FRAGILITY OF THE SUPPORT SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE AGEING SOCIETY

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36004/nier.cdr.18.2024.03

Abstract. *Accelerated population ageing is one of the most pressing demographic and social challenges for the Republic of Moldova. People aged 60 and over comprise a quarter of the population, and their share is steadily increasing, directly impacting the demand for permanent care. The study analyzes this demand's current and future dimensions, focusing on disparities by residence and gender and the pressure on an underdeveloped social support system. The research highlights significant vulnerabilities by linking empirical data from 2024 with demographic projections for 2030 and 2040, including rural areas with limited access to social services. The results indicate a significant increase in the number of people aged 75+ who will require constant support, highlighting the need to expand social infrastructure, attract qualified staff and develop effective public policies. Without strategic interventions and the allocation of adequate resources, the social support system risks becoming incapable of responding to the growing needs, seriously affecting the well-being of the elderly population and long-term social stability. The study provides clear recommendations for adapting social and public health policies in the context of demographic change.*
Keywords*: population ageing, care support system, permanent home care, projection, Moldova*
JEL*: J11, J14, J18*
CZU*: 314.04+364.6](478)*

Introduction. Population ageing is one of the most significant demographic and social challenges for the Republic of Moldova. With a steadily increasing share, constituting a quarter of the total population, the elderly population (60 years and over) faces multiple challenges: poor health due to high mortality from chronic diseases (65.5% from circulatory system diseases) and insufficient income, which affects more rural people and women, with an income disparity of over 27% compared to urban areas and 17% compared to men (BNS, 2023). Also, more than 67.8% of elderly households in rural areas consist exclusively of older people,

exacerbating social isolation and dependence on informal support. These realities underline the structural vulnerability of the elderly population.

The present study aims to analyze the current and future demand for permanent care among the elderly population, highlighting the challenges of the social support system, disparities by residence and gender, and the impact of demographic change on social services.

Data sources and methods. To achieve the proposed goal, the methodology used combines descriptive statistical analysis with the estimation of the permanent (constant) support dependency ratio for personal care based on the results of the study „Violence against Older people in Moldova" (2024)[1], providing an accurate picture of the current needs of the population aged 60 and over, and the integration of current data into a demographic forecast (elaborated by the Centre for Demographic Research, 2024-2040[2]) of the changing age structure of the old population (low scenario), detailed by gender and residence area. The resulting data are used to identify vulnerable groups and to assess the real needs for ongoing support.

In the calculation process, the estimated permanent support dependency ratio indicator has been adjusted for 2030 and 2040 by reducing it by 0.3 percentage points, hypothetically reflecting a gradual improvement in the population's health and access to services.

Among the methodological limitations of these calculations are the likelihood that the optimistic assumption of population health improvement in the absence of public health investments will not be realized; the exclusion of structural factors in the projections, such as the potential impact of technological innovations (assistive technologies, remote monitoring devices, telemedicine applications) or socio-economic changes (economic crises, continued migration, etc.) with an impact on the dependency of older people.

However, the projections provide policymakers with a solid basis for resource allocation and infrastructure development. Identifying regional and gender vulnerabilities allows interventions to be targeted to support the most affected groups.

Main results. Self-sufficiency of the elderly population. Demographic ageing brings an increasing demand for care services, but a key aspect of care for the elderly is their capacity for self-care (self-sufficiency), which enables them to maintain their independence and reduce their dependence on external help. Multiple factors, including health status, living environment, and level of social support, influence older people's self-care capacity.

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[1] The survey "Violence against older people in Moldova" (HelpAge Moldova, 2024) has a sample of 1988 respondents aged 60+ years.

[2] Data map "Demographic profile of the Republic of Moldova for the year 2024 and projection of the number and structure of the population in 2040". Authors: Gagauz O. (coord.), Pahomii, I., Slav, M., Tabac, T., Ștîrba, V.

The results of the baseline empirical study show that most people aged 60 and over can manage routine activities such as personal hygiene, cooking and managing financial resources. However, as activities (housework and gardening) become more physically demanding, the need for external help increases considerably. For example, 25% of older people need occasional help with housework, and around 32% require constant help with gardening and grounds maintenance, especially in rural areas.

