

Economic Struggles, Resilience and Agency: Ageing Market Women Redefining 'Old' in Kampala, Uganda

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Abstract: This article presents evidence from a qualitative study in which 67 in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted with ageing and old market women. The study focused on what 'old' means and how ageing and old market women redefine the meaning of 'old' to gain economic independence. The findings indicate that the meaning is still greatly attached to physical changes; there are differences in how different individuals respond to the changes, as some challenge the gender stereotypes and prejudices attached to old age and show resilience. Indicators of resilience among market women included: an active economic lifestyle, asset ownership, the freedom to socialise, the ability to make decisions about what it is they value, and the ability to earn an income. Indeed, ageing women in market trade are less dependent on others. To these women, seniority in age was no longer a challenge, nor a source of distress; instead, it was a motivator for pushing forward. Based on the findings, the authors recommend extending social security grants to enable even more old persons to start and maintain economically rewarding ventures.

Keywords: ageing, the meaning of old, market women, resilience

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Resilience is taken from two words, 'resile', which means to bounce or spring back, and 'salire', to jump, or leap (Sahi, Raghavi 2016). Thus, resilience is defined as a process of overcoming a disaster (Macleod et al. 2016). Resilience refers to people who, despite distressing conditions, have abilities that empower them to cope with adverse circumstances (Sahi, Raghavi 2016). Further, resilience is a set of traits that

develop over time (Alex 2010). For some people, their personal characteristics enable them to tap into their agency and cope with adverse circumstances (Sahi, Raghavi 2016). However, for others, being resilient or not depends on what resources they can access, how and what they do, and their future aspirations (Bousquet et al. 2016). People who have ambitions and plans, which include continuing with previous activities or taking advantage of existing opportunities, tend to have energy that contributes to their capacity to cope.

It is argued that the concept of resilience is useful in exploring how aging adults negotiate the adversities associated with later life (Wild, Wiles, Allen 2013). Ageing is an inescapable life stage which brings with it a number of stressors, such as retirement from formal employment, separation from or divorce of a loved one, and much more. Despite the fact that ageing adults experience many life-changing situations, old age has been subject to little scrutiny (Mikić, Mrčela, Golob 2018), even in Africa in general and in Eastern Africa in particular. As argued by Gabrian, Dutt and Wahl (2016), Miche et al. (2014), and Mock and Eibach (2011), ageing is a topic of subjective interpretation, which leads to multiple context-specific understandings of what it is. Influenced by our own experience of old age and of living with older adults, we construct and attach meaning to the ageing person, their ageing process, as that of a resilient or a depressed person.

The process of creating and attaching meaning is gendered and arises from societal norms, biases, and attitudes towards ageing persons. Gender symbolism, referring to the construction and assignment of meaning by men and women to basically anything and everything, and in this case being 'old' or the ageing process, is one of the three dimensions of gender, the other two being gender identity and gender structure (Cockburn, Ormrod 1993). Nonetheless the construction of old/ageing informs a person's identity and broader social identity and this influences an individual's level of resilience in life situations. Scholars such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have argued that situations, events, objects, and people have meanings conferred upon them rather than possessing their own intrinsic meaning. Thus, old age does not necessarily have the same meaning for all people in all contexts. In some contexts, old persons are constructed as weak and vulnerable. In other contexts, they are wise, experienced, influential, and indeed a real asset to society.

None the less, a number of factors, such as social cultural, individual agency and biological and psychological factors, influence the context-linked, experiential interpretation and meaning-creation of old age. Matsumoto (2007) argue that culture provides the context within which we interact and experience ageing, and thus the meaning created and attached to old age depends on context-specific realities.

Although scholars have endeavoured to unify our appreciation of old age, there is no agreement regarding its meaning or its age range, it is rather subjective and



varies between different socio-economic contexts. For example, the age range of old in developed countries has greatly relied on the use of calendar age or on the number of years one has lived. To some, old age begins at the age of 50, particularly as that matches the onset of menopause in women, to others it is the age of 65.

The United Nations (2001) has scaled retirement age from 50 to 60 years for general retirement (it is also worth noting that retirement for UN staff members was raised to age 62). The age of 60 years was adopted and implemented by most developed and developing countries through pension schemes, thereby indicating a general agreement that 'old' is from 60 years.

Further, from the Eastern African perspective (and possibly true for other regions as well), the category of 'old' depended on how many historical events have been witnessed. This would then inform a person's perceptions of who they are, what they can or cannot do, as well as their vigour and ability to be active and independent in every way. In Uganda, not everyone knows their birth date. Until relatively recently, births were not registered and literacy levels were low, so determining one's age was based on key events describing the time when the mother gave birth. Therefore, to determine one's age it was necessary to decode the past by asking questions, such as was it at Christmas, during or after the war, or during the rule of a particular king? In other words, age was tagged to a particular historical context and not a birth date. Old can also be a physical identity that leads to exclusion and denies anyone who feels or looks 'old' from activeness and agency. For example, any person who feels general body weakness and complains of ailments coupled with grey hair and a reduced skin tone is considered old. As it is, physical appearance greatly influences the judgement of who is old or not (Mikić, Mrčela, Golob 2018). Such a person is then almost 'written off' or even dismissed from economic circles as incapable of making a contribution to him or herself or to others.

Yet, today many ageing women face numerous challenges, such as widowhood, childlessness, fending for orphaned grand-children, and/or providing for unemployed children (Government of Uganda 2009), resilience is essential to their living a meaningful life and avoiding economic poverty, poor health, and a lack of institutional social support. Some ageing women in Uganda join the business sector or local markets as a resilience strategy to recuperate their economic potential and freedom. Indeed, resilience can be attained and exhibited by their success at coping with the biological, psychological, and social changes they are facing.

