



Unheard voices: vulnerability experiences of three Yoruba older women in Southwest, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study explored the vulnerability experiences of three older women in Southwest Nigeria, focusing on important developmental indicators and how they transformed into vulnerabilities later in life. This paper adopted an exploratory design using an inductive approach through in-depth interviews with three older women aged 73, 79 and 83 years and their significant others. Atlas Ti version 8 was used to analyze the data. The study revealed that the three older women were vulnerable in different ways depending on their socioeconomic status, life experiences, socioeconomic status of their children, human capital, physical and cognitive health, and death of loved ones. The absence of policies and social safety nets that could safeguard older women from vulnerability was acknowledged as a source of concern by the participants. It is concluded that there is the need for policy intervention for care and protection of older women and, by extension, men in Nigeria.

Keywords: *gender; older women; vulnerability; lifespan perspective; Nigeria*

Introduction

The world's population is ageing as a result of increasing fertility and declining mortality rates (UN, 2019). As at 2013, people aged 60 years and above made-up 11.7 percent of the global population. This figure is anticipated to be more than double to 21.1 percent by 2050, that is, increase from 605 million to 2 billion (National Institute of Aging, 2013). The rate at which the African continent is contributing to the world's ageing population is alarming. According to a UN report on population ageing published in 2017, the population of older adults in Africa is anticipated to grow faster than any other region in the world. By 2050, the continent's population of persons aged 60 and above would have more than tripled, rising from 69 million to 225 million, with Nigeria having the largest older population in Sub-Saharan Africa (Population Reference Bureau, 2017).

Growing old in Nigeria takes place in the context of poverty, socioeconomic hardship, epidemics and pandemics, as well as the gradual breakdown and disintegration of traditional extended family bonds (Adebanjoko & Ugwuoke, [2014](#)). Despite the fact that many elderly people in Nigeria are poor, there are no social protection programs in place to help them. Similarly, older people are becoming increasingly vulnerable as a result of the political economy and modernization of attitudes and practices that are redefining intergenerational ties, including social values and care for the elderly (Aboderin, 2017). The socio-economic status of older people determines how the ageing process will enhance or mar their well-being in old age. The reality is that most older people come into old age with insufficient earnings or incomes and have to depend on their adult working children, community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations, and other significant others for survival (Josephson, 2017; Togonu-Bickersteth & Akinyemi, 2014). Older people who have spent their entire lives working for the government have suffered greatly. Their pensions are only provided on a piecemeal basis, often insufficient to meet their basic needs. Adult

working children are also financially vulnerable since they earn less than what is required to assist their elderly parents and relatives (Mayston et al., 2017).

Among the elderly social category, women are the most affected, according to Oxfam International (2017). Older women are said to live longer than men and account for a bigger proportion of older adults: specifically, women account for 54% of those aged 60 and above, over 60% at age 75, and 70% at age 90 (WHO, 2018). Studies have shown that populations with a large proportion of older people, especially older women are more prone to socio-economic problems and confront a heightened challenge of access to essential health and social care (Kalasa, 2001; Animashaun & Chapman, 2017; Atchessi et al, 2018). Some of these women often face discrimination and have difficulties maintaining social relations with friends and family especially in old age. In comparison to older men, who are more commonly regarded as experienced and powerful, older women endure a double marginalisation by being even less represented and are generally portrayed as feeble, ugly, and invisible in the social sphere (Anyansi-Archibong, 2021; Ekoh et al, 2021).

Addressing older women's vulnerability from a life span perspective might provide valuable insight into developing interventions and policies that help reduce the consequences of single or recurring instances of older women's vulnerability. The perspectives of older women and their significant others with respect to older women's experience of vulnerability are sparse in the literature. There is a dearth of such studies in the literature in Nigeria in particular where older women are most vulnerable. This research explored the vulnerability experiences of three older women in Southwest Nigeria, focusing on important developmental indicators and how these transforms into vulnerabilities later in life. The goal was to explore the life trajectories that led to such vulnerabilities in old age.

Theoretical Framework

The Lifespan Perspective (LP) of human development attempts to comprehend the various components that influence people's lives from childhood to death. LP was proposed by Paul Baltes (1939–2006), a German psychologist. LP as a micro-level theory has proven to be an instrumental theoretical lens for addressing an individual's life trajectory. Exploring older people's life trajectories from growing-up to old age is one way to gain insights into how experiences in earlier periods of life have shaped their vulnerabilities in later life. Older people are sometimes exposed to some vulnerabilities due to their background as well as their environment in which they live. Lifespan theorists opine that development is life-long, and change is inevitable across the lifespan. From this perspective, older people's vulnerability is multifaceted and multidirectional, with events from earlier stages of life having an impact on current and ongoing stages of life. Individuals encounter specific changes throughout their lifespan (childhood, adulthood, and late-adulthood/old age) as a result of their socioeconomic background and socio-cultural environment of growth. This study explored the significant events from childhood, adulthood, and old age as they relate to older women's vulnerabilities in later life.

Methods

The empirical data presented here comes from a national project which employed a sequential exploratory mixed-methods research design to study vulnerability indicators of older people in Nigeria. Thus, the paper used an inductive approach to narrate the lived experiences of three women volunteers in Southwest Nigeria. To learn more about their experiences of vulnerabilities in transitioning to old age, we adopted a qualitative case-study method. This method allows researchers and participants to engage, discuss, and analyse life experiences from the participants' perspective. The three cases (participants) in this study volunteered to participate in the case study after determining that their cases were unique enough to warrant further exploration. Volunteers were clearly informed that the purpose of the study

was to learn about the lives of older people and their vulnerability experiences that may have been challenging for them. In seeking to gain a context for the participant's ageing process, an initial focus group discussion (FGD) was held among older women in Lagos and Osun States, which focused on eliciting information about general vulnerabilities of the older population in Nigeria. Income insecurity is a key source of vulnerability among older women, according to early findings from the pre-test and main study. Many women have a high level of economic dependence with little or no stable personal income, and the majority of them have no assets. Only a few of these women receive social assistance, despite the fact that many of them have raised and trained their children and grandchildren. As such, older women face increased economic vulnerability and impoverishment. We chose the three women based on their wealth parity. We learnt what they consider to be significant in their lives in the past, as well as what they consider to be relevant in their daily lives now. The lifespan framework served as a guide for describing and interpreting their experiences.