The gender disparities highlighted in older people's self-care capacity reflect cultural norms and traditional roles, which directly influence the level of independence in daily activities (Figure 1). Women are more capable of managing domestic activities but are more likely to need help with difficult physical activities. Conversely, men are less involved in domestic activities but have more significant difficulties in activities related to personal hygiene in old age.

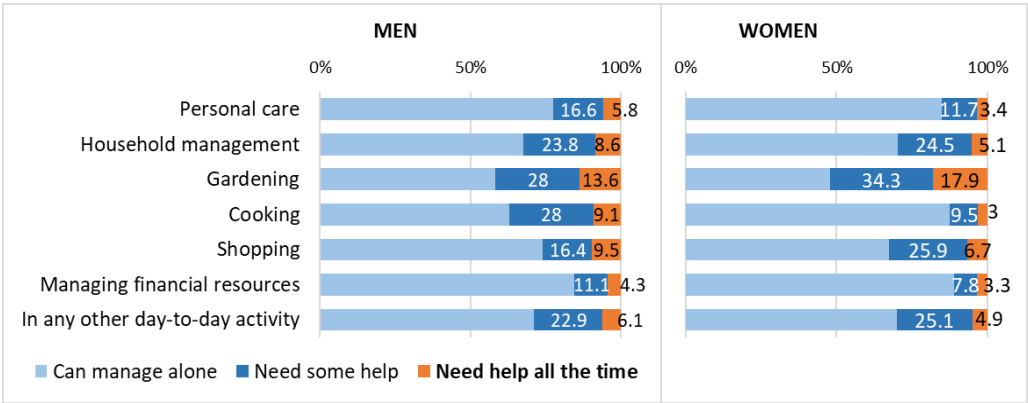

Figure 1. **Older people's capacity for self-self-care, by gender, %**
Source: Based on the survey "Violence against older people in Moldova", N=1988 respondents aged 60+ years (HelpAge Moldova, 2024)

There are notable differences in self-care capacity between urban and rural areas (Figure 2). In rural areas, older adults are more dependent on external help, especially for household and agricultural activities (around 35%, compared to 20% in urban areas), which is explained by the physical nature of rural activities and the limited access to support infrastructure. This reality means that families are often the only source of support for the elderly. Moreover, the limited access to care services in rural areas, where formal support networks are less developed and are located at large distances from urban centres, burden access to health and social services, putting additional pressure on informal support networks.

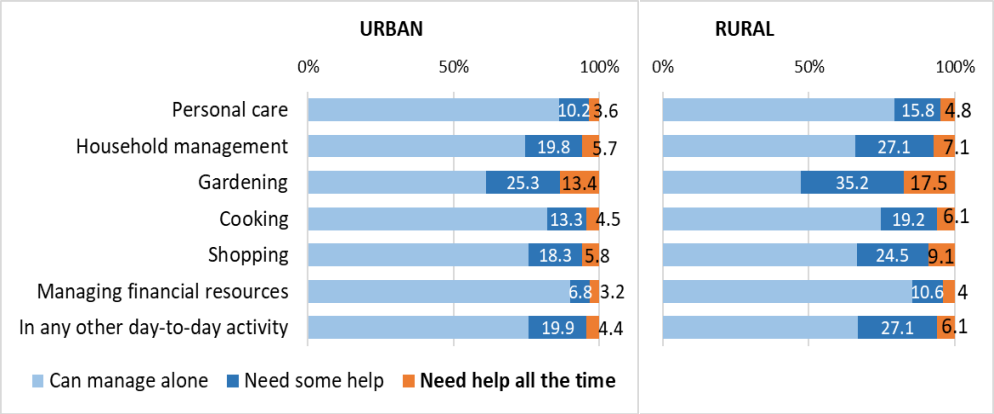

Figure 2. **Older people's capacity for self-self-care, by area of residence, %**
Source: Based on the survey "Violence against older people in Moldova", N=1988 respondents aged 60+ years (HelpAge Moldova, 2024)

With advancing age, the capacity for self-care declines, with a greater risk of loss of independence and social isolation. More requests for help appear after age 65, particularly with physical activities. The over 75s, a growing age group in Moldova, are particularly vulnerable, with high rates of dependency on complex physical activities such as gardening (32.1%) and shopping (18.9%), but also in essential activities such as personal hygiene (9.3%) and household management (13.6%), with around 12% requiring constant help for daily activities. In particular, men in the 75+ age group have twice as much need for constant help with personal care activities than women in the same age group. This emphasizes the differential burden of gender roles, where men, unaccustomed to household tasks and self-care activities, become more vulnerable in old age.

