

**CUSTOMARY IMAGES AND  
CONTEMPORARY REALITIES:  
THE ACTIVITIES OF OLDER PEOPLE  
IN NEPAL**

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## Introduction

Very little is known about older people in Nepal, except for what we can glean at a national level from censuses and survey returns (see Subedi 1996; 1999). “Old age” is not a new concept in Nepal, even though the country has been characterised by poor health and poverty for a long time, resulting in low life expectancy at birth. Certainly the number and proportion of old people was small in the past. However, the fact that the Nepalese language is rich in old-age relational words, such as *briddha* (old person), *baje/bajyee* (grandparents) and *budhyauli* (old age), suffices to show that the notion of old age is not foreign. Nevertheless, who actually counts as an elderly person may be debated. Given the poor socio-economic status, low life expectancy, poor health facilities and the definition of 58 years as the official retirement age in the civil service, given also that 50 percent of the working-age population in the 45-59 age-group are inactive due to old age or illness (CBS 1999), it is widely considered appropriate to use age sixty as the entry-point into old age in Nepal. Throughout this paper I shall therefore take ‘elderly’ or ‘older’ person to refer to anyone who is aged sixty and over.

According to the 2001 Census there are 1.5 million elderly people in Nepal, constituting 6.5 percent of the total population. Between 1991 and 2001 the elderly population has increased by 3.5 percent per annum, compared with 2.3 percent for the total population. Elderly men outnumber women by a few thousand (758,418 versus 745,893). This is contrary to most countries where there are far more elderly women than men. However, the growth rate for older women has been consistently higher than for men over the last two decades. For example, whereas the population of elderly women increased by 2.7 percent per annum between 1981-91, the corresponding figure for elderly men was only 1.9 percent.

The elderly population size in Nepal increased three-fold to 1.5 million over the past four decades (1961 to 2001). For this reason it is important for the country to consider what this increase implies in terms of state policies and programmes and, more importantly, how older people manage to fulfil their overall household needs, and whether or not they are contributing to the household economy. According to the 2001 World Development Report, Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. Human development indices for Nepal are poor. The HDI value for 2000 is 0.466

(UNDP 2001); adult literacy is only 51 percent. The GDP per capita is US\$ 1,237. Land resources, in other words the subsistence base of the overwhelming majority, are being used exhaustively (NPC 1997), and forest resources depleted to their limit (DFRS 1999). Thus most of the population is living in a state of marked poverty, exacerbated in the rural areas by outmigration of young adults (CDPS 1997; Subedi 1997). While people's physical abilities deteriorate as they grow older, their control over their own resources may weaken. Observance of traditional values and norms are becoming objects of wishful thinking when compared with the days of old people's youth and adulthood. Many elderly express their dissatisfaction with the work activities and behaviours of their children and co-resident family members (Goldstein et al. 1983). They wish their children would follow their advice more, rather than their voices being pushed to the margins (Subedi 1999). Whether expressed explicitly or implicitly, elderly people expect support from their families, relatives and the state, so that they can lead healthy lives as dignified citizens in return for the contributions they made in the past. But neither the majority of families nor state institutions are poised to listen sincerely to the quiet voices of older people in Nepal. It is in this context that population ageing becomes a very important social and demographic issue in the country.

Older people have generally been perceived as dependant, as individuals needing support. Basic demographic measures, such as the old age dependency ratio, may be considered a common analytical index which implicitly reinforces the perception of older people as weak and in need of assistance. Earlier studies drawing attention to elderly people's problems in general, as well as specific case studies, abound. To note a few, there are studies covering the demography of ageing (Martin and Preston 1994), living arrangements (Chan 1997; Hashimoto 1991), caring (Harper 1992), support systems (Cameron and Cobb-Clark 2001; Clay and Haar 1993) and health care needs (Lloyd-Sherlock 2000). These not only illustrate the situation of older people and their needs, but also portray older people as in need of special attention, thus at the receiving end of the social spectrum. Similarly there is no dearth of studies that characterise older people as a drain on household resources (e.g., Lamb 2000) and as economic and social burdens on families (e.g., Goldstein and Beall 1982).

The studies mentioned undeniably reflect important aspects concerning older people. However, equally important are the economic contributions that these older people make to their households. A large proportion of older people, especially those

living in extended families, also support their households by carrying out various activities, some of which are economic, others non-economic but integral to the running of families. Studies on these aspects are important and reflect the varied roles of elderly people in household management and organisation of labour. Cain (1991) emphasises that older people in Bangladesh participate in various economic activities, and their inputs depend partly on the household's status as landless, small owners or large owners of land. Likewise, Friedman et al. (1999) characterise older people in Vietnam as working and contributing to the household, even if their economic participation is reduced due to old age or illness. Andrews and Hennink (1992) have also drawn attention to the often considerable contributions of older people in three Asian countries. More recently, research on Indonesia has shown older people not only as major net contributors to local economy and society (Kreager 2001), but also as economic pillars of multi-generational families, with pension incomes serving to secure the livelihoods of entire family networks (Schröder-Butterfill 2003).

The perspectives dealing with older people either as recipients or as contributors, as liability or asset, cannot be considered as mutually exclusive. Older people contribute to the economy, but they also make demands on families and society. As Treas and Logue (1986) have noted, research perspectives on older people have sometimes depicted them mainly as resources, at other times more as impediments, or even as victims and certainly as a subgroup of low priority.

The setting of this paper is Nepal, a small Himalayan kingdom. Special perceptions and images of older people are part of traditional Nepalese society. Most often these images relate to older people as being full of wisdom, but also as recipients of support from their families and society. Yet as anyone familiar with South Asia will know, older people tend to work as long as they are not completely incapacitated. Thus, this paper aims to discuss not only the customary images of older people, but also the reality as demonstrated by their participation in various activities outside and inside the home. It argues that despite common perceptions of older people as full of knowledge and experience, yet as weak and economically dependent, most Nepalese older people remain active. They contribute significantly to economic activities, both home-based and outside the home. Where they are not in the labour market they are often in a position to release able-bodied family members for the labour market by performing non-economic household activities which would otherwise have tied adult members.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first introduces the issues to be discussed and provides a summary of the country's demographic situation. The second deals with the data available and the methods used. The third is about customary images based on common Nepalese sayings and proverbs. The fourth, which forms the primary focus of this paper, discusses the activities of older people. The final section also provides concluding remarks and implications for policy.

## **1. The Country and its Demographics**

Nepal is a small Himalayan kingdom sandwiched between India and China, the two demographic and spatial giants of the world. It has ten of the world's fourteen highest peaks, including Mount Everest (8,848m). The country was opened to the outside world and started its planned development only after 1950. *Gurkhas* (brave soldiers), *sherpas* (mountaineering experts), and the birthplace of lord Buddha: these are some of Nepal's images to the outside world. The country is characterised by extreme physiographic diversity, with elevations ranging from 65m above sea level in the south to 8848m in the north, all within a distance of a little over 150km. The economy is rural subsistence-based, and the majority of households depend directly on their members' physical labour for meeting daily needs. Labour-intensive agriculture mired in uncertainties associated with the monsoon are key characteristics of the country's economy.

The latest census (2001) enumerates Nepal's population at 23.2 million people, up from 18.4 million in 1991. The country has a crude density of 157 persons per km<sup>2</sup>. Only 14 percent of the total population lives in urban areas or municipalities. Of the three ecological zones, namely mountain, hill and *tarai* (plain), the *tarai* has the largest proportion of the population—nearly one-half—within an area covering less than one-fourth of the total country. The hills, that is, the area settled from historical times where people coming from the north and the south converged, is home to 44 percent of the population. The mountain regions with very limited arable land have only 7 percent of the total population, despite a territorial share of 35 percent.

The population of Nepal has grown very rapidly over the last five decades. Between 1961 and 2001 the population more than doubled, reaching 23.2 million in 2001. The growth rate has been consistently over 2 percent, with an intercensal

growth rate between 1991 and 2001 of 2.3 percent per annum. Despite high rates of population growth, mortality and fertility levels are declining fast. The crude death rate has come down from 36.7 per thousand in the 1950s to 10.3 per thousand by 2001. Life expectancy at birth has improved significantly, reaching 59.5 in 2001 with almost no difference by gender. According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey the total fertility rate has declined from 6.3 children in 1971 to 4.1 in 2001 (Ministry of Health et al. 2001). This decline has all the usual implications of an increase in the proportion of older people. Given the focus on fertility reduction and preventive health care programmes within a general setting of low economic growth, the country is ill-prepared to address the emerging issues of population ageing in Nepal. This paper discusses the general situation of an ageing population within the broader demographic and socio-economic context.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

Three main sources of information have been utilised in this paper: the decennial population censuses, national surveys, and folk sources. Nepal has conducted six decennial population censuses with the 2001 census being the latest. Since the details of this latest census were not available at the time of writing, information from the 1991 census has been used to discuss the demographic context of ageing. To present the issue of ageing in a wider perspective information from periodic national surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (Ministry of Health et al. 1996; 2001), and the Migration, Employment and Birth, Death and Contraception Survey 1996 (CDPS 1996) have been utilised. In addition, the Nepal Labour Force Survey (NLFS) 1998/99 was the main source of data for the analysis of the activity status of older people (CBS 1999). With nationally representative samples from 720 primary sample units covering more than 14,000 households and all three seasons of the year, this survey is considered the first comprehensive labour force survey in the country. It estimated a total population of 19,104,000 of which 1,315,000 were aged 60 and over. This suggests a proportion of older people of 6.9 percent. This survey was “the first survey carried out by CBS [Central Bureau of Statistics, Nepal] where work activities have been defined in line with the current ILO standards which in turn are based on the United Nations 1993 System of National Accounts” (CBS 1999: 10). Some adjustment in the time reference for asking questions about work activities was made

to fit the country's situation, but care was taken to ensure that the terminology complied with international standards. The survey uses a short reference period, that is, the seven days leading up to the interview to measure 'current activity' whereas a longer period of a year is used to capture 'usual activity'.

Data quality is of course an important issue. Despite the NLFS 1998/99 being the first of its kind, data quality is considered to be reasonably good. The survey report states that field staff were adequately trained, that sampling worked out well, and that the cartographic work for the fieldwork proved invaluable (CBS 1999). Nonetheless, a note of caution applies to data on women's work activities. For example, because of the traditional nature of the society it was not as easy to collect data on women's activities as on men's, as women operate mainly in the domestic rather than public domain. Among the higher castes such as Brahmin and Chhetri it was not difficult, but for others it was done by proxy (i.e., the household head). Many activities discussed in the paper would be more meaningful if time series data at the household level were available. However, in the context of an absolute dearth of information on labour force participation in general, and on older people in particular, this cross-sectional data set is doubtless useful to provide some insight into the current activities of older people in the country.