Participants

The study included three older women aged 73, 79, and 83 years old, as well as three significant individuals identified by each of them as their confidants, resulting in a total of six (6) interviews. Significant others are people who have a close relationship with the older women, important to their well-being, and have something to say about them. For each participant, one significant other who is close to the participant was recruited from rural, peri-urban or urban areas. The rationale for recruiting participants from various contexts was to ensure that the data was diverse and that participants' socioeconomic position was accurately reflected. In terms of status and connection, the participants' upbringing and experiences varied, reflecting variations typical of older people's circumstances in most Nigerian communities. A volunteer non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit participants for this study. After determining the uniqueness of their

case, the researchers asked if they would like to be involved in case studies with the nomination of at least one significant other which the three subjects readily agreed to. The phone numbers of the participants and their significant others were obtained. They were followed up by telephone calls to schedule appointments and venues of the interview. To protect the identities of participants, all the names in the paper, including those of significant others, are pseudonyms.

Figure 1 provides a brief overview of the participant's socio-demographic information.

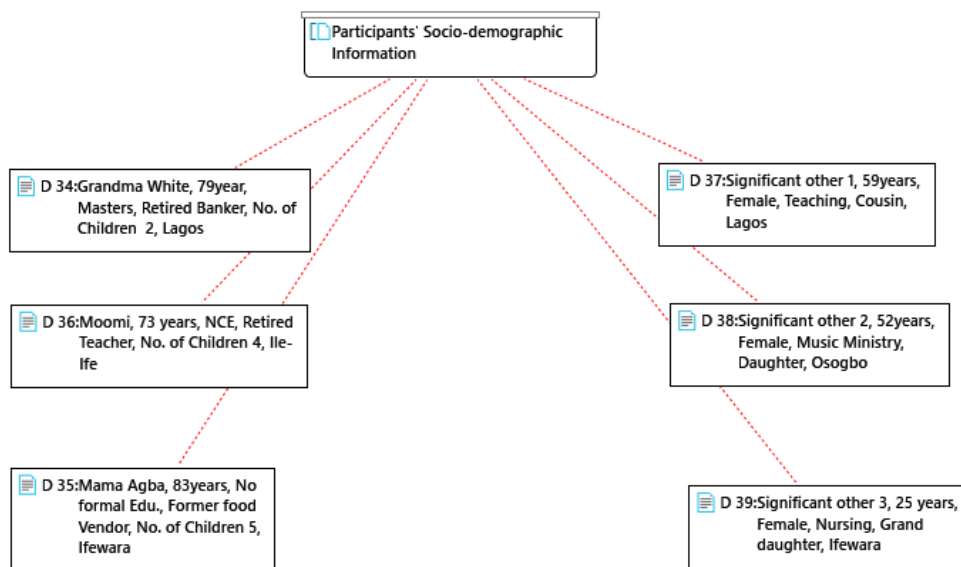


Figure 1: Sociodemographic of the participants

Grandma White was 79 years at the time of the interview. She lived with her husband, housekeepers, a driver, and a gate-man. She has a Master's degree and formerly worked as a bank manager before retiring. She has two children, with a 13-year parity between them. The children are living outside the country. She was born into a royal family and grew up in a communal environment before going to study outside the country. The only person who knows *Grandma White* too well is



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significant other 1, who she describes as a teacher, friend, and confidant. She also lives in the same neighbourhood as Grandma White, and they see each other almost every day.

Moomi was 73 years old, a widow, and she lived with a house help. She possesses a National Certificate of Education (NCE) and formerly worked as a teacher. She has four children, all of whom live in different parts of the country. Her daughter was chosen as her significant other (significant other 2). She has a great deal of faith in her daughter, and the two of them are quite close, according to her. She tells her everything about herself that her other children do not know. *Moomi* lives in Ile-Ife, while her daughter lives in another city about 50km away but they communicate for several hours on the phone every day. Significant other 2 works as a Gospel music minister.

Mama Agba was 83 years old, a widow with a visual impairment, and had her granddaughter living with her. She has no formal schooling and previously worked as a food vendor. She has five children who live in different parts of the country. She lives with her granddaughter. She chose her granddaughter, who is a nurse, 25 years old, and her care-giver, as her significant other (significant other 3).

Data Collection

Upon verbal consent to participate in the study and agreement to meet at the agreed day and time, the participants were visited in their homes by the researchers. Participants with the exception of *mama agba* gave written consent for participation in the interviews, including permission for audio recordings, on the day of the interviews. The consent form for *Mama Agba* was read to her, and with the help of her granddaughter, she provided a verbal consent and had her thumb printed on the form. The data was collected utilizing a separate in-depth interview guide for older adults and their significant others, but with similar topics concerning the elderly. Data was gathered through narratives based on rigorous daily 4 to 5 hours

face-to-face in-depth interviews done in the preferred language of the elderly women and their significant others. For older women and their significant others, the interviews were held on different days. The exercise lasted for two weeks. The interviews were conducted by one male (a Family Sociologist) and one female researcher (a Developmental Psychologist) both of whom are experts in qualitative research methods. They were involved in the construction of themes as well as the design of the in-depth interview guide. The interviews began with broad questions about the interviewees' upbringing, progressing through their middle-aged experience, and finally to their experience of becoming old, as well as vulnerability experienced in later life. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Two of the interviews were conducted in Yoruba, the participants' native language, while the other four were conducted in English, as requested by the participants. The interviews conducted in Yoruba language were transcribed and then translated into English. Participants demonstrated that they understood the research and consent procedures. Interviews took place in the agreed-upon location of the participants' homes.

