CHAPTER 5

“It’s all about being a woman”: Intersections of multiple (dis)advantages experienced by older women*

*This chapter is (revised and submitted), Gender, Place & Culture ; A Journal of Feminist Geography+
Abstract
The experiences of women in later life vary enormously, not only along intersectional lines, but also due to cumulative (dis)advantages over an individual’s life course. This qualitative article uses intersectionality and life course approach to explore the life experiences of older women in Tanzania. We specifically look into how the intersections of structural (dis)advantages earlier in women’s lives shape their later life experiences, including women’s agency. The results show that women in this study have experienced discrimination and multiple disadvantages over their life course; agency surfaces as an individual and collective strategy, complex, and changing over time. The ability or inability of an individual to exercise agency depends on the interlocking sources of (dis)advantages and the forms of discrimination. Interventions should therefore, consider the complex relationships and interactions between the discriminations, social locations and identities. Appropriate coping resources should also be provided.
5.1 Introduction

Experiences of women in later life vary enormously along such intersectional lines as gender, race, age, class, ability, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and place of residence (Calasanti, 2008; O’Neill and Hopkins 2015; Lodge et al 2016). While intersectionality has been explicitly incorporated into feminist academic work and to some extent in existing gerontological literature in western countries (Krekula (2007; Calasanti, 2010; Gulbrandsen & Walsh 2015), very few studies have provided thorough analyses of the intersection of gender, age, and other structural (dis)advantages on older women in the context of developing countries of the Global South (Emmett & Alant, 2006; Moodley and Graham, 2015; Githinji, 2015). Voices of older women in the global South deserve special attention. These women are often confronted with situations that relate to patriarchy, colonialism, racism, poverty, limiting sociocultural and structural factors and exclusions—not only within, but also between social groups (Ezer 2006; Githinji, 2015; Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2017). In Tanzania, for instance, women enter old age after a lifetime of poverty and deprivation (Mwanyangala, et al, 2010; United Nation-UN women 2015 women 2015). Discrimination, abuse, and violence against women are widespread and affect the well-being of older women United Nation-UN women 2015. According to a 2009 Tanzania Legal and Human Rights Centre report, 2585 older women were killed in Tanzania following witchcraft allegations. The killings took place between 2004 and 2009 averaging to about 517 killings a year (cf HAI-Help Age International, 2011).

We argue that although majority of older women in Tanzania share a specific ‘subordinated,’ ‘silenced’ and ‘ignored’ experience, each of these women’s lives tells an unique story which should not be re-essentialized and categorized (Githinji, 2015). Several gerontologists also call for research to uncover and understand the diverse and heterogeneous nature of old age and later life experiences (Krekula, 2007; Manthorpe 2010; Zubair & Norris, 2015). Despite these calls, research on older women’s aging and later-life experiences in the global South remains limited in breadth as well as undertheorized—the diversity in experiences among older women in the Global south is still not well-documented within gerontological research and literature.

This paper uses intersectionality and life course approach to explore the life experiences of older women in Tanzania. We specifically look into how the intersections of structural (dis)advantages earlier in their lives may shape their later life experiences. We also focus on women’s agency, specifically, how opportunities and constraints over the life course have shaped women’s ability (or inability) to exercise agency. Within the life course perspective, individuals are the main actors in their lives and
thus account for actions and decisions made throughout their lives given the opportunity and constraints over the life course (Elder, 2000). We argue that, an intersectional and life course perspective provides an important analytical framework to focus on the heterogeneous experiences of aging, to offer a richer consideration of the complex accounts of women and to account for the fluid nature of identity that is embedded within particular times and contexts (Ferrer et al 2017).

5.2 Agency

Life course perspective views peoples' lives as embedded within the social, historical and cultural contexts. Individual's agency relates to taking actions and making decisions over their life course in constructing their lives. Agency is understood to mean the capacity by individuals to act independently when making free choices (Kabeer 1999; Brown and Westaway, 2011). Agency can also be outlined as the possibility to act and take positions, as well as a subtle way of doing or not doing (Honkasalo 2009). Agency can be connected to power and resources (Kabeer 1999).