In addition to census and survey data this paper uses folk sources—local sayings and proverbs—in order to present the customary, and sometimes stereotypical, images of older people in the society. As a traditional agrarian system, Nepalese society is rich in oral traditions which are important to provide local perspectives on social issues. These rich resources are poorly utilised in academic discourses, and this paper attempts to redress the balance.

### **3. Old Age: Customary Images**

#### *Old Age: Meaning and Images of the Body*

The rapid growth of the elderly population may be a new phenomenon, but the concept and related images of older people are not new in the Nepalese social landscape. The image of old age is associated with the greying of hair, wrinkling of the skin, with poor physical health, and decreased ability to work. The common expression "*budo hunu*", to be aged, means to be poor or deficient in physical and mental ability, and limited in terms of performing economically productive activities

commonly conceived of as ‘work’. For advanced old age (‘old-old’ age) there is a saying, “*aagan pardesh hunu*”, which literally means “even the courtyard is like a very distant place.” An elaboration of this notion is found in the expression “*budo bhayo saba ranga gayo, aagan bhayo paradesh*”. This takes the notion further by commenting on the loss of beauty of the body (wrinkles, leanness) and on disabilities in activities of daily living, such that even a courtyard becomes a place hard to be reached by an old person. There are also expressions alluding to the weakening of mental abilities with the ageing process, such as “*java java budi, tava tava hudi*.” These refer to loss of mental ability, along with loss of physical ability with successive ageing. The greying of hair is obviously a key indicator of ageing and is widely reflected in language and social life. The saying goes further, “*dari aaye javan hunchha, dari pake briddha*,” meaning “the appearance of a beard brings youth, while its greying brings the [state of] old age.” In other words, the appearance of a beard (and corresponding physical changes in girls) is considered a symbol of achieving maturity, which is a positive sign, whilst its turning grey is symbolic of the disabilities associated with old age.

Biological age is sometimes explicitly referred to in sayings about older people. A common proverb in the form of a rhyme is “*java pugyo sathi haatama lathi*.” This translates as “when you are sixty you are likely to need a stick in your hand as a support.” The deterioration of the physical state of the body associated with ageing is reinforced in the saying “*java pugyo assi kunama basi*,” which means “when you are eighty you spend time sitting in a corner, not prone to easy physical movement.” Although there are also sayings like “*tan budo bhaye pani man budo bha chaina*” (“despite physical posture showing signs of old age, older people’s minds are not old”), these are not as commonly used as the others.

The concept of ageing is also expressed in terms of generation. The expressions *hajurba (baje) hunu* or *hajurama (bajai) hunu* (local terms for grandparental generations) bear the meaning of attainment of elderly status. Older individuals reiterate these expressions with pride in the regular conversations among peers and with juniors. Sometimes people stress their generational status when making a point in an argument on social behaviours. Such status is considered as carrying weight in an argument in general, and in matters of social customs and behaviour in particular. It is also considered as a boost to the social status of the respective seniors.



The disability sometimes associated with ageing is also recognised in local expressions. For example, “*haat goda chaldaina, majherima phaldaina*” is a saying that relates to the loss of physical ability with ageing. This literally translates as “with ageing the arms and legs have weakened such that they are unable to work in the farm, and no crops are grown on the courtyard.” This saying not only captures some of the growing difficulties with activities of daily living (ADL) with ageing, it also reinforces the integral role of farming as a way of earning a livelihood. In other words, in a subsistence farming system one has to produce something for survival and has to be physically fit for this. With progressive old age, individuals lose this very basis of survival.

#### *Elderly Status as Perceived in Society: Social Images*

Customarily older people are much revered and respected in Nepalese society. The reverence and respect is primarily associated with their long experience and their ability to give good advice to the younger generations on social and cultural life. They are considered as repositories of worldly experience of both good and bad times. An example is the proverb “*aago tapnu mudako, kura sunnu budako*” or “enjoy the heat of a log, and heed the advice of the elders.” In the cold season, the solution to keeping warm is to sit by the fire of a big mature timber log because it provides adequate and steady heat. Likewise, if one needs good advice one should listen to older people. Just as the heat from ordinary firewood is short-lived and inadequate, so the advice from an immature person may not be farsighted. The words of older people are reflections of their long experience of life. Related to this is another saying, “*ketalai chalaye gali, budalai chalaye buddhi*” (NEPAN/HAI 2001), which means “if you bump into a young man, you get a bashing; if the same happens with an old man, you get advice.”

The traditional Nepalese texts of moral education have expressions such as “*pitri devo bhava, matri devo bhava*” which translates as “parents are like or equal to God.” The implications are that they are to be respected as gods are respected. Likewise, in the household and family context there is an expression *pitri hrin or pitri prasad*, meaning parental debt or blessing. In the traditional system of four *ashrams* (stages of life), the system of inheritance is an integral part of life, such that a householder (*grihasthasram*) inherits economic as well as social capital from parents as debts and blessings. It is important for him to pass the inherited—nurtured and

expanded—capital to the next generation. It is believed that in this way the householder pays off the parental debt and receives the blessing of the ancestors. This also qualifies the householder for respect and care from offspring and society. Although one may argue that these expressions are no more than ‘good old sayings’ in the modern context, they are still important, as they portray traditional social images of older people and put strong moral pressure on families and children who fail to provide adequate care and support to their old parents and relatives.

The experience and wisdom of older people are well recognised in Nepalese society, especially in the areas of social behaviour and ritual and cultural practices. It is common for households to consult older people in the family or in the community about auspicious days on which to perform the many life-cycle rituals for members of the family. Expressions like these are illustrative of the social recognition of older people: “*budo bagh ra syal tanneri*,” which literally means “a smart jackal is no match against an old tiger.” In other words, no matter how smart a young adult, he cannot match an experienced older person. *Muna Madan*, the most popular Nepali poetry written in the early 1940s by Nepali poet laureate Laxmi Prasad Devkota, uses the phrase *tin bias hiyud khayeki* (a person who has experienced sixty winters) to express the fact that words from such a long-lived person are to be respected, since the words are authentic and borne from real experience.

Older people, however, are also perceived as needing sympathy and encouragement from society. The expression *danda ka gham/jun* (the setting sun or moon on the horizon) captures this. It alludes to the fact that elderly people do not have long to live and that the family, relatives, or society as a whole are expected to help make their remaining life comfortable. If the family hurts them or their feelings there is a common belief that they might curse the surviving person or family. The misdeeds done to older people are seen as deserving of a curse, and it is believed that such a curse is likely to materialise.

Of course the proverbs and sayings are not always expressive of positive aspects. They also allude to the continued work responsibilities of older people even if they have children who are assumed to take responsibility once their parents are old. One of these expressions describes older people not getting expected levels of support in spite of having children: “*baarha chhora terha nati, budhako dhokro kandhai mathi*”, literally translates as “you have twelve sons and thirteen grandsons, but the burden of work remains as ever.” This is obviously not a positive expression, but nor

is it entirely negative. It is used in the context of big families where everyone is tied up with their own business and where the elderly parents thus have to shoulder some of the responsibilities. The saying is also used to refer to parents who, despite being old, are not ready or willing to give up their active familial responsibilities and make way for their children. Often it is used in a gender-specific way to convey the impression of not valuing a daughter's ability. There are other sayings that directly relate to gender. These express the fact that there is in reality not much difference with respect to being able to count on support whether one has sons or daughters. "*Chhora paye buharilai, chhori paye jwailai; budha budhilai ustako ustai*" translates as: "If you have sons, when they grow up, they go along with daughters-in-law. If you have daughters, when they grow up, they go along with sons-in-law. The old remain lonely regardless."

When considering images of older people it is necessary also to look at the use of appropriate relational words of respect. In Nepal, depending upon a person's age, terms such as 'grandpa', 'grandma', 'uncle' or 'aunt' are habitually and respectfully used in conversation. Personal names are hardly used, especially when talking to older people, as this is considered less polite. There are also specific caste and ethnic words for expressing respect, like *baje/bajyi*, *kaji/kajini*, *sahuji/sahuni*, and *subba/subbeni*. Among them, *baje* and *bajai/boju* are increasingly being used as generic terms of respect for all older people irrespective of the existence of caste-specific terms in the past. Older people are ideally the first to be given food or other items in the household. This may not apply in urban areas where both younger-generation spouses work outside the home but it is common practice in the village.

When dealing with the issue of respect, the classic study of respect for the elderly by Silverman and Maxwell (1978) becomes relevant. They identified seven different kinds of respect older people are shown. These are classified as spatial (e.g., special seats for older people), victual (e.g., giving the elderly choice foods), linguistic (e.g., use of honorific terms of address), presentational (e.g., special postures assumed in their presence), service (e.g., housekeeping tasks performed for them), prestatative (e.g., giving them gifts), and celebrative (e.g., ceremonies held in their honour). Nepalese society is no exception in reserving respect for older people. From words expressing utmost respect to the bowing down in front of people, Nepalese elderly are shown respect. The classification of different kinds of respects as stated above becomes useful if respect forms are categorised into those performed within the

family and wider kin, and those performed by individuals in general. Because of the traditional caste system, some types of respect differ by caste and ethnic affiliation. As can commonly be observed, respect forms are being redefined over time, and nowadays rather than physically bowing down to the feet of the older person, oral expressions or simply gesturing at bowing down are becoming more popular. Detailed research on this topic is lacking for Nepal, but it is likely that there are important parallels to studies on respect undertaken elsewhere. For instance, in her study of the meaning of respect in Singapore, Mehta (1997) argues that respect is being redefined from obedience to courteous behaviour. Similarly, in the case of Hong Kong, Chow (1997) notes that young people are willing to provide financial support and personal care, but less willing to consult their elders for opinions. Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai (1997) point out that traditional expressions of respect for older people are changing in Southeast Asia, but that the value of respect remains stable.

Overall common images concerning older people in Nepal reflect them as being part of extended and joint families. This is especially the case in sayings that reflect positive images. Negative images mostly relate to older people who do not have their own family to support, who live alone, and most often are poor. Other common images are of older people as weak but full of wisdom, as persons unable to contribute economically to the household, and as persons to be looked after by younger generations on moral and cultural grounds. It is imperative to examine in how far these images translate into realities in the context of changing demographics and household economies. Thus the next section will turn to the realities of elderly people's lives by investigating their participation in various economic and non-economic activities.