Data Analysis

To get familiar with and gain insights from the data, the transcribed and translated transcripts were read and re-read to identify codes, themes, and categories. Both researchers read and discussed all of the transcripts in particular. After some discussion, a codebook was generated, and both researchers independently coded the transcripts using an inductive approach to coding. Later, the researchers came together to review, discuss, and agree on codes. This process ensures intercoder reliability. The emergence of new codes prompted a modification in the codebook, and the transcripts were re-read using the new codebook. This approach was used to develop categories, which were then explored and conceived into broad themes. Emerging themes were discovered through repeated readings of the transcripts and consideration of possible meanings and how they related to the growing themes.

Thus, the discussions were structured around the themes generated. The two researchers analysed the data using a general inductive approach to qualitative data analysis with the aid of Atlas Ti. 8 software.

Ethical considerations

The participants and their significant others were informed about the research both orally and in writing, and they signed a document confirming their informed consent. They were allowed to choose the time and location of the interview. No names or contact information were recorded on the tapes or transcriptions, and no unauthorised person had access to the data to ensure confidentiality. At the conclusion of the interview, an incentive was presented to the participants for their time. The Institute of Public Health, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, provided ethical approval (IPHOAU/12/971) for the study.

Rigour of the study

The study ensures the trustworthiness of the data collected through the prolonged engagement of the participants in an in-depth interview. Also, we probed to gain more insight into the trajectory of older peoples' lives. During the interviews, the member-checking method was used to keep track of emerging themes. We set aside our bias, thus, we relied solely on the participants' narratives of their experiences. Also, the characteristics and environment of the participants were thoroughly explained in order to ensure that the study could be replicated by any researcher.

Findings

The study explored the vulnerability of older women from childhood to old age. Themes from various life stages were used to describe these women's vulnerabilities. Their life paths resulted in retrospective and introspective narratives of their vulnerabilities. These are given here with excerpts from selected interviews in which participants' identities were protected by using pseudonyms.

Growing up: the social context

Participants recounted how their childhood experiences shaped and transformed their vulnerability experiences. The women were able to connect their childhood to their early adulthood when they were at their most productive phase in terms of building a career and raising children. As a result, their ageing experiences were distinct, as were the vulnerabilities that accompanied them. The participants largely believed that at the point of growing up (childhood/teenage years) a child gets socialised into the culture of the group he/she belongs to and also acquires education and skills, and begins to understand the ontology of the world. Stereotypes from the point of child's birth led to disparities among children in the household. The girl-child is often believed to be the victim in such cases and experiences from this early stage of growth shape the psychology of the child. Growing up as female children, the participants had different experiences. They were discriminated against in the process of attending school as a girl-child, with the belief that girls' education is unimportant. Such a choice was called a communal decision, and going against the community consensus requires a daring and exposed parent.

Two of the participants were able to go to school, while the third did not. Their backgrounds had an equal influence on their schooling experiences and how a girl-child was perceived, since one hailed from a royal family, another from a middle-class household, and the third from a poor one. One of the interviewees recounted her father's experience about sending her to school as follows:

We must not allow these girls to go back to school, said the community leader, because they are going into somebody's home and be in the kitchen. My father would say thank you very much... we'd all go back. But I told you not to do this! He'd keep quiet. The climax of this little episode is that he was summoned to the council of the village, which is now a town to the glory of God, they reported that my father was sending his girls to school and that the girls had nothing to do in



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school...My father was fined £1.1 for not obeying their orders...

(Grandma White, 79years)

According to Moomi,

I was privileged to have an enabling environment that knows the importance of education. I have no choice than to go to school even though the majority of my peers were not going to school but I was determined and it paid off for me now. I am also a retired teacher. (Moomi, 73years)

The third uneducated woman lamented that she grew up in a rural area where there was no school at that moment. In her narrative:

My parents did not know anything about school and even in our community, we were just hearing about education while people believed it was a new way to enslave women and we were made to believe that it is for male-child only by those who had gone to the cities. (Mama Agba, 83years)

The decision to send the male or female child to school affects the future of such a child. While schooling might not guarantee wealth, it bestows respect to individuals and gives leverage to them over people who do not attend schools. In late adulthood, education acquired in early ages does not go to waste as it influences the decisions of those around and also gives advantage to the educated person.

In Moomi's view:

"so much impact, comparing myself with my peers who are not as educated as I am, I can see my education set me apart even in church. I was given much more recognition and made assistant general Secretary for five years and then promoted to general Secretary nationwide for my church. I was even selected in absentia, and I can see that my educational level played the major role"

(Moomi, 73years)

From her recount, the role of childhood education in late adulthood cannot be over-emphasized. Unfortunately, not all persons could get formal education as not all could afford the luxury. Those who did not have the opportunity to go to school harbor regrets because they feel that this may have contributed to their situation and will inevitably have an impact on their wellbeing as they age.

