentage of elderly people counted by this index is much lower than when you apply the constant value of 60 or 65 years. Adopting UN standards, Polish society crossed the border value of the so called advanced demographic old age in 1980 – set as 10% of people over the age of 65 in the whole population.

Although the process of ageing seems to be constant, our country is not counted among old societies, because the pace of the ageing of the population has been relatively slow. However, according to demographic prognosis prepared by the Central Statistical Office for 2003-2030, the population of Poland in forthcoming years will gradually decrease (table 1)

Table 1. The population of Poland according to the prognosis of the UN (in thousands)

Year	2015	2020	2025	2030
Population	38 173	37 840	37 337	36 680

Central Statistical Office, 2005, p.16

Additionally, as a result of fluctuations in the following generations, in the structure of the population the percentage of children and young people decrease, as well as the amount of people at the productive age, while simultaneous the growth of the percentage of people in the post-productive age will increase (tab.2).

Table 2. Changes in the structure of Polish population according to age (%)

Age group	2015	2020	2025	2030
0-17	16,7	16,3	15,8	14,9
18-59/64	63,5	60,8	58,9	58,2
65+	19,8	22,9	25,3	26,9
All	100%	100%	100%	100%

³² In his demographic works Sauvy proposed so called ageing index in society, which would be expressed by relation between the number of old and young people.

CSO, 2005, p.16

Moreover, among the people in their productive age the process of internal ageing will occur. This situation will cause very difficult conditions in the labour market, where soon a transformation of labour resources we now own will be necessary, as well as the strengthening the fraction of the generation 50+, or even the professional stimulation and training of older people, who now stay away from the labour market.

One of intentional actions stimulating the professional activity of older people is the program “50 plus”, introduced in Poland in 2004. Its aim is to increase the work effectiveness of this age group, by teaching them modern technologies, improving professional skills and widening their knowledge. An increased percentage of older people in the number of people employed means lowering cost of earlier pensions, which could relieve public finances and improve the permeability of the labour market (Klimkiewicz 2009, 4). The index of employment of people over the age of 50 is low enough to stimulate this group of employees by creating the regulation of promoting employment and labour market institutions, where a specific category of unemployed was separated - those over the age of 50. In reference to the 50+ generation it was observed, that the number of acts of discrimination in the labour market increased. The problem is serious enough to be commented on by the European Commission in the 13th paragraph of the Amsterdam Treaty, 1997, in the provision about fighting discrimination in the labour market, including age discrimination also. Moreover, in the Lisbon Strategy, adopted by the EU in 2000, there is a provision about increasing the economical productivity of EU nations by, among others, the professional stimulation of people of late adult age (55-64) do the level of 60% (www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/index).

Modern attitude of societies to the old – the role of old men

In the current profile of culture the standards and values that dominate depreciate old age. The representatives of the young generation are in a privileged position, because the rules that dominate glorify youth. The hegemony of youth, fitness and beauty defines ageing as something unpleasant and embarrassing – simultaneously pushing away the position of old people. Old is not a socially desirable value or economically effective in a consumer sense. This creates a situation of danger to elderly people.

An additional difficulty is that in old age people are gradually excluding themselves from playing crucial social roles. This state was called by E. Burgess a roleless role³³. This undefined role places the old man in a disadvantageous social situation, which may result in social alienation or even a crisis of identity. It has an enormous meaning in the context of modern, postindustrial societies, in which every individual's activity, generating no service or product is valued relatively low. Currently the value of a man is evaluated in the category of producing something socially useful. The end of a professional career is a time of increased access to free time resources, but as the time spent not working is not a source of a functional role, it is also a time of increased unproductivity. The old individual “.. experiences a dilemma between freedom and uselessness and society has not worked out any idea of a reasonable role for a person at the age when he is poorly valued and considered unproductive” (Niezabitowski 2007, 81).