#### **4. The Activities of Older People**

For the overwhelming majority of the working age population in Nepal, there is no discrete act of retirement which separates working life from a period of inactivity or retirement. (The civil and professional services are exceptions but constitute a very small proportion of the total working population.) With more than 85 percent of older people living in rural areas where agriculture is a way of life rather than mere occupation, the majority of older people are engaged in various types of activities,

both in the home and outside the home. Not all activities demand heavy physical labour. While some older people are likely to perform strenuous, many engage in activities that are less taxing. In either case the activities of older people are not only of direct importance as contributions to the household economy, but they are also indirectly important because they help release adult members of the household for other productive tasks. Elderly people's role of freeing up other members is their most common contribution, and it helps to keep the elderly themselves active both physically and mentally.

As noted earlier, with progression towards old age individual farm household members engage in activities that entail less physically hard labour. The transition to activities requiring less physical and to fewer hours takes place gradually so that it is often not easily discernible. However, two things are noteworthy. First, with progressive ageing a shift in involvement from productive work activities to more non-productive activities (especially household maintenance) becomes apparent, despite only modest changes in the hours worked in the early stages of old age. Second, due to ownership of productive resources (e.g., agricultural land), the household head—usually a man—is likely to maintain his authority over family matters well into advanced old age. This ownership of family resources and thus control over family decision making is likely to be important in families where there is no occupational change between generations, and adult children have continued the parental occupation with inherited resources.

Conventionally, the working age population is simply categorised into economically active and inactive. The active or inactive status then applies to older people as well. The activity status of the elderly population in Nepal, however, needs to be understood from the perspective of a 'way of life' rather than sheer labour force participation. Many activities in which older people in traditional societies engage are a continuation of the activities they have been doing from their early days on. As children they supported their parents and seniors in domestic and minor farm activities. In adulthood they engaged in most farm activities as prime breadwinners, with a few also entering into non-farm activities. Thus, for most of these older people, farm work activities are so central that they have become their way of life. Variations are of course expected since older people are not a homogenous group. However, these variations are most often apparent in the *extent* of participation and are primarily due to personal health, socio-economic conditions of the household, and

living arrangements. A lot remains to be explored in these aspects of older people's lives in Nepal.

The Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99 is the only source to date that provides the information necessary to examine the activity status of older people. This survey provides information on labour force activities across the whole population. It records information on participation of individuals aged five and over in several categories of work activities in the country over a year. The activity status, types of work, and extent of participation of older people can be derived from this survey. The survey classifies the working age population as economically active versus inactive according to their status at the time of survey. As concerns *activity status*, a person is defined as currently active if he or she was either employed for at least one hour in the seven days preceding the survey, had a job attachment but was temporarily absent from work, or was seeking employment (available to work if work were to be found) (CBS, 1999: 25).

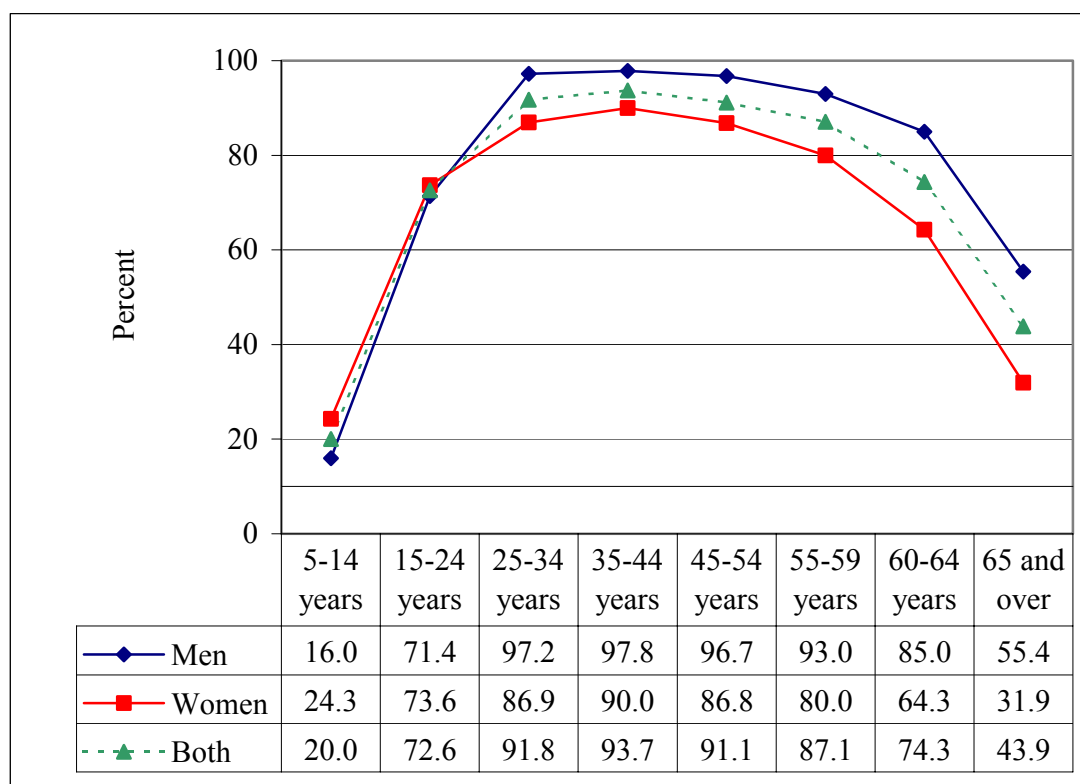
The *participation rate* of older people refers to the proportion of the population aged sixty and over engaged in various kinds of activities, some economic others non-economic. Two types of rates are distinguished: *usual activity rates* and *current activity rates*. The former captures the usual status of working or not working with reference to the past year, while the latter refers to the work status of a person over the seven days preceding the survey.

#### *Economic Activity Rates of Older People and Other Age-groups*

The economic activity rates of older persons are most meaningful when set against the rates for other age-groups. In Nepal the activity rates for children are also important since a large section of the child population helps parents in their household and farm activities. The overall activity rate for children aged five to fourteen years is 20 percent. There is a gender gap, with girls' activity rates being 24 percent, boys only 16 percent. However, this gender gap decreases with successive age-groups, although the rates for girls exceed those for boys up to the age of twenty-five. The high rates for girls compared with boys have their roots in the traditional gender division of work. It is a common practice in Nepalese society for daughters to help their parents from early ages on. School enrolment rates for girls are lower than for boys, which further underlines their participation in home-based activities.

The activity rates are higher for men than women for all age-groups above twenty-five years (see Figure 1). For both, the rates increase significantly from ages twenty-five to thirty-four; they remain almost stable until the age-group fifty to fifty-four, with a peak in the thirty-five to forty-four year age-group. Among men the highest activity rate is recorded at 98 percent, for women it is 90 percent (both these figures are for the thirty-five to forty-four year age-group). This age-group also shows the lowest gender gap in activity rates among those aged twenty-five and over. After the thirty-five to forty-four year age-group the gender gap widens with age. The rates for women are consistently lower in all age-groups after age thirty-five. This may be explained by an increased participation by women in non-economic household activities such as cooking, cleaning, child rearing, and minor repairs.

Figure 1: Economic Activity Rates by Age and Gender, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



The activity rates for the older age-groups, that is, people aged sixty and over decrease remarkably compared with those of the younger adult age-groups. The decline is noticeable for the sixty to sixty-four age-group, and striking for the age-group sixty-five and over. A breakdown of age data after age sixty-five is not available, but it is reasonable to assume that many older people in the rural areas

remain active and continue to work at least some hours a day to very high ages. A recent study reported a case of an old woman aged seventy-nine from the Western Mountains area who worked for more than 10 hours a day, of which nearly four hours were spent on economic activities (NEPAN/HAI 2001).

As noted in the preceding paragraphs older people in Nepal participate in economic activities at advanced ages. Overall the activity rate, or labour force participation rate, among people aged sixty and over is 55 percent. Gender differences are noticeable. The rates for men are higher than those for women. Whereas almost two-thirds of older men are economically active, the corresponding rate for women is only 44 percent. This gap is largely a reflection of older women's widespread engagement in domestic chores that are not considered part of labour force activities. Gender differences increase with age, as the decline in activity rates is greater for women than men. The decline is very sharp between age-groups sixty to sixty-four and sixty-five and over, showing a 41 percent drop (see Figure 1).

Without a doubt, ageing brings noticeable changes in activity status. While for some the changes involve a shift from productive physical labour to activities needing less physical labour and time, for others they entail a move towards low or no participation in work activities. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the difference between activity rates of older people (aged sixty and over) and their immediately younger age-group, i.e., those aged forty-five to fifty-nine who sometimes referred to as the 'supporting generation.' In contrast to an activity rate of 55 percent among older people, the corresponding rate is 90 percent among the forty-five to fifty-nine year-olds, suggesting a 35-percentage point decline with entry into 'old age.'