In this paper, women's agency includes autonomy in decision-making, freedom from violence, and influence in the wider society dominant norms (Brown and Westaway, 2011). Women can be agential when they subvert the norm (Butler, 2004). Empirical research that combines the concept of agency to intersectionality as an analytical tool is fairly limited (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). One key argument for stressing on agency is that it helps to overcome the view of women as powerless victims of their own culture—patriarchy, sexism and ageism. Kabeer (1999) argue that the ability of an individual to exercise choice (agency) depends on their access to resources. These resources are not just material or economic resources, but also the social capital that serves to enhance the individual's ability to exercise choice. Thus, the advantage of focusing on intersectionality is that it highlights multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life resources and the power relations that are central to agentic actions (Phoenix 2006).

5.2.2 Theorizing the intersectionality and life course in aging research

Intersectionality, a concept invented by Crenshaw (1989), suggests that dimensions of social inequality—such as age and gender—vary as a function of each other, are interconnected or interlocked, and are mutually reinforcing/constitutive. As a result, these “interlocking systems of oppression” (Richardson & Brown, 2016) simultaneously create unique social locations and structure the lived experience and life chances of the people who occupy them (Richardson & Brown, 2016). The field of gerontology is dominated by two major ongoing debates concerning the
experiences of women in later life. The double jeopardy theory rests on the view that women are double disadvantaged in later life because of the intersection of ageism with sexism—age and gender interlock to create vulnerabilities in later life such as sexism and ageism (Thorpe et al., 2015; Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2017). On the other hand, critical feminist gerontology scholars challenge the marginalization of women in later life by reinforcing negative assumptions about older women (Netting, 2011; Freixas, 2012) and have emphasized that there is need to account for the complexity of older women’s lives and histories, and accumulation of experiences, life events, and relationships that help define and shape their experiences in later life (Schatz and Seeley, 2015). For example, critical feminist gerontologists such as Gulbrandsen and Walsh (2015) argue that although it is important to recognize difficulties that older women encounter, concentrating exclusively on later life experiences and aging as disastrous or disadvantageous reinforces stereotypes of older women as weak and vulnerable. Likewise, Krekula (2007, p.156) asserted that “a double jeopardy has resulted in a perspective on older women in which misery is foregrounded”.

To move the debate forward, we suggest that there is need to consider the potentiality of integrating life course perspective in intersectionality studies. Using intersectionality and life course approach is a way to address the challenges of understanding individual’s aging experience within the wider social-cultural structures that frame and shape context and experience (Ferrer et al 2017). Thus, by integrating intersectionality and life course perspectives, this study unveils structural pathways of women, individual trajectories (i.e. roles, statuses) that shift over time and provides a valuable framework for understanding how intersecting inequalities structure disadvantage and privilege contribute to unique experiences of (dis)advantages in later life (Ferrer et al 2017). Arguably, the differences between men and women across the life course, concludes in old age —enactments of gender identities change over the life course, both in response to life events, historical and life-stage changes—age statuses change (Calasanti, 2010).

5.2.3 Gender and aging in the African context
A remarkable lack of attention has been paid to the intersection of gender and age in African context (Moodley and Graham, 2015). More often, gender and age are studied as separate categories. In other words, gender and aging are commonly handled in a men-versus-women dichotomy and little attention on their intersectionality in various socio-cultural contexts. At most, these studies in African context indicate that women are disadvantaged as they grow older in terms of e.g. care burden (Schatz and Seeley, 2015; Githinji, 2015); the lack of intergenerational sup-
port (Cliggett, 2005); gender violence (Help Age, 2011) and lack of social security (HAI 2011).