Literature reviewed within the African context shows that the old continue to live under pressure from economic poverty (May 2003), poor health, lack of social support, and loneliness (Maniragaba et al. 2018; Wandera et al. 2017). Such conditions affect older women more than older men. Further, those in rural areas are affected more than are older people who live in urban areas (Government of Uganda 2009).

Theoretically, this study was rooted in Havighurst's 'Activity Theory' (1961), which asserts that a continuing level of activity and social interaction is essential to well-being and healthy ageing and, in short, to achieving a meaningful or successful life in older age. Although Activity Theory is silent about the gender differences among the old, it offers a starting point from which to investigate the lives of ageing women. The theory further states that generally people are happier when they are working, experience an active life and are able to solve life situations (Glass et al. 1997; Versey 2015). This theory has been used to define the prerequisites of successful aging (Bedny, Waldermar 2004; Martin et al. 2015); nevertheless, it has been critiqued for not examining other factors such as personality traits, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle characteristics that may influence the relationship between activity and life satisfaction (Diggs 2008). However, in this study we do not measure the relationship between activity and life satisfaction and instead we explore the ageing process and how old people, particularly ageing women, perceive the process of ageing and what meanings they assign to being old, and we take these perspectives from people who are economically active. In Ugandan culture, society gradually snatches from women the power to be economically independent. The market is one such institution where men should be and women should not. Women who are not resilient, concede to this without question. They give in to become candidates for sympathy.

Ageing market women in Kampala, Uganda, have defied the notion of disengagement in older age when women have to be provided for. Hence, the 'gap' between what the young and the old are and what they do is increasingly narrowing. Faced with similar economic needs, resilient ageing women join the same spaces, to hustle and earn a living. It is now a common occurrence to find ageing women assuming roles that were traditionally done by the younger generation, such as caregiving and breadwinning, among others. This has led to a re-construction of what old is, and, consistent with this, it denotes a paradigm shift towards an ever-decreasing gap between younger and older adults (Harper, Walport 2016). The question then is: Given such social and economic changes, is old age now constructed and understood differently? What is its new interpretation in terms of gender symbolism? What influence does the new meaning of 'old' have on the older adult's access to power, entitlement, privilege, and independence? It is of interest, therefore, to explore what old age means in an African context and specifically in Uganda; how gender can influence an interpretation of old age; and ultimately, how these constructed meanings influence an older person's resilience to be able to regain or claim power, entitlement, and privilege. Thus, in this article we look at ageing and how old women in selected markets in Kampala, Uganda, talk about the meaning of old and how the 'new' meaning of old empowers them to remain self-reliant and live a meaningful life.



Research method

This study was conducted in selected markets in Lubaga division, Kampala City. The geographical scope was deemed suitable for obtaining a focused understanding of the context and the changes in the meaning of old age. The Lubaga area has a number of open markets that attract people, including the ageing and the old. Further, the markets offer space for unrestricted activity, and people in public places such as markets are relatively more accessible, approachable, and willing to participate in studies, as compared to those in private spaces like homes. The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design, which allows the research team to explore people's experiences. As defined by de Vos (2005), a qualitative exploratory design focuses on the meaning, experiences, and understanding of people. It is usually applied in studies that seek to understand the meaning(s), perceptions, and experiences of people (Vos 2005) – in this case, of adult market women.

The initial aim was to focus on older women aged 50 years and over. However, the reality of the market was that the women vendors were of mixed age and supported each other as if they were one family. This meant, therefore, that the younger women vendors under the age of 50 interacted with and had a lot to learn and share from this interaction. Those over the age of 50 overlooked their advancing age to act like younger people – strong and free, and the younger women, in accepting this 'equal space play', confirmed this as a sign of resilience. This was also an indication of a shift, one concerning ageing and the meaning of old, which would enrich this study. Thus, this study eventually focused on market women vendors from the ages of 35 to 80+, with a median age of 58 years. The following were included: Forty-one women respondents were between 56 and 61 years, nineteen were aged between 35 and 40 years, three women were aged 62-67, two were aged 68–73, one respondent was 41-45 years, and the oldest respondent was 83 years. This suggests that the women who work in the markets are generally in the ageing category (35-40 years+ and old category (60 years+).

In Kampala, the markets are an informal space with little organisation and poor record-keeping and where most vendors are not formally registered. A list of 90 market women aged 35 years and above was generated. The list was used to systematically select 67 women to whom a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to facilitate the interviews on opinions and experiences.

Although it was not possible to access records showing the total population of market vendors, the researchers believe that, as argued by Kothari and Garg (2014), this sample size was optimal for meeting the requirements of representativeness and reliability in the data collected. However, this article presents mostly the qualitative data from the open-ended questions and other qualitative data gathered using in-depth

interviews from six ageing and old market women, and one focus group discussion with older women from among those that did not participate in the interviews. We secured the participants' consent to be interviewed and to have their responses tape recorded. Each taped interview was transcribed verbatim, then a word document was created and analysed using ATLAS.ti. The quantitative bits of data were coded and entered into the Epi data programme and then exported to the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) for analysis. The descriptive statistics and cross tabulations generated supported an understanding of the created meaning of 'ageing' and how it pointed to the attainment of resilience as the older adult women ably maintained or regained their power, entitlements, and privileges. The real names of the participants in the study are not used and instead we use pseudonyms.