Activity rates of older people differ by gender and rural-urban residence. The rates are higher for men than women, and higher in rural than urban areas (see Figure 2). With entry into elderly status the rates decline. The decline is steeper among women and in urban areas. For example, while women's activity rate for the forty-five to fifty-nine year age-group is 62 percent it declines sharply to 27 percent for the age-group sixty and over. This may be because of limited availability of farm activities in urban areas, as well as possibly greater involvement of elderly women in household duties in the cities. The gap between men and women is far greater among older people than among the forty-five to fifty-nine year-olds (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Economic Activity Rates of People Aged Sixty and over by Gender and Urban-Rural Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

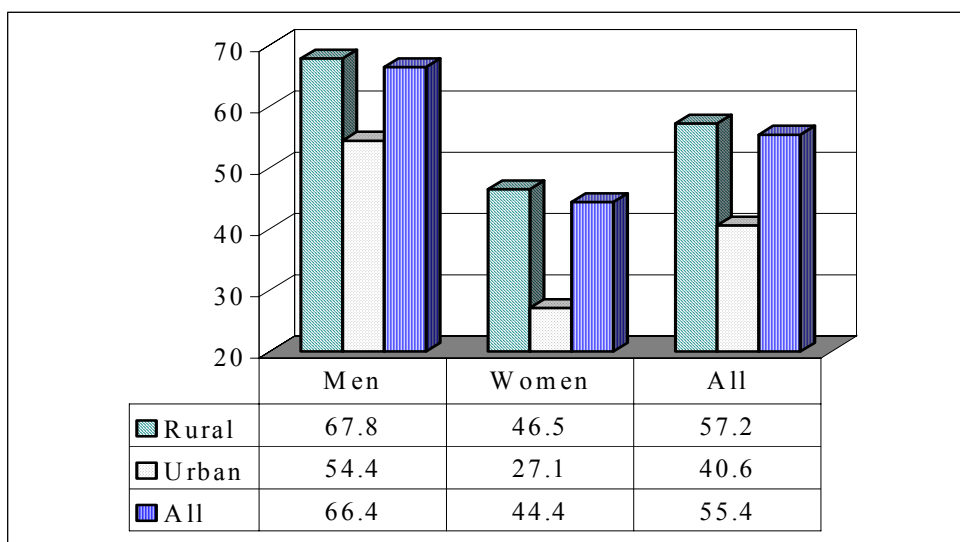
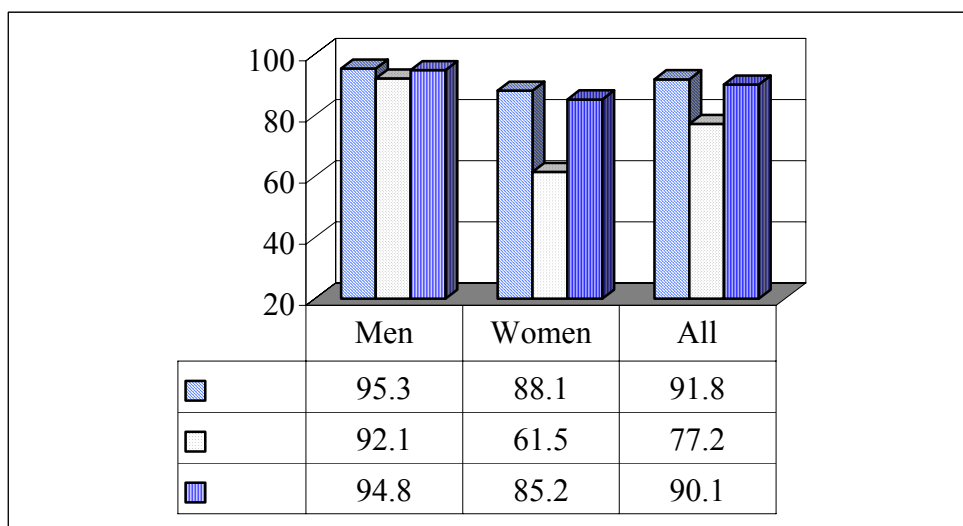
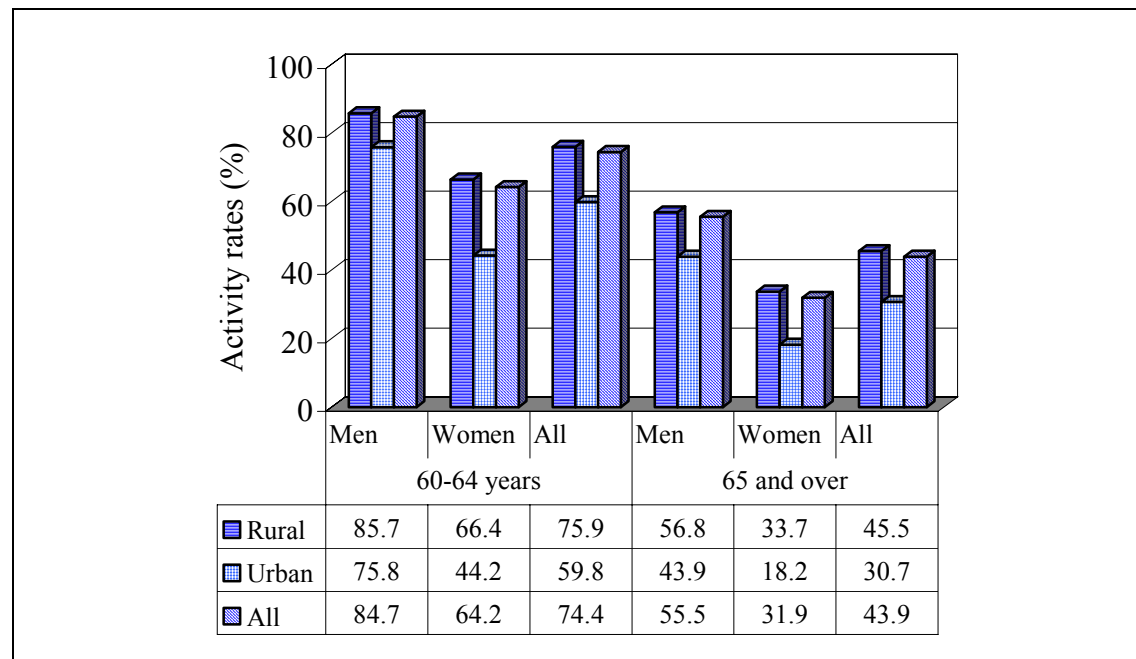


Figure 3: Economic Activity Rates of People Aged 45-59 by Gender and Urban-Rural Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



Among older people the usual activity rates change fast with age progression. A comparison of the sixty to sixty-four year-olds with people aged sixty-five and over shows this clearly. The rate of decrease is expected to be even faster as older people reach seventy or seventy-five years, although the trend is likely to depend on socio-economic status of the household. Although data on activities of those specifically aged over seventy-five are not available, studies elsewhere have provided ample evidence about a decline in work activities with increasing age (see HAI 2002).

Figure 4: Economic Activity Rates by Elderly Age-Group and Urban-Rural Residence and Gender, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



The sharp decline of activity after the age of sixty applies to both men and women, and rural and urban areas (see Figure 4). It is likely that the decline is related to increased disability associated with ageing, which results in lower participation in economic activities. The decline is once again steeper among women. Among rural men aged sixty-five and over the decline is to two-thirds of the activity status of sixty to sixty-four year-olds, whereas among women it is a decline to one-half of the status of sixty to sixty-four year-old women. In urban areas the decline is steeper for both men and women, with the older groups showing only 58 and 41 percent, respectively, of the activity status of the younger age-group.

The discussion so far has focussed on usual activity status. Activity rates based on *usual* activity have the advantage of avoiding possible effects of seasonality, because they are based on year-round coverage. However, details of participation for specific activities are not available; these are only available for *current* activity status. The following discussion of participation in specific activities is based on data of the latter. Current activity status gives information on activities in the seven days preceding the survey. In general current activity rates are higher by about nine percent than usual activity rates. This needs to be borne in mind when examining the specific activities of older people.

Data on current activity suggest that 63 percent of older people are currently economically active. The rates vary by gender, with 75 percent of men and 51 percent of women active. This is much lower than current economic activity of all women taken together (71 percent). For men aged twenty to fifty-nine the activity rates approach 100 percent. It is likely that the difference between men and women among older people is due to the participation of women in household duties, which are not considered work activities in the survey. There is also a large difference in current activity status between areas: rates among older people are far higher in rural than in urban areas. These differences are more marked for women than men (see Table 1).

Table 1. Current Activity Rates (Percent) of People Aged Sixty and Over by Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Men	Women	Total
Rural	76.4	53.2	64.9
Urban	62.9	34.1	48.2
Total	75.1	51.2	63.2

The decline in the activity rates with increasing age is noticeable, as a comparison between sixty to sixty-four year-olds and those aged over sixty-five shows (see Table 2). Whereas four out of five elderly aged sixty to sixty-four work, only just over one half of those aged sixty-five and over do. It seems likely that activity rates decrease more steeply with increasing age, but the age data to prove this are lacking. The age-related shift from active to non-active status is more apparent in urban than rural areas and applies to both men and women, although the decline in activity is more marked for women. This suggests that with age progression women engage more in household duties than farming work outside the home.

Table 2. Current Activity Status of Older People by Age-group, Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	60-64 years			65 and over		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Rural	90.5	71.4	80.8	68.0	41.6	55.1
Urban	82.4	50.5	66.3	52.2	25.5	38.4
Total	89.7	69.3	79.4	66.3	39.8	53.3

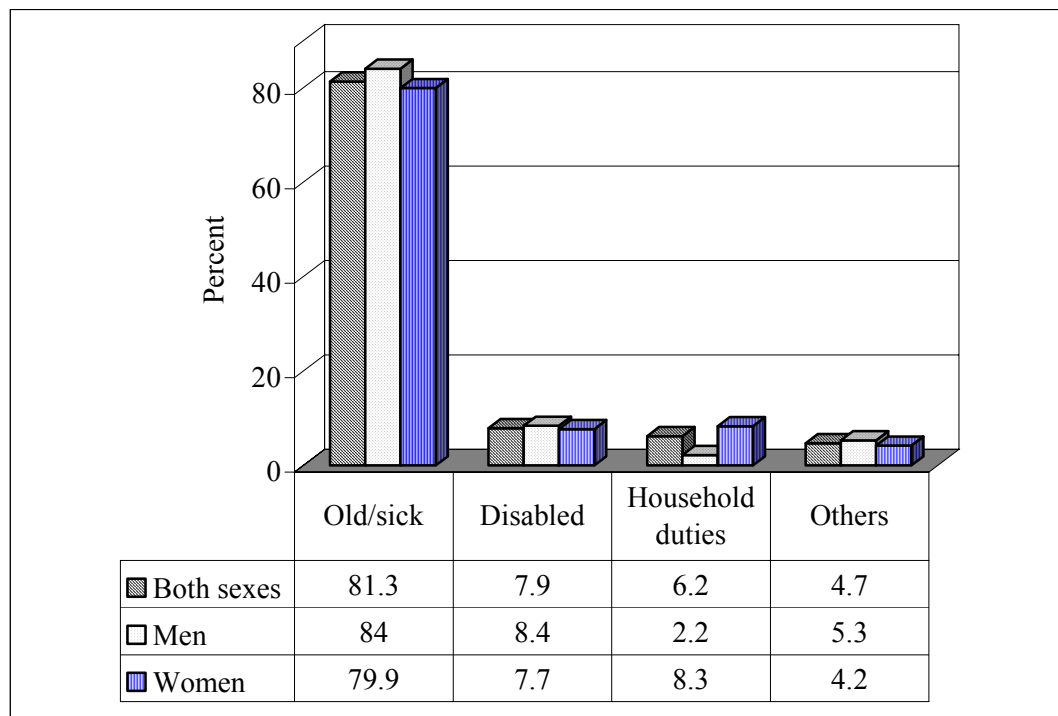
*Note:* Current activity is based on work status during the seven days preceding the survey.