As narrated by Mama Agba:

"...Inability to have formal education is still very painful for me. It wasn't intentional for me, but I was not enrolled in school, because education was less valued here then, and there was no chance of enrolling me, no one did. Probably, if I had been enrolled in school, I would have been a bit learned. I really wished to be educated, but no one enrolled me. So, it is painful to me not to have had formal education, because I would have been a better person if I was enrolled in school..." (Mama Agba, 83years)

According to the response above, a vulnerability in late adulthood is a lack of a formal education. The opportunity to pursue one's desired career and financial goals is provided by formal education. In contrast to civil servants, who have the benefit of a pension that guarantees some level of financial self-sufficiency, running and managing a business requires formal education. Without a formal education, one cannot enter the civil service, which poses a threat to late adulthood because it may result in a high reliance on family members and children from lack of pension.

Adulthood: Career and Parenthood

Marriage has a great role in parenthood. The type of care, love, and attention a child gets while growing up is influenced by the type of family he/she is born into, as featured in the participants' narratives. The participants recounted that the experiences of marriages and parenting are often relatable as they contribute to the individual differences in growth. These experiences as narrated by the participants often shape the thoughts of people and help them make better decisions. Mama



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Agba cited her parenting experience as contributing to her aging process. She stated:

During our own time of parenting, one would have to wake up at midnight to attend to her child, nurture the child, breastfeed, and back her child to wherever she needed to go; farm, hospital, or searching for herbs. I had no mother-in-law I could leave my child with. And until the child starts to walk and talk, you have to continue this for close to three years. So, this process contributes to growing old. It weakens the body. (Mama Agba, 83years)

In her own experience, Moomi explained that she had the support of her mother, mother-in-law and that of her co-wives while raising her children. Although she was not totally pleased with these experiences, she had no choice because she had to further her education and have a better career. This is confirmed from her narrative when she said:

...I went for teacher training after 3 years when I returned home. During the training I had to distribute my children between my mother and my mother in-law, one got very sick and was hospitalized for one week without my knowledge, this was why they were taken to Osogbo and my Rival (first wife) looked after my children well, though a rival will always be a rival, with one reason or the other. With my husband's support, I came back home to Ife. It was after my husband's coronation that he also came and stayed in Ife and he seems to enjoy it better, and that was how we started living together in Ife, yes there would still be rift but they are not beyond amendment. His business was not moving smoothly and my salary being more than his, we just managed ourselves like that. At the late stage of his life, he just resorted to going out to read the newspaper, relax and return home. (Moomi, 73years)

From the experience of Grandma White:



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Maybe the woman again needs to be told or needs to understand and needs to put it in her mental faculty that look I don't need to have ten children, have what you can look after and enjoy a good life. That is my policy. When I was younger, I used to say oh a family of six is so nice. I used to envisage that; four children, the parents. But after living in the UK for 8 years, I said no, I can't be like that. I want to have a good life. I want to give life to that child. So, there is a good eleven and half years between my daughter and my son, because I wasn't interested. I'm telling you the truth. I wasn't. Because I'll go on holiday, I will have this, the child must be properly fed, must be properly clothed, must go to a good school. To the glory of God, she went to Queen's College, and University of Ilorin, she did ICAN before she went back to FUTA and did her MBA. I was looking at the progression and the cost of living a good life. So, I wasn't interested in many children. I have two to the glory of God, Jide is a boy. He's now 42. If women, I think when there are too many women living with a man, they begin to compete. To achieve what? To achieve poverty? Mystery? To achieve poverty and mystery? No they didn't understand. So I think women should try to begin to let women know that don't make yourself a beast of burden. Have what you can look after, and enjoy life. Don't just look after them, but for you at the time you're looking after them, enjoy your life. I might be selfish but that's how I see it.

(Grandma White, 79years)

Based on the above narrative, Grandma White feels marriage and parenthood should not be a burden when a woman considers a wide parity among her children. She opined that a woman needs to take care of herself physically and career-wise while taking care of her home. She should also be able to accomplish all that she sets her mind to do career-wise.

...Particularly if the woman is now poor. She cannot feed well during and after pregnancy. It takes its toll. I think that's what we should be telling ourselves, you know

small groups, particularly those in the rural areas talk to them, this day and age. Even children are not willing to marry again anyway. So we're begging God and begging them, even if it's just one child, just marry and have one, you know. The educated now understand the responsibility of motherhood and fatherhood. It's a great responsibility. It is!

(Grandma White, 79years)

Furthermore, finance, in this case, is often favourably sought for and the needs of the children may be or may not be met depending on the financial security of the parents. The responsibilities accompanying marriage and parenthood are enormous and must be carefully managed in order to have a well-organised home and secure the future of the fruits of such an institution.

Late Adulthood Events: Unemployment/underemployment of children and wealth status

According to the participants, children, significant others, carers, and community members provide care and support to older people as they enter late adulthood. Such care and assistance are typically voluntary and reciprocal, and it is viewed as a responsibility that has been assumed and accepted without any form of formal recompense. Older people's care is strongly rooted in African culture, and it is one of the core values that has evolved into a form of informal social security in later life. However, the economic reality of unemployment has predisposed most older people to come to the aid of their unemployed young adult children. Participants believed that supporting their unemployed children at old age has detrimental psychological consequences for them. The participants lamented that the labour market structure has changed dramatically, with increased insecurity and unemployment. In their words "after they finish school, young adults encounter a lot of uncertainties". They argue that in today's Nigeria, you need to be connected to the powerful in order to get a job for your child(ren). This, along with the many other concerns, has made older people more vulnerable psychologically. One of the participants explanations corroborates this view:



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You know the major problem we have in this country is unemployment. ..after their education some will wait two, three, five years yet no job, nothing to do and if they can just help themselves, if I can travel abroad, I can make it. Even your parents will even be praying that their children get a job abroad or travel abroad, whatever he or she is doing there as long as it's not stealing, let him just go, I think life will be better than for him to be here. That's the major problem, our government should work very well on employment issues, because nobody wants to, as a parent, you don't want to suffer training your children in school and then be giving them food again. It's not even good. So, I think the employment issue must be attended to...I pray God will help us, because with God, all things are possible. We cannot rely on our government but we'll still be praying for them.