We argue that by solely looking at gender or age as separate categories excluding contextual factors such as culture, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, poverty and inequalities that influence gender identity, we miss the unique intertwining of life events (in the life course of a woman) and shifting identities and the ability of an individual to exercise agency. Feminist gerontologists such as Calasanti (2010), emphasize the importance of studying both genders and their intersectionality with age using life course approach. Although evidence suggests that in many African countries patriarchal contract remains quite strong and effective across women’s life course (Ezer 2006; Githinji, 2015), there is also evidence that suggests that women do not always follow the “standardized” life course (Sokolovsky, 2009). Arguably, many events in the life course of a woman are the result of intersections of various social categories and are neither uniform nor immutable. For example, the anthropological study conducted by Cattell (2003) among Abaluhya widows of Western Kenya indicates that each woman’s experiences are uniquely her own, and even within a given sociocultural framework, widows have very different experiences. Likewise, Udvardy and Cattell (1992) argued that aging and gender are intertwined themes throughout the life course of African women; their study demonstrates that there is increasing freedom that accompanies women through the aging process.

5.3 Methods

The three case studies presented in this paper were drawn from a qualitative study that involved 15 in-depth interviews and 10 Focus group discussions with women aged between 60 to 82 years, from the Coastal region of Tanzania. The study aimed at understanding gender identities and the meaning women assigned to aging. The study was conducted from November 2012 to June 2013. After getting approval from the relevant institutions, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to select participants. Most of the participants had no formal education and very few completed higher education. While the socio-economic status of the participants varied, majority were from poor and low-income households typical of the research setting. Please (see table 5.1) for characteristics of the study participants.

In this study, we apply reflective life history interviews to collect data at a single point in time. The three case studies are selected based on the depth of their account, the trajectories they described throughout their life and a variety ranging from intersecting sources of (dis)advantages. Put simply, the case studies are summaries of 3
participants chosen for the ways their narratives integrate extensive life course events that shapes their current experience of gender/aging. These trajectories were then cross-referenced and analyzed in relation to their life events (see table 5.2).

Table 5.1 Demographic characteristics of women selected for the case study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic characteristics</th>
<th>Bi Somoe</th>
<th>Bi Mishi</th>
<th>Bi Mwenda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Widow</td>
<td>Divorcee</td>
<td>Widow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of education</td>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (included those retired)</td>
<td>Retired tutor/working part time</td>
<td>Retired teacher</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4 Results

Case study 1 Bi Somoe: When I look back at my life I feel proud of what I have accomplished

Childhood abuse and gender violence: Bi Somoe a 71 years old widow was born and raised in a very poor rural household during the colonial times. Bi Somoe’s father had four wives, her mother who was the youngest wife died in childbirth. Bi Somoe describe her childhood as “abusive”, “tense and full of fear”. After her mother’s death, Bi Somoe who was by then 10 years and a sibling escaped from their home to go live with her grandmother in a faraway village. They escaped to avoid abuse from their step mothers and alcoholic father.

“Escaping was the only option I had in order to avoid abuse from my family” she says...

Though Bi Somoe’s grandmother was a poor, old widow, she provided for her grandchildren albeit in strain until she became incapacitated by illness.

Working and caregiving trajectories: Bi Somoe’s narrative and life course includes a strong dedication to caring for her family. Her working and caregiving trajectories began at a young age. With her meagre earning working as a cleaner at the mission, she was able to feed and care for her ailing grandmother and siblings.. with support from priests at the mission she was able to enroll at a school. Something she describes as the best thing that could have happened because at that time, educating girls was seen as a waste of time and money. She says: “in the past girl education was not
valued”. Like many other girls in her cohort, Bi Somoe was destined for marriage in childhood, perhaps as young as 15.

**Early/forced marriages:** Bi Somoe’s heroic strategies were not limited to her age and gender. She discussed ways through which she escaped early/forced marriages and overcame the effects of gendered life course of women in her culture.

> “Just a few weeks before I was due to take my examinations, my grandmother informed me that I had to undergo Unyago (initiation at menarche), and then enter into a marriage that had been arranged by my father”.

In Bi Somoe’s cultural model, menarche is the most important status passage for a girl. Unyago ritual intends to prepare a girl to acquire feminine attributes. Through these rituals, a girl receives instructions on life skills including gender roles, social responsibilities, marriage practices, sexual behavior, and relationships with male partners. Upon completion, the girl gets married. She says:

> “Failure to undergo this ritual was seen as bringing shame to the family so every girl in our culture had to…but I was not ready to drop out of school for the sake of it. I tried to convince my grandmother that I was not ready. My grandmother became very angry, rebuking me by saying, “I’m not raising you to be a naughty child...I don’t want you to bring shame upon me”.