### Reasons for Inactivity in Old Age

Before looking in detail at specific activities of older people, I shall first briefly discuss the reasons for being inactive among elderly who state that they are not active. Overall 38 percent of older Nepalese in the survey did not work in the seven days leading up to the survey. Inactivity was more common among women, with women almost twice as likely as men not to be working; this gives a sex ratio of inactive status of 52 men per 100 women.

Older people cited three main reasons for being inactive. These are being old and/or ill, being disabled, and having household duties. Of these being old and/or ill was by far the most commonly cited (see Figure 5). More than four in five older people were inactive due to old age or sickness. For the country as a whole one-third of working-age people stated they were inactive due to old age or illness, of which three-quarters were aged sixty and over. About 8 percent of inactive older people stated disability as their reason for not working. This reason was slightly more common among men than women. Almost half of all working-age people who are inactive due to disability are over age sixty.

Figure 5: Reasons for Inactivity Among Older People by Gender, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



Note: The total number of inactive older people was 484,000, of which 165,000 were men, 319,000 women. NLFS1998/99 reported total population aged sixty and over at 1,314 thousand.

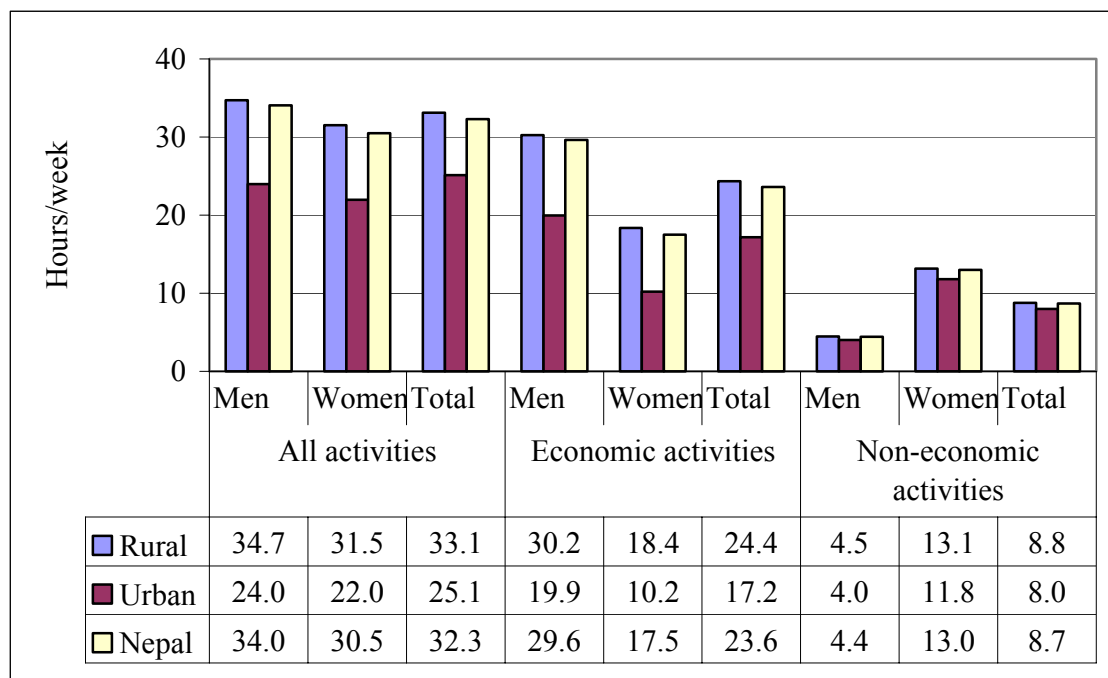
Household duties were given as the reason for inactivity by 6 percent of elderly. Four times as many women than men states this as their reason. However, in terms of absolute numbers women who are responsible for household duties and thus not working outnumber men by a factor of more than eight. For the total female inactive population the percentage reporting household duties as the reason for inactivity was 95.7 percent.

### *The Types of Activities of Older People*

Older people are commonly viewed as recipients of services, as physically weak and thus limited in their ability to perform activities. However, survey data show elderly Nepalese people to be engaged in various activities and working long hours. In the country as a whole, older people aged sixty years and over work on average more than 32 hours per week, which translates into approximately five hours a day. Men work about 3.5 hours more than women per week. Men spend 87 percent of their total working time on activities categorised as economic activities; only 13 percent of their time is spent on non-economic activities. Women on the other hand spend 57 percent of their working time on economic activities, and 43 percent on non-economic activities (see Figure 6).

When all older people are taken together the time allocation ratio of economic to non-economic activities is 2.7 to 1. For men it is 6.7 to 1, while for women it is 1.3 to 1. Nepal is not exceptional in this regard. Evidence from other countries, such as India (see Dharmalingam 1994), Bangladesh (see Cain 1991), and elsewhere (Grundy 1991) points to similar trends in gender differences.

Figure 6: Average Hours spent by Elderly People on Various Activities per Week by Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



The place of residence makes a difference to the numbers of hours worked in a week. Those living in urban areas were found to be working fewer hours, and this applies to men and women. Whereas older men were active for on average 33 hours a week in rural areas the corresponding figure for urban areas is only 24. This is largely a result of fewer hours being spent on economic activities. Engagement in non-economic activities does not show marked differences between urban and rural areas. Older women in rural areas spent more hours in some form of activity compared with their urban counterparts. This may primarily be a reflection of the rural economy, where there is always one or another type of farm or domestic work that will keep older people occupied.

Far from elderly people uniformly withdrawing from worldly affairs, we detect high levels of active involvement among the elderly in Nepal. This can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, in line with the deteriorating state economy the household-economic situation of most families with older people is not improving. In the midst of poor and stagnant household economies many older people are forced to stop working only when they become physically incapacitated. In addition, for those older people who do not have a son or family to support them, there is no alternative to working for as long as possibly. Secondly, those who stay with their children have

an obvious tendency to want to help their children so that the household's economic condition does not deteriorate. This means they engage in various types of work, some of which not only consists in minor help but also releases other adults for more strenuous physical activities. Therefore, economic necessity and older people's desire to better the economic status of their offspring lead them to spend time on various economic and non-economic activities.

Before discussing the participation of older people in various activities it is essential to note the kinds of activities that are considered as *work activities* and those that fall under *productive activities*. Following ILO standards the survey includes activities like tailoring, making mats for the household, or collecting water or firewood within the category of work (for details see CBS 1999). The kinds of activities subsumed under work activities include activities outside the home as well as home-based activities. The former include wage employment and any business operated by a respondent. Home-based activities include agriculture, milling and other food processing, handicrafts, construction and minor repairs, fetching water, collecting firewood, and other work activities such as bonded labour, activities of persons of a religious order, or cooking food for labourers working on one's farm.

As we have seen, the activity rate was quite high among older people (63 percent). If activities are categorised by place of work, by far the largest proportion carried out home-based activities, as evidenced by the 81 percent working in agriculture (see Table 4). Apart from farming and animal husbandry, agriculture also includes fishing, gathering fruit and vegetables from forests or common land, hunting animals and birds, and making charcoal. Milling, in which one in ten older people are engaged, includes threshing and milling grain, making cheese, ghee and butter, making local beer and alcohol, slaughtering livestock, curing hides and skins, and preserving meat and fish. One in eight spent more than one hour fetching water during the reference period; one in ten carried out activities of cutting and collecting firewood. Four percent engaged in handicrafts, which includes collecting thatching and weaving materials, weaving baskets and mats, making clay pots, weaving cloth, tailoring and dressmaking, and making furniture.

Table 4. Percentage of Older People Carrying Out Various Economic Activities, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total	Rural	Urban
<b><i>Activities Outside the Home</i></b>			
Own business	10.1	8.8	25.4
Wage job	6.0	5.6	10.4
<b><i>Home-based activities</i></b>			
Agriculture	81.3	83.2	59.7
Milling and food processing	10.1	10.5	4.5
Handicrafts	4.0	4.2	1.5
Construction	1.6	1.6	1.5
Fetching water	12.9	13.4	6.0
Collecting firewood	9.3	9.7	4.5
Other work activity	1.9	2.0	1.5
Any of these activities	96.3	96.5	94.0

*Notes:* These percentages refer to older people who spent at least one hour carrying out the respective activities in the seven days preceding the survey. Since most individuals are involved in more than one activity over the reference period, the activities are not mutually exclusive. Thus the table shows what proportions of older people are engaged in particular activities irrespective of their involvement in any other activity.

A sizable proportion of older people is carrying out activities outside the home; one in ten active elderly are engaged in their own business. This consists in managing one's own business or farm. Six percent of older people carry out wage labour. The survey defines wage job as employment in factories, business enterprises, farms, shops, services, or other economic units engaged in the production of goods and services for sale on the market. Also included are employees of the government and other social and cultural institutions, hotels, restaurants, transport and communication. Politicians who get remuneration, lawyers, doctors, shopkeepers, and farmers also fall into this category.

Some rural urban differences are noticeable, despite the fact that agriculture is an activity of the majority of older people in urban as well as rural areas. This reflects the overwhelmingly rural character of urban areas in Nepal. Of the fifty-eight municipalities in Nepal the greater part are urban areas without urban facilities (see Sharma 1989). Differences are notable in three activities. First, the proportion running their own business is nearly three times higher in urban than rural areas.



Second, the proportion engaged in wage work in urban areas is nearly double that of rural areas. Third, a far greater proportion of older people are engaged in handicrafts, milling and food processing, fetching water, and collecting firewood in rural than urban areas. Lack of basic amenities like piped water and the nature of the economy itself explain the higher rates of involvement in the latter activities in rural areas.

The gender dimension is notable not only in the proportions participating in economic activities, but also in the kinds of participation. As noted earlier, whereas three in four men take part in productive activities, only one in two women are doing so. There are commonalities and differences by gender among currently active older people. With respect to commonalities, there is not a single productive activity that is exclusive to men or women. Moreover, almost equal proportions participated in one or another activity that counts as productive work.