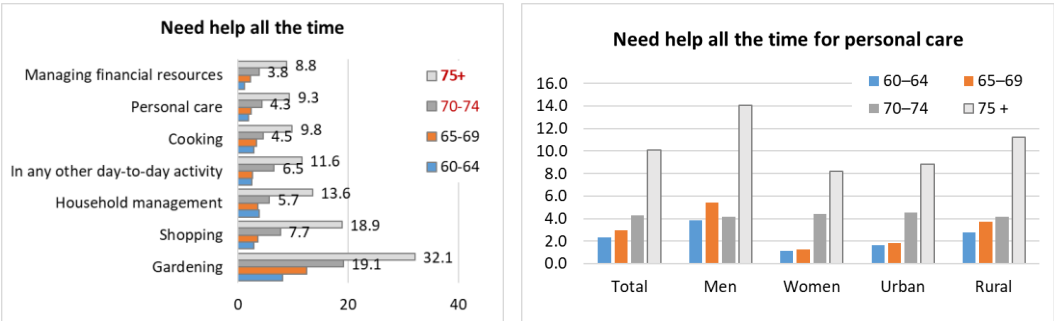

Figure 3. **The permanent (constant) support dependency ratio for personal care and everyday activities by age group, gender and area of residence, %**
Source: Based on the survey "Violence against older people in Moldova", N=1988 respondents aged 60+ years (HelpAge Moldova, 2024)

This vulnerability is rooted in the poor health status of older people, which is the cumulative result of difficult living conditions. In Moldova, life expectancy is relatively low, but the years lived in good health are also lower compared to the European average, leading to a prolonged period of disability and dependency in the lives of the elderly. Moreover, statistics show that a significant proportion of older

people live alone or on insufficient income, which increases the risk of isolation and lack of support for daily activities.

Sources of support for older people and systemic gaps in social care. The survey results reveal that for older people needing help, support comes mainly from the family - usually from children and other relatives (55.6%) and from the life partner (about 43%) of the total help provided. Traditional family roles and the gender gap in life expectancy explain the fact that 2/3 of men receive help predominantly from their wives, while women receive more support from children or relatives (61.4%).

The family support structure is fragile and unevenly distributed. In rural areas, where young people migrate intensively for a better life, older people are more exposed to isolation and lack of support. This phenomenon, known as 'transnational loneliness' (Baldassar L., 2006; Boccagni P., 2012), seriously impacts demographic ageing and the need for care for the elderly, as no well-defined system of care compensates for the absence of family. Some 11% of older people said they receive no help at all, the most vulnerable group to the negative effects of social isolation, which include increased risks of depression, malnutrition and rapid deterioration in health. This is a systemic problem, as the state does not have sufficient resources to compensate for the lack of family support, and isolation is becoming an endemic problem among the elderly.