**Never felt incomplete as a woman:** After failing to convince her grandmother, Bi Somoe, again sought support from priests at the mission. She was moved to a boarding school in a distant village. A year later, she joined middle school. Bi Somoe recalled being teased and bullied during her teen years because she did not go through the Unyago ritual. She recalls, “My peers mocked me” ...they regarded the girls who did not undergo Unyago as ‘incomplete women’.

She also noted that it was widely believed that such girls would get pregnant and bring shame to their families. This perpetuated belief led to several girls dropping out of school. When asked her if she ever felt incomplete because she did not undergo Unyago, she said she did not, and that having been educated to university level gave her a feeling of independence.

**Subverted the norm and marry a man of her choice:** Bi Somoe met her husband at the college she attended. She explained to me that she was very glad that she was able to marry the man of her choice, and that her husband was caring and
supportive. She noted that her grandmother was very excited as well. Her grandmother was afraid that no man would marry a 28 year old woman who had not undergone Unyago. Bi Somoe’s grandmother told her that she was lucky to have found an educated person like herself to marry, as no man in the village would have married her. Bi Somoe described her husband as different from the other men in her society. She said “unlike typical Tanzanian men he helped me even with household chores”. She said that many people in Tanzania are still astonished when they see a married man cook food or do other domestic chores. These tasks are still considered women’s work unless a man is paid to do them. She reported that she shared household responsibilities with her husband until he passed away.

**Feeling happy despite of my disability:** Bi Somoe Health has since declined. Two years back she had suffered a stroke that left her right side paralysed. Bi Somoe described old age as a rewarding stage of life when one is financially prepared and surrounded by supportive people. She said;

> “With the support of my children and the people around me, I am able to cope with my disability... ... I am well cared for and loved ... Just imagine, if I had had no support from my children or had had no money from my pension, the stroke would have killed me”.

Bi Somoe frequently compared herself with other people of her age, and seemed to sympathize with them. She talked about how majority of the older women live in poverty and have been abandoned by their children. She said,

> “I can say I am so blessed. I have four children, all of whom are university graduates with good jobs! They are all married and have children... I have a pension, a house that I rent out, a part-time job, and support from my children... What else can I ask from God?”

She said that when she looks back at her life she feels proud of what she has accomplished given that she grew up during a time when a woman’s value was defined by marriage and having many children. She pointed that because of the male-centered culture she came of age in, it had not been easy for her to accomplish what she had accomplished.

**Case study 2 Bi Mishi: “I am at a stage of life where I get whatever I want”**

**Embraced traditional and formal socialization:** Bi Mishi is a 70-year-old, retired widow who was born in a middle class family in colonial Tanzania. Her father was
a teacher and her mother a housewife. She describes herself as “as a multicultural person” because she had been brought up with a mixture of indigenous Zaramo practice, religious norms and urban and rural lifestyles. She links her education trajectory to wider culture and religion background. Bi Mishi is among the few girls who attended Unyago (initiation at menarche) and were still able to continue with formal education. “Many girls stop schooling and got married after “Unyago”.

After ”kufundwa” (indoctrinated), girls adopted new roles and new gender identities “mwali” meaning a woman that is ready for marriage”. Bi Mishi described that there was not much said between a daughter and a mother about the onset of menstruation. The topic was masked in secrecy and silence. She narrates;

“When I had my first period I was in primary school, I knew nothing about it…I hinted her [mother], and my mother informed my grandmother. They took me to the village to undergo the Unyago initiation rite”.

Bi Mishi was in seclusion for three weeks where she was indoctrinated into the ideals of true womanhood. After completing the initiation ritual, Bi Mishi ‘officially came out’. She said “there was a lot of pressure from my aunts and my grandmother for me to get married after Unyago… he [father] insisted that I should go back to study”. She continued with her primary school education after which. She joined a teachers’ college.