Gender differences are evident in the proportions carrying out specific activities. On activities outside the home, men outnumber women by two to one. While one in five men participate in activities outside the home, only one in ten women do so (see Table 5). By contrast, with the exception of construction work and handicrafts, women's participation in home-based activities far outweighs that of men. In short, while men are active outside the home, women are active primarily in home-based tasks including agriculture. Surprisingly, women's participation in agriculture is slightly higher than that of men. For men the lower proportion engaged in agriculture is likely to be due to activities outside the home, whereas for women it probably reflects a lack of alternative activities.

Even though men are not entirely lacking from activities such as milling, fetching water, and collecting firewood, these seem to be primarily women's domains (see Table 5). Although data do not permit clarification of this point, it seems probable that a large proportion of men carrying out activities are living alone or have spouses who are ill. Overall men's participation in home-based activities is still high, not only because some of these activities demand heavy physical labour (e.g., agricultural work), but also because they require specific skills. Although most of the skills needed for these activities do not entail leaving the home, and both men and women can obtain these skills, men have a definite advantage over women in accessing such skills in the existing social set-up.

Table 5. Percentage of Older People Carrying Out Various Economic Activities by Gender and Urban-Rural Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Activities outside the home</i>						
Own business	12.5	6.6	10.8	5.8	30.2	16.7
Wage job	7.9	3.3	7.5	3.2	11.6	4.2
<i>Home-based activities</i>						
Agriculture	79.4	84.2	81.9	85.2	53.5	70.8
Milling	4.0	19.1	4.2	19.6	2.3	12.5
Handicrafts	5.2	2.1	5.5	2.3	2.3	4.2
Construction	2.4	0.3	2.4	0.3	2.3	0.0
Fetching water	6.5	22.4	6.6	23.2	2.3	12.5
Collecting firewood	6.5	13.4	6.8	13.8	2.3	8.3
Other work activity	1.6	2.7	1.5	2.6	2.3	4.2
Any of these activities	96.4	95.8	96.7	95.8	93.0	95.8

*Note:* Percentages are based on economically active elderly as the denominator.

The rural-urban differences are not surprising, as more people participate in activities outside the home in urban than in rural areas. Although the proportion of women in wage labour is greater in urban areas compared with the national average, the gender gap is nonetheless considerable (Table 5). The proportion of women engaged in handicrafts is greater in urban than rural areas. This is associated with home-based production of carpets, souvenirs, and traditional handloom work, which tends to be based in major cities and the Kathmandu valley in particular. The majority of workers producing these handicrafts are women.

Clear rural-urban differences are also evident in the proportions of women collecting firewood and fetching water. The percentage of women fetching water in urban areas is higher than one might ordinarily expect. This is a reflection of the limited coverage of water supplies even in urban areas of Nepal. Similarly, firewood collection in urban areas reflects the fact that firewood is still a common source of household energy throughout Nepal. Overall a very high proportion of Nepalese older people in urban areas carry out agricultural activities, and the proportion of women doing so is as high as 71 percent. Again this bears witness to the rural nature of the economic base in Nepalese cities.

### *The Extent of Older People's Participation in Productive Activities*

The extent—in terms of hours—of older people's participation in various productive activities ranges from fewer than five hours (e.g., for milling or food processing) to as many as forty-two hours (e.g., wage work) per week. Assuming a six-day working week, this amounts to seven-hour working days spent in wage work by some elderly. Obviously, some activities like fetching water are daily activities, whereas others—milling, food processing, or collecting firewood—are not conducted daily. In terms of hours spent on a given activity four activities emerge as dominant among older people. These include agriculture, construction, working in an own business, and wage work (see Table 6). Older people carrying out these activities spend more than 33 hours per week on their respective tasks. Working hours need to be interpreted in conjunction with the number of elderly who undertake various tasks. Thus, although those carrying out agriculture spend 'only' 33.5 hours a week doing so (this being the lowest figure among the four major activities), the proportion engaged in agriculture is more than 80 percent. By contrast, persons carrying out wage and construction work spend 42 and 35 hours per week, respectively, but they make up only a small proportion of all elderly, that is, 6 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively.

Table 6. Average Number of Hours Spent on Various Economic Activities by Active Older People, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total	Rural	Urban
<i>Activities Outside the Home</i>			
Own business	39.5	38.2	43.2
Wage job	41.8	41.4	43.9
<i>Home-based activities</i>			
Agriculture	33.5	33.7	29.8
Milling/food processing	4.8	4.9	4.7
Handicrafts	17.1	16.8	25.0
Construction	35.4	36.5	21.0
Fetching water	5.2	5.2	5.3
Collecting firewood	8.6	8.6	9.3
Other work activities	19.5	18.9	28.0

*Note:* The average hours of work are calculated on the basis of all individuals who are active in each respective type of activity.

There are a few rural-urban differences worth noting in the hours spent carrying out activities. Those living in urban areas and carrying out agriculture spend fewer hours on this activity than those living in rural areas. This may be attributable to the limited amount of cultivated land in urban areas. By contrast, older people in urban areas doing activities outside the home do so for longer hours than their rural counterparts. It is also notable that the proportions working in own businesses and conducting wage work are higher in urban than in areas. It is difficult to explain these longer hours in the absence of more detailed data. Possibly the hardship associated with earning a living and the more abundant availability of work outside the home in urban areas are explanatory factors.

The amount of time reported as spent on construction work is strikingly high. This is in part due to the broad definition of construction work used in the survey. Repair activities, such as repair of farm buildings and renovation of dwellings, are considered part of construction work. These activities are more common in rural areas where labour for such work is provided by resident members and may also take longer. Urban-rural differences in the amount of time spent on handicraft production can be explained in the differing manners in which such work is carried out. In urban areas, handicraft production is often full-time work carried out by a small proportion of older people for instance for the tourism market. In rural areas, by contrast, handicraft work is a secondary activity carried out in spare time by a relatively large proportion of older people.

Men spend on average about one hour more a day on productive activities outside the home than women. The only exception is wage labour in urban areas where the hours spent do not show any difference by gender. It is also noteworthy that of all older people engaged in various activities it is those doing wage work in urban areas that spend the most hours per week (see Table 7). It is likely that many of these people are migrants working in factories, business enterprises, and the service sector in urban areas. Further details about the nature of and motivation for such work are needed.

Table 7. Average Number of Hours Spent on Economic Activities by Active Older People by Gender, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Activities outside the home</i>						
Own business	41.1	34.8	40.0	34.6	45.5	35.8
Wage job	43.0	37.4	41.8	36.0	51.2	51.0
<i>Home-based activities</i>						
Agriculture	35.1	31.3	35.3	31.6	32.0	26.7
Milling	3.4	5.3	3.5	38.1	2.0	4.0
Handicrafts	16.9	17.6	17.1	15.9	12.0	13.0
Construction	35.2	37.0	36.5	37.0	21.0	0.0
Fetching water	4.6	5.4	4.7	5.4	5.0	5.3
Collecting firewood	9.1	8.2	5.9	8.2	10.0	9.0
Other work activity	20.8	16.2	20.7	17.5	21.0	6.0

*Note:* The average hours of work are calculated on the basis of all individuals who are active in each respective type of activity.

On the whole, with the exception of agriculture, the activities for which women spend more hours than men are home-based activities (e.g., milling or collecting firewood). Despite older women spending more hours on these activities the gender differences are less pronounced than among the non-elderly adult population (see CBS 1999). One possible explanation for the comparatively small gender difference concerns the decline in physical ability among elderly men. With a decrease in physical abilities more men begin to spend time doing activities that entail less physical strength; in their prime, these activities were largely left to women. Contrary to the common view that older women's contributions are more important in terms of hours spent, we find men spending more hours on most tasks although the differences are often small. A surprising finding concerns the large amount of time spent by elderly men and women on construction work—including repair-work—in rural areas. As such work—like agricultural work—is likely to be quite strenuous this is suggestive of comparatively high levels of physical strength among many of the active elderly.

In order to understand the level and extent of participation of older people in productive activities, a comparison is made with the age-group that is immediately adjacent to the elderly age-group, that is those people who are aged forty-five to fifty-

nine. Among this group the current activity rates are 96 percent for men, 87 percent for women, and 92 percent for both sexes. Table 8 provides data on the level of participation of younger age-groups in various work activities among the economically active members of these groups. Compared with the older group (see Tables 4 and 5), the proportions of people in the younger group who are carrying out activities outside the home are high, while the proportions carrying out agricultural work are low. Similarly, among the younger group the proportions in activities such as milling and collecting firewood are high, while the proportions fetching water are roughly comparable. There is a remarkable difference between the age-groups in the proportions engaged in wage work. This may be suggestive of age or cohort effects. Whereas 21 percent of men and almost 7 percent of women among the forty-five to fifty-nine year-olds carry out wage work, the corresponding percentages among older people are only 8 and 3 percent, respectively. Likewise, a smaller proportion of younger people make handicrafts (2.5 percent) compared with older people (4 percent). The proportions of women in this activity are roughly similar in both groups.

Table 8: Active Population Aged Forty-Five to Fifty-Nine by Various Work Activities (Percent), Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Men	Women	Total
<i>Activities outside the home</i>			
Own business	15.3	7.8	11.7
Wage job	20.9	6.5	14.1
<i>Home-based activities</i>			
Agriculture	71.9	86.7	78.9
Milling	6.6	28.2	16.8
Handicrafts	2.9	2.2	2.5
Construction	2.3	0.2	1.3
Fetching water	5.1	23.7	13.8
Collecting firewood	8.1	17.9	12.7
Other work activity	2.0	3.2	2.6
Any of these activities	96.7	97.7	97.1
	(N=941,000)	(N=837,000)	(N=1,778,000)

Obviously younger people work longer hours than older people. This applies to both home-based activities and activities outside the home. Older people engaged in these activities spend fewer hours on them than the younger group (see Table 9). Two activities, namely construction and handicrafts, are exceptions. In handicraft production not only are the hours of work longer among older people but the proportions carrying out this activity are also higher. The same is true in construction although the percentages participating are only slightly higher among older people.

Table 9: Average Number of Hours Spent on Various Economic Activities by People Aged Sixty and over and People Aged Forty-Five to Fifty-Nine, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Aged 60 and Over			Aged 45-59		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
<i>Activities outside the home</i>						
Own business	41.1	34.8	39.5	44.3	37.8	42.2
Wage job	43.0	37.4	41.8	44.2	38.0	42.9
<i>Home-based activities</i>						
Agriculture	35.1	31.3	33.5	38.4	35.8	37.0
Milling	3.4	5.3	4.8	4.4	5.6	5.4
Handicrafts	16.9	17.6	17.1	11.2	15.7	13.0
Construction	35.2	37.0	35.4	30.0	45.0	31.2
Fetching water	4.6	5.4	5.2	4.6	5.5	5.4
Collecting firewood	9.1	8.2	8.6	9.4	8.7	8.9
Other work activity	20.8	16.2	19.5	23.9	12.5	17.2

*Note:* The average hours of work are calculated on the basis of all individuals who are active in each respective type of activity.