Aging in Uganda

This study was conducted in Uganda, a tropical East African country, bordered by South Sudan in the north, Kenya in the east, Tanzania in the south, Rwanda in the southwest, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the west. The population of Uganda, as of 2016, stood at 34.6 million, the majority of whom live in rural areas, while only one-fifth of the population live in the urban areas (Nzabona 2016). Even though Uganda has one of the youngest populations worldwide, the average life expectancy is growing (Maniragaba et al. 2018). The absolute number of older people has continued to rise. In the 2014 census, 1,433,305 persons were aged 60 years or over; of them, 619,380 were men and 813,925 women (Nzabona 2016). The elderly population is projected to reach 5,420,000 by 2050 (Government of Uganda 2009; Nzabona 2016; Wandera et al. 2017).

However, what is not so clear is the quality of life of ageing and older people, especially because not many studies have sought to study the social realities of old age. The perspective from which this article is written recognises the low status of women in general and, by implication, the (low) status of old women. Uganda predominantly has an agriculturally-based economy where a high percentage of farm labour is performed by women. Unfortunately, few women in this patriarchal society inherit assets (Najjumba-Mulindwa 2003). Gender biases in the sharing of power influence the entitlement to own property and favour the male line. This norm is maintained in order to avoid property being lost to other clans when girls or women get married. This automatically means that fewer women inherit land even if they are farming it. They can only have access and user rights, a situation that does not necessarily imply that they have full control over the harvests or the proceeds of their labour (Gaddis, Lahoti, Li 2018). This also means that if a woman loses her spouse, she also risks losing the right to access and use the land to a male relative, unless she has a surviving son.



Fortunately, a number of factors are gradually bringing change to this otherwise archaic practice. One of the factors is the country's legal environment. The 1995 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (as amended) made transformative provisions to protect the rights of women in marriage and in the case of its dissolution. Further, the Constitution also recognises the rights of ageing persons and provides for the enactment of laws to address issues of concern to senior citizens (Government of Uganda 1995). The National Policy for Older Persons of Uganda (NPOP) (2009) also aims to address the issues of older persons, with a focus on improving the quality of life. In addition, the government provides a Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE) to a few districts and the decentralisation of retirement benefits (Maniragaba et al. 2018). Ageing persons need more than financial support, however; they still need care, and professional and in some cases institutionalised caregiving services are not in place in Uganda, so ageing women (and men) have to rely on support from their family.

Despite governmental interventions, a number of women continue to experience unfair treatment, and this can endure into late age. To an extent the conditions of old people in Uganda are almost synonymous with distress. For example, the majority of old women (and some old men) face a number of challenges including: poor housing, poor health, most especially non-communicable diseases, and financial hardships, with only 7.1% of them, and possibly only those in formal employment, able to access a pension. Generally, a number of working-age persons, but especially women, are employed in the informal sector, which is not covered by pension schemes. This means that the majority of older persons do not have social security. Widespread poverty exacerbates this situation and affects their quality of life (Maniragaba et al. 2018).

Situating the participants

While the study's participants were of various ages, i.e. from 35 to 83, this suggests that the women in the markets are generally not a homogeneous category. This finding is also indicative of the fact that in Uganda, possibly like all the other countries in Eastern Africa, market vending is frequently a good job for women and their social characteristics are varied. Perhaps what makes this practice endearing is the nature of market activities, which allow for individual time management, the possibility of operating with a small capital base, and the absence of restrictions based on age, level of education, or marital status. Also, the surety of a daily income to control and spend makes market work appeal to women. These women were also found to be extending their cultural responsibility of preparing food for the family. They sold food stuffs that also enabled them to access food for their own home consumption. The gender structure, with predetermined gender roles, partly explains why more women in the study were self-employed and working in markets, selling food and

groceries. With no men in the picture to provide, especially when gardens were out of the picture, the market was a well-considered option.

Only a few of the participants (18 out of 67), representing 26.8% of the respondents, were married. Twenty-six of the ageing market women, or 38.8% of the participants in this study, said they were widowed and 14 (20.8%) said they were separated or divorced, while only 5 (7.4%) were single. The results from the interviews also showed that some of the participants who said they were married were not physically living in the same home with a partner in a day-to-day arrangement. This finding means that there were more ageing market vendors (49 out of 67 or 73%) who were living 'single' without a partner. This is an expected finding and it corroborates the statements of gerontology scholars that gender is linked to marital status in later life (Arber 2004; Utz 2005). The fact that these women had to contend with the situation of losing or being separated from their loved intimate partners and yet were able to collect themselves and find alternative ways to make their lives meaningful and rewarding is sure testimony to their resilience. It also confirms their ability to recover and achieve psychological balance, knowing well that the path of each individual person is unique (Alex 2010). To them, therefore, being out of a relationship and in old age was not enough reason for them to give in to psychological or economic stress. They continued to believe in themselves and their ability to earn a living engaging in market activities. They chose not to sit back and lament but to see themselves as capable of earning a living, which was the reason they were working in a market – they were motivated to continue working and therefore resilient (Hayat, Khan, Sadia 2016).

Gender symbolism related to ageing

Ageing and old women are not a homogeneous group. Both ageing and old women have different life experiences that differently influence their capacity to be resilient. Thus, in this study, the meaning of ageing was interrogated by mapping the trends in perceptions about ageing from ten years ago up to the present in the view of the participating vendors, examining their individual interpretations and the characteristics they associated with old age. For this, additional data on the gender symbolism associated with ageing were drawn from reviewed literature.