(Moomi, 73years)

For Grandma White, a wealthy older woman, financial vulnerability took on a new dimension. Because some of them are unable to undertake errands on their own, elderly women may become financially vulnerable as a result of domestic employees stealing their money and increasing commodity prices. She said that her driver inflates prices and occasionally conspires with the house-help to steal food, money, and other goods from the house. As a result, domestic employees have to be changed frequently, and finding trustworthy domestic help has been quite tough in recent times.

You see, you cannot do everything by yourself, especially at this age. Even if you are physically active, you need people around you. But in a situation where people around you are stealing your items like money, food, and other little things, what do you do? I will send my driver something and he will add his own money, thinking I will not know. The gateman sometimes connives with the house help to steal money. It is annoying and makes me unhappy...

(Grandma White, 79years)

This is not the situation for Mama Agba, who is physically impaired and marginally impoverished. The participant expressed her dissatisfaction with her carer, who is a relative, for stealing her money and occasionally transferring airtime and diverting money sent to her by her children to herself. She submitted that she would have to convince her children to give the money to a neighbour, who she would then collect from. The interviewee explains thus:

I don't trust my granddaughter; she always takes my money. When my children send money to me, she will not tell me until they phone to tell me they have sent it. She makes an effort to look after me, yet she is preoccupied with stealing my money...The issue is that I don't have a choice. (Mama Agba, 83years)

Grandma White noted that:

Those who are needy need financial support, so many elderly people are in need. The government has no plan for anybody, not even for these poor children who are making noise there, they have no plan for them. And they will be saying whatever, I say where is Nigeria now? Oh God, help this nation not to fail our younger generation. So, they do need financial support. They do, many do. But who is giving them? Is it a child that finished university and has no job for seven years? These are basic problems. They do need financial support. (Grandma White, 79years)

Social ties with family, friends and neighbours

According to participants, the social cycle shrinks as individuals get older. The capacity to keep one's cycle continuing till one is aged determines one's cycle in old age. Participants agreed that friends are important in old age, regardless of their age group, class, or conditions. Companionship is considered vital at this stage of life since the need for someone to talk to increases as one gets older. Participants in different socio-economic classes submitted that old people seem to be lonely and isolated due to their inability to satisfy their craving for friendship. A participant

exclaimed that “*You can’t make old friends, you either have them or you don’t*”. Participants agreed that having at least one person who understands you adds to the well-being of older persons. The participants viewed companionship in old age as more than just social glue and glamour; they feel that true friendship in late adulthood alleviates loneliness, improves health, and increases a sense of well-being. Describing her experience, a participant submitted that:

You need good friends who will be like sisters to you. And sometimes you have opposite sex as friends that are willing to see you become what you wish in life with advice and everything. But on my side, because I went to an all-girls college. I thank God for the few that I had, that we’re still good friends till now. You know “You can’t make old friends, you either have them or you don’t”. We left the college in 1963, and we’re still together and a couple of them have passed away in the past few years. But we’re still four who are still very very close. One of us was 81 at the end of February, she’s much older than the rest of us. She resides in America. And Teju is here, she’s 80 in August, Grace is here in Ikeja, she’ll be 80 again in October before me, and I will be 80 in November, and our baby-sister friend, Ranti, she’ll be 80 in March next year. We are very very close, and what affects me affects you. That is the way we are. We are prayer partners on issues; pray with me along on this issue. That’s what we are. So, we are still very very close. (Grandma White, 79years)

Corroborating the above, another interviewee said:

I grew up with few friends and we’re still friends because we belong to the same age cohort. Meanwhile, old age ridden with sickness has impeded our usual relationship. (Mama Agba, 83 years)

The responses above confirm how social relationships can influence the choices and decisions a person makes and the influence of bonds within these relationships. Friendship and close association are necessary parts of later life stability.

Apart from these relationships, support from family members has a major role to play in the wellbeing of older people. The dedication of time and attention to people of these ages helps them as it serves as a support to them and keeps them assured of being cared for. In most cases, family members are regarded first before friends depending on how cordial relationships existing between them are. Family members are also the first responder to the call of help and need and therefore family members must avail themselves of the demands of people in their later lives. According to a participant:

I thank God. I've enjoyed the support of people around me; my immediate family, my husband and my children. They are always there. Anything I'm thinking of, for example when I wanted to buy that car more than ten years ago, I called my son and said I want to buy a car. And I'm looking at the modelIt's the best car in the world. Next to it is either Nissan or Honda. The other day I wanted to know something, anything I want to know, I'll just call my son and say, please google this thing and find out for me. To me, that is support, and if it's my daughter, she is always there, she's always calling me on the phone, that's support. (Grandma White, 79years)

In late adulthood, the lack of necessary attention and companionship has been viewed as a vulnerability that is harmful to older people's health. Loneliness and individualistic living might emerge as a consequence of children's work responsibilities, an older person's location, or the family system. Many elderly people find that talking on the phone and communicating with family members keeps them entertained and happy as it is becoming more difficult to interact with neighbours in this era. As explained by an interviewee:

Loneliness is not good at all. When you're alone, anything can happen. Although society is something else; the children will have to go to their different work stations, but if there are other elders around, they can easily relate and rub



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*minds, and they won't feel lonely. Loneliness creates worries for the elderly ones.
(Mama Agba, 83 years)*

Another stated,

Relating with people is a bit difficult now. You don't even know your next neighbour. You want to know them, they think oh they're coming too close. So, you keep yourself to yourself. When you are in Rome, you do as the Romans. That's unfortunate. But this is what the world is becoming. (Moomi, 73 years)

Being socially integrated and having access to social support are linked to improved physical health, and overall cognitive health throughout adulthood, including later life.