A comparison of the average hours spent on various activities between the elderly and those aged forty-five to fifty-nine further substantiates the comparable hours of involvement in both home-based activities and activities outside the home (Table 10). On the whole the younger group spends slightly over 44 hours a week in any of the activities categorised as productive within the boundaries set by the ILO, and the older group spends slightly over 37 hours a week. In short, the differences are not huge.

Table 10: Comparison of Average Hours Spent by People Aged Sixty and Over and People Aged Forty-Five to Fifty-Nine in Various Economic Activities in the Seven Days Preceding the Survey, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Aged 60 and Over			Aged 45-59		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
<i>Activities outside the home</i>						
Own business	5.1	2.3	4.0	6.8	2.9	5.0
Wage job	3.4	1.2	2.5	9.3	2.4	6.1
<i>Home-based activities</i>						
Agriculture	27.9	26.3	27.3	27.6	31.1	29.2
Milling	0.1	1.0	0.5	0.3	1.6	0.9
Handicrafts	0.9	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.3
Construction	0.9	0.1	0.6	0.7	0.1	0.4
Fetching water	0.3	1.2	0.7	0.2	1.3	0.7
Collecting firewood	0.6	1.1	0.8	0.8	1.6	1.1
Other work activity	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4
Any of these activities	39.5	34.1	37.3	46.4	41.7	44.2

*Note:* The average hours of work are calculated on the basis of all individuals who are active in each respective type of activity.

It emerges from these figures that contrary to the common view of older people carrying out a limited number of activities only and merely working short hours, they seem in fact to be carrying out a wide range of activities inside and beyond the home. Moreover, the extent of their involvement in terms of hours spent per week is far higher than generally assumed for older people. Obviously in the later ages, primarily after age seventy-five, the level and extent of activities are likely to decrease profoundly, but the data to show this are lacking. To what extent these high degrees of involvement are driven by poverty or the absence of intergenerational and family support, or whether living arrangements have an impact on elderly people's participation, cannot be deduced from the available data. These questions, as well as questions surrounding transitions from productive to non-productive activities, spatial differences (urban, rural, and ecological), and—most importantly—socio-cultural differences by caste and ethnic affiliation, are important and warrant further research on ageing in Nepal.



### *Older People in Non-economic Activities*

Major non-economic activities asked about in the NLFS 1998/99 which older Nepalese people carry out include cooking, cleaning, minor repairs, shopping, caring, child-minding, and volunteer work. Both economically active as well as non-active elderly carry out these activities. Overall 58 percent of the population aged five and over carry out at least one of these activities. Obviously the level of participation differs by age-group, with 18 percent of children aged five to nine and 42 percent among ten to fourteen year-olds undertaking at least one such task. The figure increases to 57 percent for those aged fifteen to nineteen, and more than 70 percent for the age-group twenty to fifty-nine, with a peak at 78 percent among thirty to forty-four year-olds. The participation rate then decreases sharply, with only 54 percent of those aged sixty and over carrying out one or more of the various non-economic activities.

Among older people 54 percent carry out one or more of the non-economic activities. This proportion is lower by 17 percent compared with the immediately younger group (forty-five to fifty-nine years). In terms of the proportions involved the four primary non-economic activities of older people are cooking, cleaning, child-minding, and shopping. Nearly one in three cook, whereas one in five look after a child (see Table 11). Minor household repairs are done by 6 percent, and about 3 percent carry out activities categorised as caring for an old, sick, or infirm family member.

Table 11. Percentages of Older People Carrying out Non-Economic Activities, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total	Rural	Urban
Cooking	32.5	32.8	30.2
Cleaning	27.8	27.9	26.8
Child-minding	19.1	19.5	15.7
Shopping	13.3	12.6	19.1
Minor repairs	6.1	6.2	5.5
Caring	1.9	1.8	2.7
Volunteer work	1.0	1.0	1.2
Any of these	54.0	54.0	53.3

*Note:* The percentages refer to all people aged sixty and over.

No rural-urban differences are evident in terms of the overall proportions of older people carrying out non-economic activities. However, there are differences with regard to specific activities. In urban areas fewer old people are involved in cooking, cleaning, and child-minding, but compared with older people in rural areas a higher proportion does shopping; similarly, more elderly in urban areas are involved in caring for others.

Gender differences are observable not only in the overall proportions carrying out *any* of these activities but also in the proportions participating in specific activities. Two in three older women carry out non-economic activities; among men only two in five do. Moreover in terms of specific activities men's participation does not exceed 20 percent in any of the non-economic activities. By contrast women's participation reaches 54 percent in some activities (see Table 12). Two chores, cooking and cleaning, are clearly the domain of women as demonstrated by their participation levels (54 and 46 percent, respectively). Child-minding, which includes feeding children, childcare, and taking them to school is not exclusively done by women; men also participate. Unlike in Western countries shopping is an activity clearly dominated by men in Nepal. This is largely explained by culture and tradition which favours men in activities that take place outside the home (see also CBS 1999).

Table 12. Percentage of Older People Carrying out Non-economic Activities by Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Cooking	11.2	54.0	11.5	54.4	8.9	50.6
Cleaning	9.4	46.3	9.5	46.6	9.0	43.8
Child-minding	14.3	23.9	14.6	24.4	11.5	19.7
Shopping	19.6	6.9	18.8	6.3	26.7	11.8
Minor repairs	4.0	8.3	4.0	8.4	4.1	6.9
Caring	1.6	2.1	1.6	2.0	2.4	3.0
Volunteer	1.8	0.2	1.7	0.1	2.0	0.3
Any of these	41.1	66.9	40.9	67.4	43.3	62.9

*Note:* The percentages are based on the whole elderly population of each respective sex and residence.

The pattern of participation does not show large differences by residence, but the extent of participation varies. The proportions carrying out cooking, cleaning, and

child-minding are higher in rural than urban areas. This is likely to be a reflection of larger family sizes, types of energy used, distances to be covered, and housing types. (Mud and thatch houses need to be cleaned and maintained quite often.) Men carry out shopping more than any other activity in urban areas. Culture and traditions are likely to explain why men are more often involved in volunteer work, although the gender difference is quite small.

Among older people carrying out non-economic activities three out of five cook, one in two clean, slightly more than one in three look after children, and one in four shop (see Table 13). As in earlier tables women's participation is higher except for shopping, caring, and voluntary community service.

Table 13. Percentage of Older People Carrying Out Various Non-Economic Activities Among Those Who Carry out At Least One Such Activity, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Urban			Rural			Total		
	M	W	T	M	W	T	M	W	T
Cooking	20.7	80.0	56.8	28.0	80.7	60.7	27.2	80.6	60.2
Cleaning	20.7	68.9	50.0	23.0	69.2	51.6	22.8	69.2	51.5
Child-minding	27.6	31.1	29.7	35.8	36.1	36.0	34.9	35.6	35.4
Shopping	62.1	17.8	35.1	45.7	9.4	23.3	47.4	10.3	24.5
Minor repairs	10.3	11.1	10.8	9.9	12.5	11.5	9.9	12.3	11.4
Caring	6.9	4.4	5.4	3.7	3.1	3.3	4.0	3.2	3.5
Volunteer	3.4	0.0	1.4	4.5	0.3	1.9	4.4	0.2	1.8

*Note:* These percentages are based on all people aged sixty and over who carried out at least one of these non-economic activities. Many older people carry out more than one activity, thus the percentages do not sum to one hundred.

#### *The Extent of Older People's Participation in Non-economic Activities*

In general older people who carry out non-economic activities spend 16 hours a week on one or more of these activities. Those living in rural areas spend more time than those in urban areas (see Table 14). Child-minding takes up the most hours, cooking and minor repairs are the next most time-intensive activities done by elderly people. Although time spent on voluntary work in the community is quite significant, only nominal proportions of older people are actually involved in this. By contrast, although cleaning takes up few hours, this activity deserves attention as the proportion of elderly who do cleaning chores is quite high.

Table 14. Average Number of Hours Spent on Various Non-Economic Activities by Older People Who Do at Least One Non-Economic Activity by Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total	Rural	Urban
Cooking	10.9	10.9	10.4
Cleaning	5.5	5.5	5.7
Child-minding	13.7	13.8	12.0
Shopping	3.5	3.5	3.6
Minor repairs	10.0	10.1	9.5
Caring	3.4	3.4	3.6
Volunteer	13.8	12.3	31.0
Any of these	16.1	16.2	14.9

*Note:* The average hours of work are calculated on the basis of all individuals who are active in each respective type of activity.

Hours spent on non-economic activities per week do not differ much by place of residence. This is related to two factors: firstly, the rural character of urban areas, and secondly, the nature of activities subsumed under non-economic activities. As noted above, many areas in Nepal are declared municipalities not because they have urban character but because they are either district or regional headquarters. Moreover, many of these activities are by nature quite fixed in their duration, which explains why there are no notable differences between urban and rural areas.

If the total hours spent on various activities are spread over the entire population of older people, irrespective of whether or not they participate in any non-economic activity, then older people seem to spend approximately 9 hours on non-economic activities (see Table 15). Urban areas show marginally fewer hours than rural areas. In terms of hours spent, cooking takes up most of the time, followed by child-minding and cleaning.

Table 15. Average Number of Hours Spent by All Older People on Non-economic Activities by Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total	Rural	Urban
Cooking	3.5	3.6	3.2
Cleaning	1.5	1.5	1.5
Child-minding	2.6	2.7	1.9
Shopping	0.5	0.4	0.7
Minor repairs	0.2	0.2	0.2
Caring	0.2	0.2	0.3
Volunteer work	0.1	0.1	0.2
Any of these	8.7	8.8	8.0

*Note:* The percentages refer to the total population of older people, irrespective of whether or not they participate in any non-economic activities.

There are important gender differences in the hours spent on non-economic activities. Women spend almost 20 hours per week in one or more of these non-economic activities, while men spend fewer than 11 hours on such tasks. Women spend more hours in child-minding, cooking, cleaning, and minor household repairs (see Table 16). Men spend slightly more time on shopping—though the difference is unlikely to be significant—and on voluntary community work. Surprisingly, they appear to spend more time than women on caring for the old, sick or infirm.