Trends in the meaning of ageing

The argument that resilience can be influenced by a combination of biological, psychological, and socio-cultural factors (Alex 2010) was confirmed in the narratives on ageing. Respondents were asked to compare old age ten years ago and today. Ten was considered a short enough period for the women to remember what was happening in their lives. The responses are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Trends in the meanings attached to ageing

Ten years ago	Today
1. Old face, grey hair, wrinkles, walking with a stick/cane, walking while speaking alone and with a bent back, cracking painful back	Very few still show their grey hair, otherwise, the majority disguise their old age by dying their hair to look young. Have no time for bringing up children. Their time is limited since they have to work
2. Usually not working and the only responsibility old people had was to look after their grandchildren	Even though people think the ageing and old can no longer handle a formal job or work to earn a living, these women work and need to keep their jobs
3. Old people were proud of their old age and age commanded respect in the community	Acknowledging old age is defeatist, it sounds like a person is fading, giving in, surrendering
4. Old people talked about things in the past, meaning that they were able to remember	They are more forgetful and preoccupied with so many things. They move from place to place
5. Old people had much wisdom – they advised the young on raising children, health care and well-being, marriage, methods of agricultural production	Although they still have much wisdom, sometimes they do not exercise it. They are no longer wise like old people of the past. They sometimes endure negative stereotypes and are disregarded
6. They were able to remember more of the past and tended to forget current events, their eyesight was poor, they were unable to walk with ease, some had to crawl	They are still forgetful, have poor eyesight, but use glasses. If unable to walk they use a cane to walk. Those who can afford it use wheelchairs. Old people disguise their age
7. They had short tempers, they complained too much	They are short-tempered and complain about everything; people hate to be corrected, which has silenced the elderly, nowadays the old are very weak
8. Old age was welcomed with joy, it was a blessing to live longer	Old people come and buy places in cities, some even build houses to rent so they can come to collect money in the cities since they can no longer farm
9. They had the ability to identify medicinal herbs, predict rainy seasons and times	The ability to identify medicinal herbs has been silenced by modern medicine
10. They were able to recite the past	They use history books
11. They were called Jaaja (Granny)	Now they disguise their age and are not proud to be called granny
12. They were storytellers	Storytelling is limited

The narratives above show a contrast that explains the changes in how ageism is perceived by those working in the markets. The World Health Organisation (WHO 2020) defines ageism as a concept affected by a multitude of 'negative' stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. The disregard and the segregation that has resulted due to social economic changes has led to reminiscences about the times when old age was more meaningful, was associated with positive narratives connoted by such characteristics as wisdom, being a 'granny' (a term of endearment) and a storyteller, knowledgeable about the past, and a nurturer and carer of children, and a healer, knowledgeable about various ailments and the medicine that cures them. The participants argued that a positive narrative was enough to earn an older person respect, power, entitlements, and privileges in society. Not anymore. The old are now denied respect, love, and support. According to our respondents, all that was positive about being old is now changing. The once positive attributes have been replaced with negative narratives. Indeed, as noted by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020), the negative stereotypes now dominate the discussions about old age and ageing. Older adults are depicted as a bother and an economic and social liability. The old who fail to adapt to this change and eventual neglect suffer. Those who are resilient move on to claim new spaces and earn social and economic independence. Incidentally, this otherwise positive transformation among the ageing and the old is meeting with still more negative reactions. The stereotyping, especially applied to those working to fend for themselves, is that the old are now mean. Despite the prejudice they continue to move forward, become more self-centred, offer less of themselves, and therefore have no time for others. On a deeper level of analysis, this is actually a reaction to the reduced support offered to them as ageing and old persons. As a resilient strategy, therefore, they also equally look inward. They are, as a result, more interested in and focused on their own work and life, choosing not to expect much from others or anyone.

Other researchers argue that women and men experience ageing in different ways and face different vulnerabilities (Russel 2007). It is a general occurrence for ageing and old women, more so than for the men, to be economically dependent on their families. Women tend not to have access to income-generating opportunities, nor do they own any assets (Bukuluki, Watson 2012: 13), so they have to be supported by either their husbands, grown-up children, other family members, or the community, especially when they don't have a close family. Unfortunately, this supportive network has been disrupted to the extent that more old persons find themselves looking after young dependents instead of being looked after.

Our qualitative analysis reveals that as ageing and old women accept that the society they now live in is changing, they acknowledge the need to find alternatives. Unfortunately, not all ageing and old women are in the position to find alternatives.



It is the ageing and old in urban areas or in peripheral urban areas who are in an advantaged position where they can access more options. Therefore, on realising the need for a change and to embrace the available opportunities and move beyond expecting social sympathy and handouts, ageing and old women become market vendors. It is through this brave move that they construct their resilience, refusing to be put off by negative narratives or the judgement that women belong in the private space. They in turn retain their independence, agency, and resilience. They refuse to become vulnerable waiting for handouts. Further analysis of field data and reviewed literature confirms that ageing and old women in urban centres, especially those who are able to work to earn a living, can rise out of vulnerability, characterised by extreme poverty and helplessness.

Findings further revealed that women have started noticing the changes. The value formally attached to ageing and the old was shifting and being lost. Looking back to a decade ago, as shown in the data, it was obvious that market women felt more positively about the meaning of old age then than now. For example, 81.5% of them said that the old were respected; 80% said the old were proud of their age; and 76.9% said that the old were treated better. During the in-depth interviews, participants agreed that when the current context is compared with the past, the meaning of old age is similar in terms of the physical characteristics only. The psychological and economic needs and their certification has changed:

Yes, the physical characteristics of women like an old face with wrinkles, walking with difficulty, walking with the aid of a stick/cane, walking while speaking alone, a bent/cracking and painful back, painful knees are still the same, although for some older adult women they appear at a later stage. But old adult women seem to be more alert these days, they seem to remember more of the present than those ten years ago. Some women have even become so preoccupied with the need for economic survival that they do not have the time to raise their grandchildren.