Physical and cognitive changes in old age

Apart from the major vulnerabilities explained above, there are several vulnerabilities older people are exposed to. In old age, the majority of older people undergo physical and cognitive decline and they are more prone to suffer from the challenges of co-morbidity. Hearing loss, refractive errors and cataracts, back and neck discomfort, and osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, depression, and dementia are all common illnesses highlighted as experienced by older people. Participants expressed their dissatisfaction with their hearing loss, vision problems, and memory loss, which caused them to forget things. As expressed by Mama Agba:

I started having sight problems about five years ago. And I went to the health centre where I was directed to the General hospital but to no avail. I also went to see someone at Ipetu. I learnt there is someone there who is into eye care, but he said he could not handle it and asked me to go back home. I bought a drug that I was using but it later turned into what I have now. Though some said it's as a result of old age, I denied it because I didn't believe old age could cause loss of sight. I couldn't resort to fate because that is what God wanted to happen to me.



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Although if I had my way, I wanted my sight back, but as much as we tried, it didn't work out. Hearing also has been weakened. I started noticing that about a year ago. Though I still hear, when the voice is coming from a longer distance, it becomes hard to hear well, except if the speaker is making noise. I have always had problems with my smelling sense. I don't really smell things. My taste bud is still very active. It still tastes very well. Mobility has reduced seriously though. I start feeling pain after about 3-4 minutes of walking (Mama Agba, 83 years)

Grandma White's narration on the same issue:

In my right ear I discover that it develops more wax than the other one, that's about five years ago, but I can hear.....When the wax is turning round, you feel the pain. Can you ever imagine that? I asked to see my doctor, fixed an appointment for my surgery in London but was told it is not something serious. So, he just put in virgin oil. And so when I got home, I just put some anointing oil in, put cotton wool on, went to bed and that's all. So, I think I started having that issue about five years ago. (Grandma White, 79 years)

Moomi was quite concerned about her memory loss, and she expressed herself in the following way:

Haaaa, I am very forgetful. Even when I used to drive after daddy's death and Mechanics were worrying me too much, I had to tell the children to come and pick the vehicle. Because if I put the car key in my clothes, I can look for it when I want to go out again. Same thing happened when I was cooking with gas, I kept the matches in my clothes and looked for them when I needed them again. It was so frustrating when I discovered them in my clothes when I wanted to shower.

(Moomi, 73 years)

From the responses of the three selected women, it can be inferred that women experience several physiological challenges with advancing ageing. While some

women in their late adulthood luckily escape these physiological challenges, many have experienced them and many more are going through them. However, with the support of the family and adequate medical attention, these problems can be properly managed in order not to limit the engagement of older people in activities of interest or meeting with friends. The participants identified and acknowledged the natural remedies that have worked for them, some of which are medically supported. The participants submitted that healthy eating, adequate relaxation, and exercise, among other things, all contribute to the elderly's well-being. According to them, eating regularly and on time, diversity in choice of foods, including vegetables, drinking a lot of water, and hygiene are important for the body as they aid digestion and keep the body in good condition. While the major physical or other health challenges might still persist, one has to also take equal responsibility for caring for the body by watching what is being eaten. This is exemplified in one of the participants' narratives:

So, good health is essential for ageing. If the health is not there, it's a problem, it's a big issue. So, good health is necessary for old age and they say you're ageing gracefully. Oh you will occasion of oh I don't know how I'm feeling, that is it, and you eat well, eat well, don't just fill your system with every rubbish in the world. In old age, you need something small to eat, not a massive plate filled with eba, pounded yam. If you eat some, I don't eat pounded yam. I'm an Ijesa who doesn't eat pounded yam because I stopped eating pounded yam in 1979 when I had my son, because anytime I ate pounded yam I felt bloated and I would go to the toilet, I would not sleep, I said ah. Not your full of pounded yam, eba with a small quantity of soup. It's killing! It's killing!! So, if you eat the right food, and God is kind to you, give you good health. Ah! Hold it as a precious gift. And don't let bad eating habits take that health away from you. If you eat a lot of vegetables, fruits, drink a lot of water, two litres of water a day or eight or ten cups of water a day, and try and exercise which I'm not doing and I keep telling



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*myself you're just doing yourself.
years)*

(Grandma White, 79

Memory loss either in its slight or extreme form threatens the wellbeing of the aged. It stresses them physically and psychologically. Loss of memory is a very common problem associated with old age. Without human support and presence, memory loss can be much worse as it frustrates people in late adulthood and drains them of energy. Because of its prevalence in society and the challenges that come with dementia, memory loss has been accepted as a major challenge.

Indulging in self-pity can affect you in all forms. Self-pity can affect you in many ways. Instead of facing the problem of memory loss headlong and accepting it as part of ageing, but indulge in self-pity, you can become a vulnerable person to more problems, if you allow self-pity to override you.

(Grandma White, 79 years)

Learning in Old age

Learning is quite often slow in late adulthood because older people tend to understand things less quickly and lose memory capacity as they get older. While learning is often encouraged to distract older people from loneliness and lack of activities, memory loss often acts as a setback to the process of learning. A decrease in strength can also mar the efficiency and rate of learning as breaks are frequently required for older people to rest and relate with one another. At this level, learning for older people involves having a place to go, pass their time and, most importantly, people to communicate and interact with. They seize the opportunity to learn something new, familiarise themselves with what they already know, or learn more about a topic. Participants are enthusiastic about the prospect of studying in old age, even if it is just for pleasure. The participants had varied opinions regarding learning in their old age. Two of the participants had a strong desire to learn new



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things, whereas one had little or no desire to study in her old age. One of the participants, who had a great desire to learn even as an elderly person, considered it a good thing that developed countries do.