**Pregnancy and marriage:** After finishing her certificate in primary school teaching, Bi Mishi started working towards earning a diploma in secondary school teaching but became pregnant while in her first term. Bi Mishi described her becoming pregnant before finishing her diploma and out of marriage as a great disappointment to her parents, herself, and her grandmother. Upon reflecting what happened she stated:

“While in the college I met my ex-husband who was serving as a soldier in the Tanzanian army. After few months of our relationship I became pregnant, he persuaded me to get married, saying that after we got married, he would pay for my diploma course”. He then paid dowry and we got married. Bi Mishi described her marriage as “a peaceful Christian marriage”. They had their first daughter six months after they wed.

**Verbal and physical abuse:** Her’s was a happy in marriage until her ex-husband developed a drinking habit. The habit started out small, drinking only socially but eventually turned into full blown alcoholism. Verbal and financial abuse soon started. Over
time, he became physically violent, these violent outbursts would occur every time he was drunk and slowly, it became part of her life. “It became hard to remind him of his promise to pay for my diploma course... he was treating me like a servant, and not a wife”.

She would report the violence to Balozi (the ten-cell leader) or the police or church leaders or his parents. After reporting such incidents, he would beat her more. When asked what triggered the violent eruptions, Bi Mishi credits the violence as being triggered by the fact that she had born daughters only while her husband was in desperate need for a son. She recalled that when she was pregnant with their third child, he beat her up so much she almost had a miscarriage. After the birth of their third daughter, the violence escalated, he was now using military swords and ropes on her. She incurred several injuries as a result, including permanent blindness in her right eye.

**Structured system of discrimination:** Bi Mishi’s life course includes facing a rigidly structured system of discrimination, embedded in cultural practices, religious values and legal systems. She recounted that after several reports, Balozi told her to stop making complaints against her husband. He advised her to try to settle their problems privately. The violence continued to the point where she was unable to go to the office at times because of her wounds and injuries. Bi Mishi started planning to get a divorce, but cultural norms, family situation and religious teachings played a great role in influencing her to delay initiating the divorce. She was in a dilemma: if she left her marriage her children may have been unable to attend good schools. She also describes how it was difficult to divorce due to religious reasons, if she divorced him she might be barred from religious rites such as the holy Eucharist, and that she would have a bad reputation. She noted that everyone, including her parents and her in-laws, were against the divorce. Her mother-in-law told her:

> “Every woman goes through what you are going through, my experience was worse than yours; persevere my daughter, as he grows older he will stop”.

**Subverted the norms and divorced:** Because of these circumstances (culture, family, religion), she felt forced to delay the divorce. Her first strategy was to open a secret bank account. She recalled,

> “At that time, banks used books that the customers would keep. I had three of them. I kept one in the house, the one he saw. The other two I used to
give to my colleagues (teachers) to hide. When I collected my salary, I would withdraw certain amounts of money that I would deposit in these accounts”.

She made sure that her husband did not know that she had other accounts. She bought land and other property in her name. Bi Mishi described her second exit strategy,

“I used family planning to avoid pregnancies, even though my ex-husband used to tell me that I will give birth until I give him a son…”

She took birth control pills while she worked on other exit strategies. Out of confusion she accepted whatever advice offered without question. She was advised to position herself in a certain way while having intercourse with her husband so that she would conceive a baby boy. Because she thought she might be able to placate her husband by giving him a son, she decided to give it a try. She got off birth control and conceived their fourth baby daughter. This made the abuse worse; a last violent episode where he wanted to kill her became her ‘turning point.’ She decided to initiate divorce.

“I said, 'enough with this violence.... I have my job... God will forgive me”.

In 1986, Bi Mishi filed for divorce. She recalled that after hearing about her divorce, the priest told her that what she did was a sin.

“I said to him, where was the church when my husband blinded my eye? How many times did I come here to report what happened? I said, ‘Our God is not blind, he saw what I went through, he saw when my husband almost killed me...I don’t feel any guilt and I am sure the good Lord has forgiven me…”

**Old age is the time of happiness and relaxation:** Reflecting on her trajectory, Bi Mishi felt proud of her heroic decisions. “Look at me now, she said, the decision I made years ago made me the person I am today... as the days go by, I feel good about my life... I have left the pain behind me”.