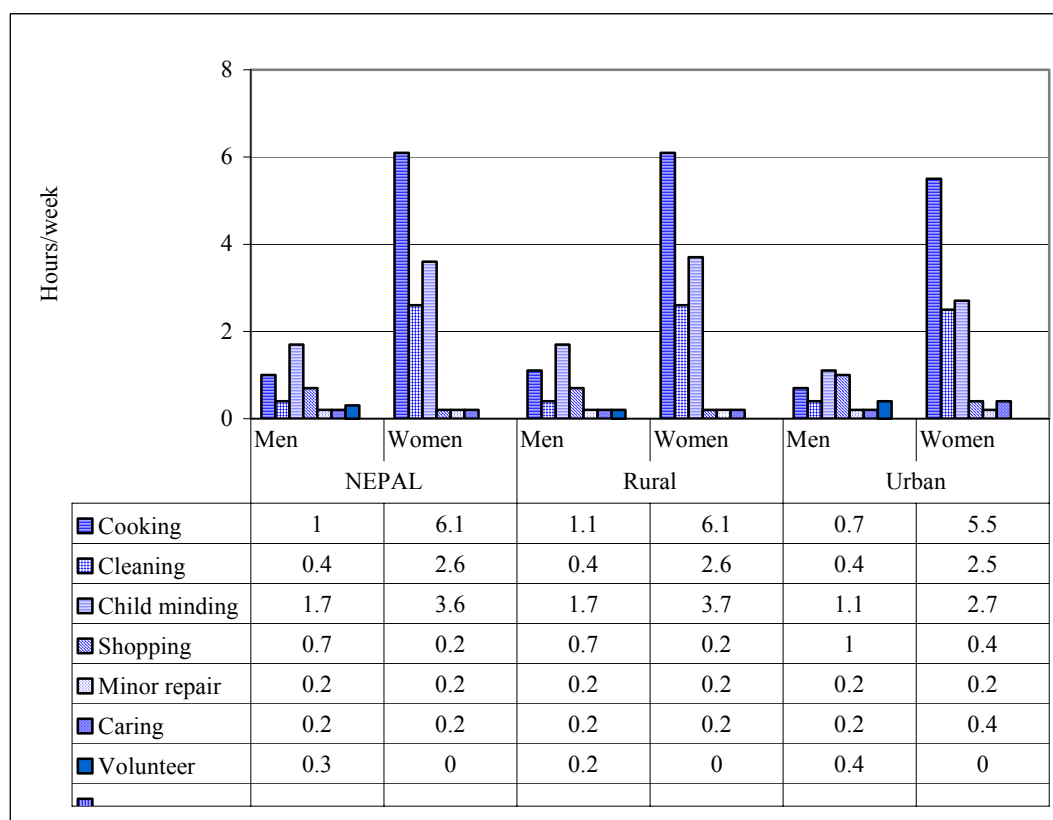
Table 16. Average Number of Hours Spent on Non-economic Activities Among Older People by Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Cooking	9.3	11.3	9.4	11.3	8	10.8
Cleaning	4.5	5.7	4.4	5.7	5	5.8
Child-minding	11.5	15.0	11.7	15.1	9.3	13.5
Shopping	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.4	3.8	3.1
Minor repairs	9.5	10.4	10.2	9.9	6.5	13.0
Caring	4.5	2.9	4.5	2.8	4.7	3.0
Volunteer work	14.2	9.0	12.9	6.0	28.0	0
Any of these	10.7	19.4	10.9	19.5	9.5	18.4

*Note:* Average hours are based on the number of elderly people who engage in each respective activity (differentiated by sex and residence).

If the total hours spent on non-economic activities are spread over the entire population of older people, the gender gap is also very evident. Whereas on average women spend 13 hours in one or the other non-economic activity, men merely spend 4.4 hours. This gender pattern does not change when comparing urban and rural residence. The average hours spent per week on cooking, cleaning, and child-minding are lower in urban than rural areas. Older people in urban areas spend slightly more time on shopping than their contemporaries in rural areas (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Average Number of Hours Spent by All Elderly on Various Non-Economic Activities by Gender and Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99



Note: Average number of hours are based on the total older population (differentiated by sex and residence), irrespective of whether or not they participate in any non-economic activity.

A comparison of the proportions of older people carrying out non-economic activities with their immediately adjacent age-group (aged forty-five to fifty-nine) and with all ages (five years and over) shows that despite their old age a large proportion of elderly contribute to non-economic activities of the household. Obviously the contributions by women are higher than those of men, but men's contributions are far from insignificant. Of the entire population aged five and over, 58 percent carry out one or more non-economic household activities, and 54 percent of older people do so

(see Table 17). A larger proportion of older men carry out non-economic activities compared with the average for the entire male population (aged five and over). This is suggestive of a clear shift towards non-economic activities with age progression among men. Traditionally, young and middle-aged men are expected to take responsibility for activities outside the home. A common saying which substantiates this assertion is “*gharakile gharai garnu, marda le chahardai garnu,*” which means that “women take charge of home-based activities and men look after the realm outside the home.”

Table 17. Percentage of the Population Engaged in Various Types of Non-Economic Activities by Age-Group and Gender, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Aged 60 and over		Aged 45-59		Aged 5 and over	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Cooking	11.2	54.0	9.5	78.0	8.6	63.0
Cleaning	9.4	46.3	9.0	71.7	10.5	67.4
Child-minding	14.3	23.9	15.4	28.5	13.4	32.0
Shopping	19.6	6.9	36.8	14.1	19.6	9.1
Minor repairs	4.0	8.3	7.1	15.1	3.8	12.7
Caring	1.6	2.1	2.3	3.5	1.6	2.5
Volunteer work	1.8	0.2	3.3	0.4	1.5	0.3
Any of these	41.1	66.9	55.1	90.3	37.2	76.8

Compared with the forty-five to fifty-nine year age-group, older people’s participation is lower. However, if prevalent images of older people as frail, sick and “good on words, not on deeds” are taken into account then participation rates of more than 54 percent in general, and 67 percent among women, clearly contradict this. The forty-five to fifty-nine year-olds may be considered as in transition: from prime age to the beginnings of a decline in participation in economic activities. Thus a high proportion among them carrying out non-economic activities (as well as economic activities) is to be expected. These figures also indicate that older people’s contributions should be understood not only in terms of time and effort per se, but also in the broader household context where these contributions may have released an adult for fully productive work activities. This is important in a country like Nepal where the extended family is a norm and where able-bodied members of the households have to work hard to make their living.

Across the total population nearly 11 hours are spent per person per week on non-economic activities. The forty-five to fifty-nine year-olds spend twelve hours and the older population nearly nine hours (see Table 18). If this younger age-group is considered making maximum input in terms of hours, then older people contribute as much as 73 percent of the more productive younger population's input. This is very high given the common images of older people as unproductive!

Table 18. Average Number of Hours Spent Per Week on Non-economic Activities Across Various Age-groups by Gender and Rural-Urban Residence, Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99

	Aged 60 and over		Aged 45-59		Aged 5 and over	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Cooking	1.0	6.1	0.7	9.8	0.6	7.5
Cleaning	0.4	2.6	0.4	4.8	0.4	4.6
Child-minding	1.7	3.6	1.2	3.3	1.2	4.4
Shopping	0.7	0.2	1.5	0.5	0.8	0.3
Minor repairs	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.5	0.2	0.4
Caring	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2
Volunteer work	0.3	0	0.5	0.1	0.2	0
Any of these	4.4	13.0	4.8	19.2	3.5	17.4

*Note:* Average hours are based on the number of elderly people who engage in each respective activity (differentiated by sex and residence).

## 5. Conclusion

As part of traditional society there exist specific perceptions of older people in Nepal. Despite the fact that the elderly population has only recently been growing fast and taking on a larger presence, the concepts and images surrounding the elderly and old age are not new. These images as reflected in the local languages and sayings need to be interpreted carefully as their messages are oftentimes conflicting. Thus it is difficult to say objectively which images are closest to reality. However, their general importance is undeniable, as judged by the frequency with which they are used in the local environment. The sayings and proverbs common in Nepal illustrate several things. In terms of earning a livelihood and being physically able, elderly people are perceived as non-productive, in need of support, and physically weak. On the other hand, social and cultural images also reflect on their wisdom and depict older people



as full of knowledge and thus worthy of respect. Most of the sayings, especially those with positive images, portray older people as part of the extended family. The negative portrayals are primarily related to those who are not part of a larger family or who do not have children, in particular sons who are considered essential according to traditional beliefs.

Despite an abundance of sayings and proverbs which portray older people as weak and unable to perform work activities, survey data show that the overwhelming majority of elderly Nepalese people contribute significantly to household activities. The overall activity rate is as high as 55 percent, with 66 percent of men and 44 percent of women being active in old age. Despite their age these people carry out economic activities both home-based and outside the home. Farming is by far the most common economic activity, but having a business, doing wage work, food processing, or milling are also frequent. The elderly who are active spend more than 30 hours in their respective activities, which have been defined to fall within the commonly recognised boundaries of productive work. They also spend more than 16 hours per week in non-economic activities, such as cooking, shopping, child-minding, or doing minor repair work. Both the activity rates and the hours of work undertaken are found to decrease quite fast with increasing age after the late 50s. Gender differences are apparent with men more economically active than women. The rural-urban differences are less pronounced than gender differences, which largely reflects the rural character of urban areas in Nepal.

Unfortunately time series data are not available for analysis of changes over time and across generations. Nonetheless, the findings from the Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99 suggest at least two issues of policy relevance. First, the high proportion of older people in various household activities means that programmes aiming at active ageing by involving more and more older people in local-level activities and decision making need to be encouraged. Such measures will not only promote active ageing but also enable older people to continue to be respected citizens of a society to which they have contributed over their productive life-span.

Second, the findings point to a need for supporting households with an elderly person through social provisions and state subsidies. In a national context where nearly 40 percent of the population live below the absolute poverty line, the elderly population is growing rapidly, and social security measures for the elderly are lacking, it is important that households are encouraged to provide as much as they can to

promote healthy ageing among older members. Any support to households with elderly members could be cast in terms of a recognition of the contributions elderly people have made to society in the past, as well as an acknowledgement of the important support households provide to their older members. That way once older people cease to be economically and socially active the burden of providing for them would not rest exclusively with the households in which they live.

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