She claims that:

It's a good thing, and you have that in civilised countries. I know there is that sort of thing in England that I know. There is. Even the elderly people were taught how to use computers. They have where you go and learn how you can use computers. They are there in the borough. Like a local government, the boroughs are like the local government. So, there is that provision, but who made it? The government.

(Grandma White, 79 years).

Contrary to the above excerpts, Moomi said:

Well I don't really have a drive to learn something new aside from the teachings of the Bible at church.

(Moomi, 73 years)

From their responses, the reluctance, motive and drive to learn new things or to acquire new skills can be attributed to differences in life trajectories and social class.

Grieving the Death of Loved ones

The death of a loved one(s) can also be a portal to the vulnerability of older people. Participants contextualized the death of loved ones as a great loss in old age that affects their emotions, health, and psychological well-being. When someone close to them passes away, they feel sad, devastated and alone. This state makes them vulnerable to several health and social problems because at this point they cannot and do not care about themselves but grieve the loss of their loved ones. As their capacity to perform everyday tasks deteriorates, the aged also feel a sense of loss

and despair. As a result, the elderly may lose their sense of purpose. Two of the older women summed up their view by claiming that things were not the same when they lost their spouse and first child, respectively, while the third woman stated that she has never lost any friends or family members. She mentioned that from infancy till now, she was able to keep three to four friends. The anguish of losing a loved one is shown in the excerpts below from a participant's perspectives.

My husband's death really got at me. Imagine someone you have children with, someone you have been winning and dining with, someone you've been raising your children with; you can caution a child with the presence of him. But at a point he is no more there. Imagine the security you had when your husband was alive and no one could harass or fight you because of him. That can be painful, and I was particularly affected. I was a bit old when he died; At that time the responsibility of two persons turned on one person. It caused me emotional pressure. He died about 20 years ago. (Mama Agba,83 years)

From Mama Agba's view:

When my first child died, it was a sad experience. And my younger sister also lost a child. These experiences were very sad and painful because they should be taking care of us now that we are old. (Mama Agba, 83 years).

In general, the loss of close family members or friends may make the elderly more vulnerable depending on their relationship. Many older people experience difficulties due to the death of loved ones, health problems, cognitive problems, and the fact that they frequently can no longer live alone.

Stigmatization in old age

Apart from cases of death, societal influences and affiliations can pose a threat to the general security of people in late adulthood. In Africa, older individuals, particularly women, are labelled as witches, especially when tragic events occur around them. The labelling and tags affiliated to women in late adulthood might

depend on location, class, status and education. However, those who lack these factors of differentiation are often subjected to accusations and ridicule. As a self-fulfilling prophecy, stigma impacts the stigmatised thus, negative preconceptions such as "witchcraft" may lead to stigmatised people being mistreated and discriminated against. Mama Agba's experience revealed this, which she said was caused by her physical condition (loss of vision). According to her caregiver,

...You know when someone marries the wrong person. When some daughters-in-law realise that their aged mother-in-law is blind, they would be maltreating them...this will cause the old woman to be worried and start thinking about the situation, and die untimely. Some grandchildren see their grandmothers as witches. Meanwhile some grandmothers are also harsh and mean in their dealing with their grandchildren. So, it all depends on the relationship one has with the children and grandchildren sometimes. So, the grandchildren who refuse to live with their grandmothers may not be blamed. Some grandmothers are fetish, and they might eventually indoctrinate their grandchildren into witchcraft... (Caregiver, Mama Agba).

The full range of vulnerabilities brought on by stigmatisation in later life are not covered by the witchcraft allegation. These three older women experiences ageing differently when it comes to experiencing old age stigma.

Discussion

This study identified a range of women's experiences that exposed them to vulnerabilities in later life. These include experiences as a child, climbing the career ladder, parenthood experiences, unemployment status of grown-up children, social relations in late adulthood, physical and cognitive health in old age, stigmatisation and the death of loved ones. The experiences detailed here as they pertain to older

people's life trajectories have not been thoroughly interrogated in Nigerian gerontological literature and the influence of these trajectories on later life vulnerability experiences is rarely amplified. The main contribution of this case study is the in-depth understanding of the significant events from childhood, adulthood, and old age as they relate to older women's vulnerabilities in later life.

The findings revealed that the social context of growing up (family background, education, career, marriage and parenthood) as analysed from the responses of the selected women above can be accepted as a means to legitimise the stance that individual differences in growing up shape the future and orientation of individuals. Differences in the family background influence the path children from such families will follow, their responses to situations, and how well they will thrive. This is not to suggest that a person's family is solely responsible for his or her success or failure; rather, it is to highlight how powerful the family unit can be in influencing the lives and lived experiences of its members. Traditionally, the Yorubas would say "bi okete ba dagba tan, omun omo re ni mu," meaning "the parent feeds from the child when the child is grown-up." This social norm puts the financial burden of older parents on their grown-up children. Regrettably, this is not always so nowadays due to the unemployment or underemployment of most grown-up children in Nigeria. This is in tandem with Mayston et al.'s (2017) findings that adult working children are also financially vulnerable since they earn less than what is required to help their ageing parents and relatives. Hence, older people confront a double threat of vulnerability as a result of their social status, as the majority of their offspring cannot support them and some still depend on the elderly population for survival due to underemployment or unemployment.