Despite the blindness caused by her ex-husband, Bi Mishi seemed happy she says,“As a Christian I forgive and forget, that is my secret to happiness.” Bi Mishi described her children’s achievement as the main reasons for her happiness. She said
“None of my girls has disappointed me; my enormous sacrifices to further their education were not in vain”. When my older daughters started working, they said: “Mama you need to rest, we will make sure our younger sister finishes her bachelor’s degree too”. This was a huge relief for me, I decided to use my savings to further my education and finish my diploma.

Bi Mishi described another reason for her happiness and peace of mind, she says,

“I thank God that my daughters are married and none have experienced violence. She said: “God gave them caring husbands…I am so happy because I have four sons” (referring to her sons-in-law).

Bi Mishi described old age as a stage of relaxation and enjoyment especially, after achieving what they always thought they wanted. She says,

“I thank God that I have not reached a point where I lack anything. I am at a stage of life where I get whatever I want”. I thank God for what I have achieved as a single parent. Every day of my life is better than the last one; I am loved and well cared for”.

She said that she thinks about where she came from and reflects on what she went through, including the scars she incurred from her ex-husband and the pain he put her through, she thanks God for where she is.

Case Study 3 Bi Mwenda: What is the meaning of having many years full of unhappiness?”

Early arranged marriage: Bi Mwenda is a 72-year-old widow who was born in a family of 14 children in Magu. Her childhood was a happy one; her father was a rich man, who had many cows and a lot of land. Her family always had a good harvest, and they had plenty of milk and food. Like the majority of women of her age, she doesn’t know how to read and write.

“That’s because “women of my generation” did not go to school”, she says. Bi Mwenda explains that in the past getting married was considered as a major life achievement for a girl. She also said that, no one in her family went to school except her youngest brother. Bi Mwenda’s life trajectory had been affected by her early life experiences where a missed timing of one transition (schooling) and (early marriages) have affected multiple transitions in her life.
course. Her childhood was shortened by an early-child marriage. When asked how old she was when she got married, she answered,

“I was very young, even before my first menses”. Bi Mwenda explains that her marriage was arranged by the family and had never met him (her husband) before they got married. She said that although she was too young to understand what was happening to her, she felt under familial pressure to enter into it. She later, - commented, “it is Ok; it is a norm that every woman followed... after they paid the bride price, we got married in a traditional ceremony.”

**Childless marriage:** Bi Mwenda describes that in her cultural context after marriage, parenthood is a crucial life course transition. After years in the marriage and no children, her husband married a second wife. She described not having children as one of the most difficult experiences in her marriage. She also explained that her husband did not seek her approval for a second marriage. She however says that she had no objection since she was not able to give him a child. Bi Mwenda’s co-wife had four children. She said that they got along well;

“My co-wife, who passed away, was a good woman, she did not despise me just because I was barren ...After she died, I took good care of her children”. Her co-wife’s death was a turning point to Bi Mwenda. It completely transformed her marriage life and her relationship with people around her.

**Death of spouse and accusations:** Few months after her death (second wife), he married another woman. Bi Mwenda describes her second co-wife as a woman with a lot of hatred towards her and the stepchildren. She says,

“When this younger woman came, life in my marriage became unbearable; there was a lot of tension...She would always tell me to leave because I am useless since I don’t have children of my own”.

The tension continued even after Bi Mwenda’s husband passed away. After the death of her husband, rumors went around the family that Bi Mwenda is a witch. These accusations grew with time. She explained that whenever a family member died, they would point a finger at her, accusing her of killing them. The family started to hate her, and soon the rumor that she is a witch was all over the village she narrates,

“They hated me to point where they were isolating me; no one wanted to eat my food, and they did not want their children to come close to me. I used to
sell tomatoes and vegetables, but after these accusations no one was buying... they stopped coming to my home. I had never practiced witchcraft, and I feel so sad that even the children I raised as my own turned against me, accusing me and wanting to kill me...if I am a witch as they say, I would have bewitched them (stepchildren) and killed them when they were young and defenseless. Now that they had grown up and I am getting older and weaker, they have turned their backs on me and taken everything I used to own”.