(Nantaba, age 60, adult woman who sells fruit, FGD)

Just as Nantaba narrated above, the indicators of resilience were found to vary between the current and earlier generations. The earlier generation was resilient, but within the socially defined space of the home. However, the current perspective recognises that older women are demanding inclusion and space beyond the private sphere. For example, during the interviews, the women participants revealed that in the earlier trends, self-reliant older women were greatly involved in the children's upbringing, which was laced with storytelling. The young were trained and socialised in matters of importance to society, and the older adults were respected as

disciplinarians. They were consulted and gave advice on many aspects of life, including marriage, or they arbitrated in cases involving land conflicts. In turn, the young listened to and respected them. Hence, ageing adults were seen as fountains of honour and referred to as 'the wise ones'. For example, post-menopause Asante women (old adult women) in Ghana, west Africa, were given positions in the public sphere as a group where they acted as arbiters for women's issues in market organisation and trading as well as having political competence (Brydon 1996). These positions were ordinarily reserved only for men. But ageing women were regarded as having transcended the taboo attached to menstruation and thus as worthy of attaining a recognised group social status in the public sphere. The Asante women looked forward to ageing and taking on other roles. Similarly, ten years ago, the participants further highlighted that many women then looked forward to ageing and gaining that respect. Notable though, and distinct, is that whatever they did, they conformed to the social construction of the spaces that limited them to only the private and to be provided for.

Ageing and old women in the present do things differently. They in addition go out to claim new roles and positions of influence to the last of their strength, refusing to be termed old, helpless, incapable, and dependent on their family's good will, and thus in need of care:

... but nowadays, the old continue to work. In Uganda, our old [people] work till death. It is common among those who are in business or self-employed.

(Namata, age 37, sells spices and vegetables, FGD)

... I did not want to stay at home. My grandchildren, the children of my daughter, wanted to take me to their home and keep me, I refused. What I want is to be free and earn my own money.

(Mariana, age 83, sells matooke, in-depth interview)

The 37-year-old Namata represents the ageing while 83-year-old Mariana represents the old women market vendors who are resilient and have shunned handouts. Considering Mariana's advanced age, her work at the market alongside Namata is a sign of real resilience. In fact, Mariana was found reading a Luganda (local language) Bukedde newspaper to keep herself abreast with current affairs. Other market women vendors testified that Mariana comes to the market earlier than many of them, purchases her matooke for the day's sale, and then reads the paper as she waits for customers. This confirms that for some women, who are like her, menopause or the 50-year age mark is not the end of the road for them. To them, it is their coping abilities that make a difference. The ability to cope is crucial for a satisfactory life, just



as a number of scholars have argued (Diggs 2008; Hayat et al. 2016; Havighurst 1961; Martin et al. 2015). It is this that has enabled them to venture into market vending. And at the same time, through their participation in market vending, their life has been improved. This finding is consistent with the Activity Theory and confirms the need for women, both ageing and old adults, to maintain an active life for as long as is possibly feasible, because they are capable of high resilience (Macleod et al. 2016). It also confirms that as most older persons are without a pension, they have to continue working for as long as they are physically able (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2016).

The life experiences of women such as Marian and others in the market proved wrong the African perception, based on common and popular stereotypes, that for women, unlike men, menopause or a woman's 50th birthday marks the onset of old age and a life of inactivity. It was interesting to note that even though the respondents were aware that ten years ago women would have been considered old from the age of 45, women aged 60 and over now saw themselves abstractly not as old but active. Once alternatives to remain active are available to women, they will remain active for a long time, well beyond their reproductive age bracket. Even when society regards them as old, resilient ageing and old women defy society's expectations of them to retire from an active life of work, including marital obligations. The participants stated that the meaning of ageing has changed greatly, as has the way of life of older persons.

Much as the old are seen negatively, an issue that prompts many ageing women to be conscious of the changes, including doing things that conceal ageing, they act differently, move out of the countryside, and move to towns where they know life is going to be manageable, as the words of Namulondo confirm:

... ageing adults now disguise their age. The majority do all it takes to continue looking young...ten years ago my granny used to stay in the village, but now, when life in the village is difficult, more so for the old with no close person to provide for them, you leave. See me here, I left village life, I come to work.
(Namulondo, age 65, sells vegetables, Irish potatoes, and fruit, FGD)

Today ageing and old women in the markets have to continue to struggle to make ends meet; they have limited time to tell their stories to their grandchildren. They are frequently on the move between urban and rural areas and between home and their workplaces. Therefore, many have no permanent place where their grandchildren can come to them to obtain skills and guidance. When they move to urban centres to fend for themselves, their lifestyles change, they lose touch with nature and fall victim to new habits, such as eating food that is not healthy:

... life has greatly changed; these days people eat fried food. ... But earlier we enjoyed longevity and we were healthy, we ate healthily-grown food with no chemicals. We would eat fish, but now people eat fish harvested with poison.
(Namuddu, age 41, sells cooked food, FGD)

The findings that confirm change are corroborated by facts presented by earlier scholars that a number of factors drive change (Diggs 2008; Nzabona, Ntozi, Rutaremwa 2015). The ageing and old market women are adopting to the changes and adoptability is a quality of resilience (Gulbrandsen, Walsh 2015).