Also, the study discovered that family status and exposure are linked to whether or not a female child attends school. Because of their family background and parents' exposure, the two participants who attended school were able to do so, and this has

translated into and aided their lifestyle in late adulthood. This is in accordance with UNICEF's submission that investing in the education of girls has a profound impact on communities, countries, and the entire globe. Girls who acquire an education are less likely to marry early, and they will lead healthier, more productive lives. However, the last non-educated participant expressed regret for her lack of education. One possible reason for this outcome is that there was a lack of understanding about the importance of girl-child education during her time and in her context. However, the situation has changed, and the right to education for girls is now a key component of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Furthermore, social ties are gradually eroding, and most older people now complain of loneliness. This study underscored the importance of social ties in old age, as narrated by the three women. They emphasised that as people grow older, their need for companionship expands, which can be obtained through long-term relationships developed with a spouse, children, other family members, close friends, and neighbours. Nonetheless, many older people who have not developed such relationships remain lonely, isolated, and neglected. This finding provides additional insight into the findings of the World Health Organization (2015) and Antonucci, Ajrouch, & Birditt, (2014) that social connectivity is a key enabler that allows older people to age successfully and in context, forms the foundation of age-friendly cultures. This is similar to the earlier findings of Charles and Carstensen (2010) that as people get older, they prefer to associate with close friends and family members who provide possibilities for emotionally significant interaction and a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, the study by Holt-Lunstad, Robles, and Sbarra (2017) affirmed that, in addition to smoking, flu vaccination, physical inactivity, and obesity, a lack of social ties is a predictor of premature death among older people. Thus, intimate social ties are frequently created in later life by people who have known one another for decades, whereas this is not always the case in modern times. A probable explanation is the change in the dynamics of the family

system, employment, modernization, and urbanisation (Adebanjoko & Ugwuoke, [2014](#)).

In addition, the study revealed that each of the three women had experienced diminish visual acuity, hearing impairment, and memory loss. They expressed unhappiness over these health concerns. These health concerns are sometimes the physical and cognitive signs of old age, albeit they do not affect every older person. The physical changes that occur as a result of growing older come with their own set of vulnerabilities. The danger of losing visual acuity, for example, is that anyone, including their carers, may take advantage of the elderly by stealing their money, giving them overdosed medicines to sleep, or punishing them unjustly (Chane & Adamek, 2015). This was mirrored in Mama Agba's complaint that her granddaughter was often stealing her money. Also, with hearing loss, older people who are unable to hear well may become depressed or withdraw from others because they feel excluded by their inability to grasp what is being said. They could be misunderstood as being confused, uncooperative and unresponsive. While memory loss exhibits a similar concern, some studies have linked hearing loss to an increased risk of dementia in old age. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 20,264 people from several prospective cohort studies, Loughrey et al. (2018) discovered that hearing impairment was substantially linked with dementia illnesses. This is also consistent with the findings of Michalowsky et al. (2019).

The study also discovered that learning in old age captivated two of the three participants, who showed a desire to learn new things even if it was merely to keep them occupied and provide them the opportunity to interact with others. One of the participants, who, despite her age, had a strong desire to learn, thought lifelong learning was a wonderful thing that the Western countries had developed. This is consistent with the study of Park, et al (2014) that learning in old age can assist older individuals improve their memory and brain health by slowing cognitive decline as they age and reducing the risk of dementia. However, a study found that

learning participation was lowest among some elderly women, widowers, older individuals in poor physical health, and those with lower socioeconomic position (Liesbeth De Donder et al. 2014).

Grief at the death of a loved one is a crucial occurrence in the lives of older women.

Only two of the three individuals grieved the loss of a spouse and a child. As a result, there is a big void in their life, which has resulted in irreplaceable loss. This might put the two women's physical and mental wellbeing in jeopardy, most especially the woman that lost her child. It rendered her most vulnerable and disempowered her mentally. This finding is supported by the findings of Rook and Charles (2017) that posited that many older individuals will lose one or more strong ties over the course of their lifetimes, which will have repercussions for their health and, in many cases, for the rearrangement of their social lives over time.

Lastly, and of interest, is Mama Agba's experience of being accused of witchcraft because of her physical condition - blindness. As a result, she experienced stigmatization, mistreatment, and discrimination, resulting in physical and verbal abuse. This finding corroborates the findings of Liepe (2016) and Sambe, Yander, and Abanyam (2014) that women accused of being witches are frequently subjected to abuses such as beatings, hackling, ridicule, torture, and even stoning to death. Also, a recent study by Wamara, Bennich and Strandberg (2021) found that older women were more vulnerable to accusation of witchcraft owing to disabilities, lack of a male child, and childlessness. This indicates that women accused of witchcraft are vulnerable to verbal, physical, emotional and psychological vulnerabilities. In Nigeria, Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no one shall be tortured or subjected to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. In spite of this declaration, some old women continue to experience persecution or discrimination due to the allegation that they are witches. A plausible explanation for this could be cultural narratives about witchcraft, particularly when someone is impoverished and physically challenged. \

Conclusion

Much of what happens in old age may be linked back to the individual's life trajectories. The conditions of the three women who participated in this study exemplify this. After several considerations from the responses of the three women we can conclude that late adulthood is a stage defined by family background, education, occupation, marriage, culture, exposure, social ties and relationships formed in a person's youth. Comfortability in late adulthood can be linked to the early years of an older person, choices made, location chosen, the orientation of such individuals towards life and most importantly human and social support around the elderly person. These older women face many vulnerabilities as they age, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, caring for the elderly is important in light of their significant contributions to their families and society. Older women are the glue that holds society together. They unite the family, help in caring for grandchildren, advise the young on crucial decisions, teach morals and cultural values, train others' children, give back to society, and many more. These positive values, in turn, will promote family unity and a sense of homogeneity in society by bringing people closer together. If proper attention is paid to the three main risk factors that contribute to vulnerability in older adults (health status, cognitive ability, and social network), older people will be able to live better lives and continue to contribute positively to their society.

Declarations:

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Availability of data

The dataset used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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