Ran away from home: Bi Mwenda believes that her childless status makes her vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. She explained that in her ethnic group, a childless woman inherits nothing from the husband. The older wife though has a right to stay in her matrimonial home and protect the family’s property until the children grow up. Bi Mwenda describes that the underlying motives for false accusations was that they “didn’t want her to stay there. She says

“They didn’t want me there...after hearing rumors that they wanted to kill me the way they killed Bi Mwaina (Bi Mwaina was an old woman who was accused of being a witch and was brutally killed), I ran away”.

Bi Mwenda described the experience of running away from her home as a very difficult decision she ever had to make, but rationalize that, staying would have meant death.

Discrimination and rejection: After the accusation, Bi Mwenda went to several relatives’ homes to seek shelter but was rejected. No one would risk keeping her. After wandering around villages, her niece gave her money and advised her to go to Tungi, Kibaha to her nephew. Bi Mwenda was not welcomed there either, they attempted to kick her out of the house several times, but she refused to leave and would spend the nights outside their house at the door step. After seeing her outside for several nights, the neighbors reported the case to Mjumbe (a local government official) who advised the family to let her in. She explains,

“They had no option but to allow me stay...but they make me feel I am not accepted... I know I am not wanted here but I have nowhere to go... no one here cares if I eat or not... no one cares about my feelings, they know I am sick, but they don’t care”.

Bi Mwenda often stays hungry or begs for food from neighbors. She said that although she had lived in Tungi for almost 15 years, ‘it was not a place to call home.’
Unhappy, lonely and helpless: During the interview, Bi Mwenda appeared weak, malnourished and was unable to walk without the support of a walking stick. When asked what being old meant to her, Bi Mwenda said,

“Oh, God, life is so awful! ... Old age is a burden... look at me...I am useless, I own nothing, I left everything I worked for my entire life... I came here to find comfort, but no one wants me here”.

Bi Mwenda’s life course is characterized by numerous negative descriptions. She said,

“Old age is terrible for a poor and childless woman like me...it is unfortunate that I don’t have children; they would have had the obligation to care for me in my old age”.