Ageing well as resilience

The responses on ageing well were categorised as corresponding to economic independence, a good life, good health, and good nutrition. Both ageing and old persons described economic independence to be defined by the ability to invest or to construct buildings, such as residential houses or shops, that can be let out for rental income. Ageing and old persons can also choose to buy other assets, including animals, and to educate children, which would assure an income in the later years. Older adults who have sources of livelihood were perceived to have aged well. It was added, however, that in the event that a person has not been able to accumulate wealth and has no economically stable children, *'...then working is the answer, otherwise how will one survive'* (Nakitende, age 67, sells matooke/bananas and sweet potatoes, in-depth interview). This finding confirms the view that a positive self-perception on the part of ageing and older women is based on their achievements (Mikić et al. 2018). Ageing well was also said to depend on the abilities one has:

Naturally there can be a difference due to what one does physically. e.g., people in professional jobs age much more slowly than those involved in physical or heavy manual work like brick-making. Among women it is also the same. If a woman is in a retail shop, she will age differently from one who spends most of her time under the scorching sun doing hard labour. ... if you prepared for your old life, even when you stay in the village you age well.
(Hasifa, age 67, sells ground nuts and vegetables, in-depth interview)

Market vending was not regarded as strenuous; in fact, the women market vendors were happy with their work and with their lives. They indicated that they have time to purchase merchandise delivered to the market yard and arrange it in an attractive display, and then wait to serve their customers. Indeed, for the women market vending was an escape from the hard labour in rural areas, where farm work was the only option. Through market vending, women gain access to and control over resources,



and they own property. For women, owning property is an important attainment, considering the fact that, in many cultures, income as well as property ownership was and still is not as automatically accessible to women as it is to most men. In fact, men are three times likely to own property than women. Yet, women's ownership, use, and control of property is important for their well-being (Gaddis et al. 2018). One participant gave an example:

... and now I am happy, I can afford having a nice home, good feeding– [in fact] a working old woman will have less stress ...

(Nakitende, age 67, sells matooke and sweet potatoes, in-depth interview)

This finding corroborates arguments that economic accomplishments play a role in the judgement that a person has a good and successful life and is thus ageing well (Hayat et al. 2016). Another participant, Nora, age 63, who resisted the option to become a poultry farmer suggested by her children, said:

... by working one can age well ...you have friends to talk to, eat what you like and with good nutrition...when you eat well, or you have wealth and cows for milk, then you have a good life and you will have aged well.

(Nora, age 63, sells matooke, FGD)

Certainly, Nora takes pride in social interaction, in being accomplished, and being able to decide how to spend her time and energy. She preferred not to be domesticated and look after chickens and instead chose to work in the market, with friends to talk to, share with, and look to. This is further confirmation of the argument put forth by Rowe and Kahn (2015) that successful ageing is about maintaining good mental health and good interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. It is market vending and not closed chicken-rearing that affords Nora good mental health in the company of her peers. Nora used her internal strength and ability to decide, she chose to have a free life where she can decide on her own than have children determine her life trajectory.

Gender symbolism of old age and marital status

As stated earlier in this article, gender symbolism is a fundamental category of gender, within which meaning and value can be assigned to anything (Cockburn, Ormrod 1993; Nsibirano 2012). Findings from the current study further confirmed that the meaning of old was still very much a factor of physical well-being, and value was mainly derived therefrom. For all the study participants the gender symbolism of old age was associated with many things, but mainly with the negative characteristics

of the changes to physical, mental, and sexual health that occur in later life. This was consistent with the argument that research on older women has been dominated by the 'misery perspective' (Mikić, Mrčela, Golob 2018). In fact, it is the negative physical attributes of ageing that the resilient market women redefined. They refused to uphold the negative as a qualifier for who they were. They would instead argue that a person gains experience from having lived a long life and that makes him or her wise and a better thinker (Hayat et al. 2016). They also confessed that not all older persons are wise. It is only the resilient that will indeed become wise. Some participants agreed that some older adults experience poor memory and are not able to engage in gainful self-employment, especially if they had not maintained an active life from the start. This finding was consistent with the argument put forth by Robert Havighurst in his Activity Theory for successful ageing (Havighurst 1961; Chen 2017), which proposes that older adults are happiest when they stay active and maintain social interaction. Indeed, when older adults are active in the market, they are happy, relaxed, and mentally and physically active. This is the very reason the 80- and 83-year-old women were continuing to run their market stalls. The respondents hope to live even longer, contrary to the stereotype that the old are at the end of the line and will die soon.

Another physical change from which meaning of 'old' is derived involves sexual changes, particularly, menopause. What is interesting here is that women's sexuality was associated only with their reproductive obligations; hence reference to menopause was very common. Menopause was clearly defined and understood as a marker between younger adults and older adults. It is expected that when a woman hits menopause, her sexual life ends. She stops feeling sexual desires. This is a gendered perception that defines ageing and old women as asexual and treats issues of sexuality as if they do not exist or should not even be mentioned in relation to them (Marhánková 2018). They must then forgo their desires because their sexuality is controlled by society. The sexual desires and pleasures of older adult women were not discussed in this cultural space except in reference to reproduction. This is confirmed by the next quoted voice from an in-depth interview:

A woman is old once she stops giving birth or stops having menstrual periods, and this [usually] happens at age 50.