In Polish society, compared to other European countries, the role of old men is to some significant and relatively positive extent connected with the family. During the last 25 years the structure of the family has changed, although despite clear atomization, relations between generations – according to researchers – have not worsen that much. Undoubtedly this is the consequence of stronger family bonds in Poland and to some extent insufficient organization of alternative forms of elderly care, especially when their disability intensifies. The family is still a place of basic meaning in the field of satisfying the senior citizens most important needs.

The meaning of work in a senior's life

It is known, that the life's perspective of an individual changes depending on the stage of his life. In old age the value of staying in good condition and independence in life and action increases, as well as those connected with social integration. The basic problem is real access to the labour market whose form and scale responds to the seniors' expectations and capability, enabling them to be active and socially independent.

In a situation when the average life expectancy increases and the period of old age is lived through more and more advantageously, as different deficiencies, typical for the age are felt later and later it can be assumed, that seniors are in relatively better health. As a result they may want – or be forced to – stay professionally active for a longer time, which would allow them to gain additional income, keeping in touch with other people and cultivate social relations, satisfy their

³³ According to Burgess losing functional role and social identity by an individual happens as a result of retiring and stopping social activity. An individual then experiences being „trapped in socially vapid role.”

needs related to work and – what is very important – would build the budget of the country. This has a fundamental meaning, especially as we are now observing the decreasing efficiency of the institutions of social security. At the same time it is worth remembering, that nowadays the situation in the labour market, especially the current unemployment problem may cause – and it really does – some discrimination of older people, who are eager to work. Employing an older person, who receives a retirement pension, is perceived morally wrong, as blocking work places to people in the productive age. Moreover, the existing regulations caused that until recently, as a result of extending access to retirement systems the professional activity of older people decreased (Szukalski 1999, 69-78). Relatively long education leads to a deformation of the relation between the time worked and the time of gaining experience, so currently in many economically developed countries the raising the retirement age for both men and women to the age of 65 is in progress.

Nowadays, as a result of decreasing labour resources, the chance of professional reactivation can create economically productive people, in different forms of employment from part-time to tele-work or professional advising. The better the education of the individual is, the higher the alternative cost of retirement. So the perspective of employing pensioners will be determined by their eagerness to continue work and the economical need of increasing employment. Another factor that may stimulate professional activity of people in a post-productive age is the fact, that the development of the market economy, especially high technology decreases the demand for simple physical work, but creates advantageous conditions for high-qualified people – regardless of age. Paradoxically the time of the transformation and restructuring of the economy may favour seniors' professional activation, especially in all those fields of economy, which do not require work which is limited by age (Frąckiewicz, 2004, 149). In the case of a stable or relatively stable economy, depending on changing work supply and low demand for work, the group of people in the post-productive age could be professionally activated (Pietruszek 2006, 197). It is worth remembering that in the last few years in Poland also there were attempts to legislate actions, which aimed at making the retirement age of women at 65, the same as the retirement age for men and restraining the possibility of professional work after early retirement (Goliowska 2004, 208).

Conclusions

1. The process of the ageing of many societies, as well as Polish society, creates many economical, political, social and cultural consequences. The real perspective of work force deficiency mobilizes changes in the field of politics and work organization.

2. At the same time an increasing number of seniors cause them to become an important, although specific type of consumer (so the consumption demand has to also undergo transformation). A growth of demand for health services, especially in the area of medical care, rehabilitation, physical therapy and relaxation, education and artistic services should be expected. An important issue is to teach the senior consumers how to find offers suitable for them and that satisfying their needs, among the loads of offers potentially dedicated to them. This is an issue of great importance, because as a specific consumer type, the senior consumer will significantly influence the demand for goods and services of a specific economic type.
3. But what is most alarming is the problem of rapidly growing fiscal deficiency and the insufficient financing of the Polish retirement system, which will intensify even more when the baby boom generation retires. The stability of pensions from public retirement funds is impossible to maintain at current level. In order to prevent retirement system bankruptcy it is necessary to constantly monitor such areas as: reform of retirement system, introducing later retirement, increasing the effectiveness of work and the professional activation of seniors as well as the liberalization of immigration regulations.

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