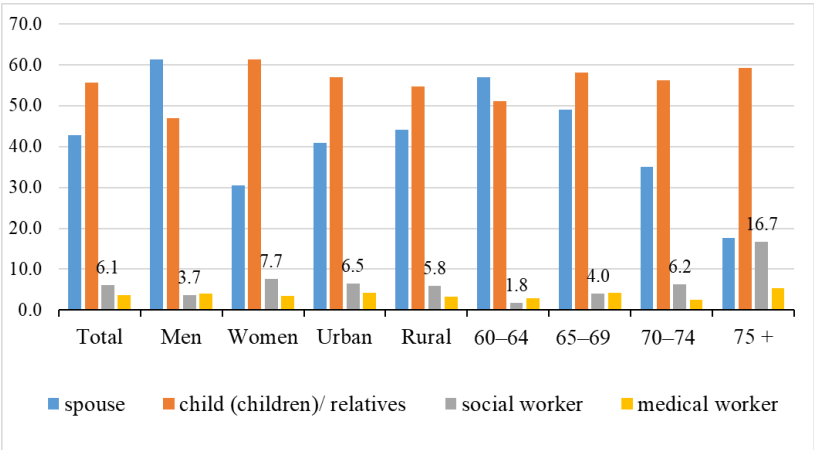

Figure 4. **Distribution of sources of help for older people in daily activities by gender of respondents, area of residence and age group, %**

Source: Based on the survey "Violence against older people in Moldova", N=1988 respondents aged 60+ years (HelpAge Moldova, 2024)

A small percentage of older people (6.1%) receive help from social workers, reflecting the gaps in the social assistance system, which needs to be improved regarding numbers and geographical coverage, indicating a high degree of social and economic inequality. With age, the likelihood of applications for help from the state or organizations increases to compensate for the lack of family support and receive

specialized professional help. Thus, the study shows that at the age of 75 and over, about 17% receive help from social workers.

The situation is aggravated by the reduced capacity of the state to make up for the lack of family support through public services. In 2023, around 1900 social workers provided care at home for around 14800 people of retirement age (women constituting over 81%) - a proportion insufficient to cover existing needs. Only 1 in 5 people who need these services receive them (MMPS, 2023). In the centres with specialized services, there were about 4.3 thousand elderly beneficiaries, while the social welfare canteens served 4.8 thousand people of retirement age.

Studies show that one of the biggest challenges of home support services is insufficient funding and unequal distribution of resources between regions of the country, with rural areas often remaining less covered (Racu et al., 2022). Most home care services are concentrated in cities such as Chisinau and Balti, where funding and infrastructure are better developed; in rural regions, however, more than 70% of people who would need these services do not have access to them due to long distances and lack of resources (Sociopolis, 2021). At the same time, there is a growing need for integrated services, combining social and health care, to better meet the needs of the elderly and people with disabilities. Another worrying reality for the sustainability and capacity of the health and social care system is the decrease in the number of workers by about 10% in the last three years, while the demand for services is steadily increasing.

Increasing demand for elderly care: projections and challenges for 2040. The accelerated ageing of the population, especially the increase in the number of people in the age group 75 years and over, visible in the demographic projections for the year 2040, made by the Center for Demographic Research (CCD, 2024), highlights several significant challenges for the health and social support system of the Republic of Moldova. Although, by 2040, the forecast estimates a slight increase (0.7%) in the population aged 60 years and over, the population structure is changing significantly. The number of people aged 75+ will increase by +86.2% compared to 2024 and will exceed the proportion of 38% in the total elderly population. The 60-64 age group decreased significantly (-22.6%), reflecting a decline in the active elderly population base, which could also affect the availability of financial support in the social system or informal care.

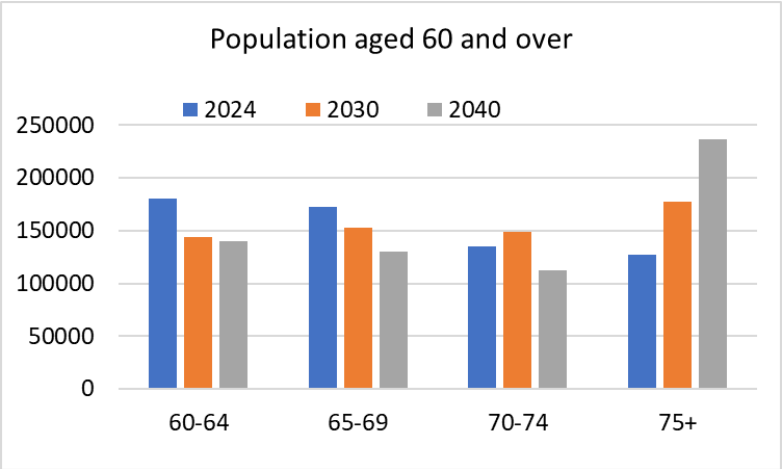

Figure 5. **Projected population in elderly age groups, thousand persons**
Surse: Centre for Demographic Research (2024)

Starting from the results of the empirical study (Figure 3), which reflect the current reality of those in need of constant help, and demographic forecasts, projections for the years 2030 and 2040 (Figure 5) were made to estimate the future need for personnel care and assistance for older people in Moldova.