(Monday, age 71, sells matooke, in-depth interview)

This quote indicates that very little change, if any, is occurring in how the aged are perceived now and in earlier years. Women are still seen in relation to their reproductive chronology. It also confirms that sexism and ageism are interconnected and continue to affect women (Mikić et al. 2018). Even in the study, this perspective



was sustained by a few older women who confessed that, on their part, they had given up the 'issues of men', meaning that they were no longer sexually active. However, this was not true for all the ageing and old women in the study. Some indicated that they needed information on HIV/AIDS, which means that there were still some who were having intimate relationships. The older adult women with some intimate relationships were tapping into their internal strength to demystify relationships for women and they were choosing to live their lives to the fullest. However, it was a common perception among the participants that culture in Africa allows men more leeway to enjoy their sexuality, arguing that men do not age at all, or that the onset of their ageing happens much later compared to women. Sexually active older women had occasions when they became intimate. There were occasions when they defined the adage that 'men age like a fine wine while women age like a glass of milk' (Futrelle 2019). Although the source of the adage is not well known, it has been reproduced in different societies, all to put men in a better position than women, even when they are old. This now culturally popular slogan introduces double standards. It is meant to heighten and offer men more freedom even to be intimate but to deny women the same. The cultural adage means that just as wine ages well, unlike milk, men, like wine, are refined, but women spoil like milk. The participants explained that women, like milk, become useless, in this case sexually useless, and the only use of women is acknowledged through reproduction. This perception was mostly justified and safeguarded by the fact that men continued to be sexually active and were said to have the ability to father children even when advanced in age, regardless of their marital status: '*... a man can father children even at one hundred years [old] ...*' (Maliza, age 56, sells cooked food, FGD). Interestingly, participants in the study who were past menopause said that for them not being sexually active did not mean that they were old. Nor did it make them feel less competent to work to support themselves and their families. Therefore, they chose to continue looking good for themselves. In fact, these women said that, at their age, it was good for them to look good and express themselves and appreciate their bodies. This finding seems to support the argument by Mock and Eibach (2011) that the gender symbolism of ageing and whether the old continue to be sexually active or not are subjective issues.

Access to power, entitlement, and privilege

Findings revealed that it was through market vending that the women were able to claim power, entitlement, and privilege, which they had not previously had. The majority of women participants, whether married or not, enjoy less power in most societies in Africa (Sudarkasa 1986). In marriage, it is the men who exercise power and control over their spouses and other family members, and thus have access to,

and enjoy, care, unlike women. However, when women take up market vending, the issues of power distribution change. They too gain power and, they enjoy more liberty and agency to choose what they feel suits them. The majority of the participants argued that what is gained through their sweat is theirs to control, with no limits or excuses; that even ageing thus cannot be a limitation for women in the market, that it should not restrict their access to opportunities.

This finding is consistent with the argument that women pursue entrepreneurship to gain control over their opportunities, for self-realisation, and financial success (Sullivan, Meek 2012). Even myths and stereotypes, such as that older adult women should control themselves and should not indulge in intimate relationships, are being redefined. Relationships and freedom of association, of mobility, and communication are opportunities that market women have decided to claim. Older adult market women can freely choose whether or not to have intimate partners, as testified by Mude: *'...in most Ugandan cultures, older adult women are denied access to (re-)marriage after a certain age...but the women here have male friends ...'* (Mude, age 56, sells second-hand clothes, FGD) And even when participants in an FGD agreed that in some cultures once a woman is judged to be old by society, she is expected to deny herself many pleasures of life, including having intimate relationships. However, some of the respondents were still married past their 50th birthday. It is possible that market life is liberating, is able to keep them outside the conformity that could be forced on them as a result of having limited or no options, or from self-pity and having a sense of worthlessness.

In relation to access to marriage, some (26.8%) older adult market women vendors were married and even others confessed to having occasional partners. In an African context, where gendered constraints such as patriarchy, masculine ideologies, and women's dependence still strongly apply, marital status in old age increases access to privileges, as stated by one woman during an in-depth interview: *'an unmarried woman dies quickly because she has no one to take care of her'*. Whether this is true or a myth, we argue that this view is as a result of loneliness. But by engaging in vending, these women used their inner strength, their sense of self-worth, and their freedom to get company and social networks of friends, from amongst whom they can choose an intimate partner.

Over half of the respondents (57.3%) confirmed that market vending avails them of the opportunity to redefine what they can or cannot do. For example, these women said that they are frequently told that old people should not be engaged in economic struggles or activities that require the use of physical strength, that they cannot manage activities such as: *'lifting heavy things or going out to work due to their physical weakness. [That] the aged are supposed to rest. [However they] see me, I work'* (Daisy, age 61, sells cooked food, FGD). Another respondent said: *'It will*



make me feel bad if as an older person I cannot have a job' (Akong, age 67, sells smoked fish, in-depth interview).

The view that ageing involves a decline in all faculties not only reduces opportunities for older people to engage in an active life, it also reduces their capability and agency, particularly among those older persons who accept and live according to this interpretation. They give up the chance to access the benefits of work. This was rejected by the ageing and older adult women in the market: *'... for me, I have many ideas [because] whenever you age [go through the process of ageing] you know more about good and bad. So I now [even I] advise those I work with on how to get out of poverty'* (Daisy, age 61, sells cooked food, in-depth interview).

This study also revealed that sometimes old age is a challenge to those who want to work. Age affected access to formal employment. This further confirms that market vending was a great opportunity for older adults. In an FGD, one of the participants said:

Although older women are very much willing to engage in work, there are some opportunities they are aware of but which are still very hard for them to access as older adult women. For example, the opportunity to go abroad for work is not offered to the old. They are either denied access to active and productive work because they are seen as incapable of doing anything right or because they are seen as parents [and thus senior to the employer] and [therefore it is] not so easy to order them around [even if they are employees].

(Mariana, age 83, sells matooke, FGD)

Discussion

Activity Theory (AT) is the most recognised part of Russian psychology and has been applied in many disciplines and regions outside Russia (Mironenko 2013). This theory proposes that older adults are happiest when they stay active and maintain social interaction (Everard et al. 2000) informed the analysis in this article. Proponents of the theory argue that there is a positive relationship between activity and life satisfaction. Thus, individuals should maintain the activities and orientations of middle age for as long as possible (Chen 2017; Gedera, Williams 2016). Although, critiques have noted that AT disregards inequalities in health and social economic status, we did find this theory useful in interrogating the meaning attached to old age and how such meaning(s) influence other issues in an older person's life. For instance, our respondents agreed that one's health and economic status affect the possibility of remaining active, and that the constructed and ascribed meanings of old age also influence one's ability to remain active, as well as to have access to power and

privilege. Thus, older women continued to seek meaning in their lives, a tendency also observed by Matsumoto (2007) and Steger et al. (2008).

Our findings confirm earlier scholars' arguments that what constitutes aging well or successful aging is multidimensional with a subjective component (Gabrian et al. 2017; Miche et al. 2014; Syme et al. 2013) and is gendered (Sobal, Rauschenbach 2003). It could also mean that one has become old and yet has maintained physical health, is active, and has charisma and vigour (Anjali 2010; Menec 2003), and the older adult women vendors in the market did indeed exhibit these qualities.

Among the older adult women, the subjective construction of the meaning of ageing well is based on whether and to what extent one is able to access or afford, in the following order, basics such as food, health services, good housing, and that one even has an income. In the past, many adult women looked to their grown-up children to provide for their needs. However, in the absence of that support older adult women have to work. And now, for older adult women who are working, ageing well involves the ownership of assets, a source of income, good food, and an independent lifestyle. These differences can be explained by the fact that these women have redefined 'old' and also challenged the social and cultural dictates that created the boundaries beyond which they can or cannot be and go, including whether they can or cannot engage in economic ventures outside the home. Much like the cultural construction of gender roles, access to and control over resources and expectations withstands the test of time; however, older market women vendors have consistently taken it upon themselves to redefine this position to their advantage. It is no longer only the gender structure as authored through culture that drives the interests and values of these women. Rather, through their economic endeavours they too construct their life values and extend their social and economic boundaries. They now appreciate the value of assets and having an income to fulfil their obligations. In their new positions as women and as mothers and caregivers who have to support those under their care, older adult women are changing priorities – from being vulnerable to being resilient and acquiring self-worth. With the waves of development, urbanisation, and modernisation, these have slowly but steadily been embraced. They use the material resources to weaken the traditional social grip that had otherwise affected women in general but older adult women in particular. Older women now have to and do earn a living. There are also increasing numbers of cases where the old now provide for the young. There has been a re-construction of the previous meanings of old age as being sickly, weak, and without the capacity to shoulder responsibilities. Now older women take on jobs, including market vending.

Access to power, entitlement, and privilege are not necessarily dependent on age. This is now influenced by one's capacity to work. Older adult women do own assets and have an income and they can gain power as leaders and advisors. Thus, active



engagement can be a precursor to successful ageing, as already stated, but in Uganda in the current era, it is also a passport to more, i.e. status, respect, trust, and the power to influence.

But if older adult women are able to gain entry and maintain an active life in the market place, is that enough? If it is not, what else do they wish for? When the study participants were asked about the needs of the old, they said that the government should extend the funding scheme for older people. This government scheme is supposed to be an entitlement that all old women and men above the age of 70 should get. It is not just for those who are defined as vulnerable. However, the women commented that old women, especially those in urban centres have not yet benefited from this new form of social security from the government. Further, they appealed to the government to also enable older women in market vending to access the wealth creation programme. The government can support more older women not yet in active economic ventures by providing them with start-up capital to open a small business. Such businesses can sustain them during their old age. The participants mentioned taxation as a challenge and need the government to reduce taxes, especially the taxes that affect older adults. Key among the taxes mentioned in this light were the ones on commodities. The government should provide older adults with clean water, good shelter, and good food. Both the ageing and old women market vendors alluded to an urgent need for government policies and structures that will address their concerns relating to housing, land, and health.

Conclusion

Considering the study findings, it is evident that the gender symbolism or meaning of 'old' is no longer derived from the value attached to the length of years one has lived. There are shifts in the meaning of old age, from just longevity to include what one has, in terms of assets, power, and social and economic independence. Further, seniority in age alone is not sufficient for older adult women to access power, entitlement, and privilege, including status, respect, and even care. This reality has led to a re-definition of the meaning and gender symbolism of old age. While in the past the gender symbolism of being old or old age was associated with being wiser, a granny (a term of endearment), a storyteller – someone knowledgeable about the past, a nurturer and carer of children and a healer. And this positive narrative was enough to earn an older person respect, power, entitlements, and privileges in society. Currently, the old cannot earn respect, power, and entitlements on the basis of that alone. In fact, old age can be a liability to them, which they have to address by remaining active and adapting to change. The ageing and old market women have remained economically active and independent in the face of new life

challenges by taking on available opportunities. This to them is resilience. They have refused to become incapable, dependent, and vulnerable and waiting for handouts. Not only have they accumulated years, experience, and knowledge, but also assets and wealth.

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