Table 1. **Projected number of people who will need constant assistance/help for personal care, persons**

2024	**Total**	**Men**	**Women**	**Urban**	**Rural**
60–64	4203	3074	1123	1166	3004
65–69	5116	3866	1272	1282	3830
70–74	5836	2778	4291	2457	3379
75 +	***12810***	***5817***	***7044***	***4483***	***8545***
Total 60 +	*27964*	*15536*	*13730*	*9389*	*18757*
2030	**Total**	**Bărbați**	**Femei**	**Urban**	**Rural**
60–64	2908	2278	646	754	2128
65–69	4068	3243	855	952	3113
70–74	5995	2504	3820	2534	3461
75 +	***17393***	***7914***	***9529***	***6061***	***11638***
Total 60 +	*30365*	*15939*	*14851*	*10300*	*20341*
2040	**Total**	**Bărbați**	**Femei**	**Urban**	**Rural**
60–64	2413	2000	403	567	1821
65–69	3091	2648	499	658	2430
70–74	4187	1891	2816	1777	2410
75 +	***22439***	***10245***	***12234***	***7783***	***15063***
Total 60 +	*32129*	*16783*	*15953*	*10784*	*21724*

This exercise reveals several significant findings:

- by 2040, the number of people aged 60 and over who will require permanent care will increase by about 15%, a development driven in particular by the increase in dependency in the 75+ age group;
- in the 75+ age group, the number of dependent persons will almost double by 2040 (+75%), leading to a significant increase in the demand for

permanent care at home (22439 persons by 2040, compared to 12810 persons estimated for 2024). This increase confirms the long-term pressure on care services, especially for the elderly with disabilities or chronic conditions.

- older women are more likely to require ongoing support, suggesting the need for gender-sensitive and age-specific support programmes, given more extended life expectancy and increased risk of isolation;
- In rural areas, the number of people needing support is consistently higher than in urban areas. However, the population here has less access to health and social care services and poorer living conditions in these areas.
- the optimistic scenario of a reduction over time in the rate of dependency on permanent support for older people does not compensate for the increase in the elderly population as the total number of dependent people continues to rise.

Conclusions. The study emphasizes the urgency of adapting social and public health policies to demographic trends in the Republic of Moldova, highlighting the direct impact of accelerated ageing on the demand for permanent care. The significant increase in the number of dependent elderly people, particularly in the 75+ age group, puts considerable pressure on an underdeveloped social support system and on families already affected by youth migration and poverty.

Expanding the social infrastructure and developing sustainable solutions tailored to the specific demographic and economic resources available is essential to meet these challenges.

- Investing in training and attracting qualified staff - particularly in geriatrics and home care - are immediate priorities.
- Also, reducing rural-urban inequalities through the creation of day-care centres, local support networks based on volunteering and civil society involvement, strengthening public-private partnerships for the development of integrated care solutions and promoting technological innovations such as assistive devices and telemedicine services can radically transform the way social services are delivered and the associated costs.
- An important aspect can be the involvement of people aged 60-64 in caring for other older people, especially in activities adapted to their capacity, counselling activities or coordinating community support programs. This would not only help reduce pressure on the workforce but would also provide additional income for this population segment, improve quality of life and strengthen social cohesion.

Demographic ageing must be seen not only as a social problem but also as an opportunity for economic development and social consolidation. By adapting policies, stimulating innovation and mobilizing local resources, it is possible to create a sustainable social support system capable of meeting the growing needs of the ageing population without compromising the well-being of future generations.

Note. *The article was developed within the framework of the research programme "The demographic transition in the Republic of Moldova: particularities,*

socioeconomic implications and demographic resilience straightening (TDRM, 2024-2027)"

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