Figure 5.1 Older women’s structural dis(advantages and intersecting identities across the life course
Table 5.2 The intersecting sources of (dis)advantages over life course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Life stage transitions</th>
<th>Life events</th>
<th>Intersecting/interlocking dis(advantages)</th>
<th>Agentic behaviours/strategies</th>
<th>Support/significant others/linked life</th>
<th>Old age experiences/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>-Death of a mother</td>
<td>Age, gender, class, family status, cultural norms, violence, power,</td>
<td>Escaped from home –child abuse and gender violence</td>
<td>Grandmother support</td>
<td>-Feeling happy -Well cared -Proud of my achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood to Adolescence</td>
<td>-Enrolment to school -Grandmother illness -Start work</td>
<td>Age, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, patriarchy, culture, occupation, income, poverty,</td>
<td>Escaped forced early marriage Subvert the norms of discrimination in girl child education</td>
<td>Support from priests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood to middle adulthood</td>
<td>-Completed college -Employed -Marriage -Birth of children</td>
<td>Income, education, class, marital status, occupation,</td>
<td>Subvert the norms of arranged marriages and married the man of her choice</td>
<td>Support from Spouse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>-Retirement -Sons and daughters got marriage -Death of spouse -Personal illness -Employed part time</td>
<td>Age, class, education, occupation and (dis) ability, marital status,</td>
<td>Tenacity</td>
<td>Support from children and social networks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 The intersecting sources of (dis)advantages over life course (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Life stage transitions</th>
<th>Life events</th>
<th>Intersecting/interlocking dis(advantages)</th>
<th>Agentic behaviours/strategies</th>
<th>Support/significant others/linked life</th>
<th>Old age experiences/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Childhood  | -Beginning primary schooling  
- Unyago (female initiation rites) | class, age, gender, family status, religion, ethnicity, cultural norms, patriarchy | No agency | Parents | -Relaxed  
- Happy  
- Loved  
- Cared |
| Childhood to Adolescence | -Enrolled for secondary school  
-Joined teachers college  
-Completed certificate in primary school teaching | class, age, family status | No agency | Parents | |
| Adulthood to middle adulthood | -Enrolled for teaching diploma  
-Pregnancy  
-expelled from college  
-Marriage  
-Birth of the first child  
-Birth of second, third and fourth child  
-Significant marital conflicts  
-Major injury—disability  
-Divorce  
-Major readjustment | Age, gender, class, ethnicity, power, (dis) ability, culture, religion, family status, occupation, family status | Savings  
Buying assets  
Use contraceptives  
Subvert the norms of discrimination  
woman in marriage by divorcing  
Taking diploma course | Support from fellow teachers | |
| Old age | -Retirement  
-Daughters got jobs  
-daughters got marriage  
-Caring for grandchildren | Age, class, education, occupation and (dis) ability | Tenacity | Support from children and sons in law | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case study</th>
<th>Life stage transitions</th>
<th>Life events</th>
<th>Intersecting/interlocking dis(advantages)</th>
<th>Agentic behaviours/strategies</th>
<th>Support/significant others/linked life</th>
<th>Old age experiences/meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Childhood</td>
<td>-Marriage</td>
<td>Age, gender, class, family status, cultural norms, violence, power, patriarchy</td>
<td>Inability to exercise agency</td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>-Unhappy -Lonely -Worthless -Helpless -Suffering -Life is meaningless -Lack of care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood to Adolescence</td>
<td>-Husband married a second wife -Death of co- wife -Caring for step children</td>
<td>Age, gender, class, ethnicity, culture, occupation, income, poverty, marital status, income, education, childless, patriarchy</td>
<td>Inability to exercise agency</td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adulthood to middle adulthood</td>
<td>-Husband married the third wife -Death of spouse</td>
<td>gender, class, ethnicity, culture, occupation, income, poverty, Income, education, childless, location</td>
<td>Inability to exercise agency</td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old age</td>
<td>-Witch-craft accusations -Ran away from home -Change in residence</td>
<td>Agrism, sexism, class, ethnicity, culture, occupation, income, poverty, Income, education, childless, residence, discrimination, rejections</td>
<td>Inability to exercise agency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The accusations, the loneliness, the lack of support, and her ill health led her to doubt whether her life had any meaning. She expressed extreme unhappiness with her current situation. “I always ask God to take me... what is the point of having many years full of unhappiness?” She said that she hated everything around her, and would be better off dead. Death to her was better as opposed to a continued life of suffering, the allegations and the neglect that come with old age.

5.5 Discussion

**Intersections of structural (dis)advantages across the life course**

This paper uses intersectionality and life course approach to explore the life experiences of older women in Tanzania. The three cases presented in this study have revealed how intersecting sources of (dis) advantages (see figure 5.1) play out differently through the life course of women into old age. The study revealed that women are structured in relation to the cultural expectations of femininity which encourages them to accept the shared norms and patriarchal values such as submissiveness, obedience and acceptance of the status quo (Rutagumirwa & Bailey, 2017). However, the different life paths pursued by these women reveal a nonlinear Life Trajectory, which indicates that, these structured life courses are contested, resisted, and utilized by women. Our findings seem to echo Sokolovsky’s (2009) observation that within cultures, how individuals follow the “standardized” life course differ and changes over time.

The findings presented in this study further unveil how structural (dis)advantages that occur over an extended period of time intersect with individual life trajectories and other sources of discrimination to shape women’s life courses. For example, it is evident that structural disadvantages such as patriarchal customary laws that require a woman to be submissive to her husband and intersecting factors such as, religion, family status, gender, marital status (see figure 5.1 delayed Bi Mishi’s decision to file for divorce. It is within her delayed responses that she was subjected to violence that caused her permanent disability. Likewise, in her childhood Bi Mwenda was subjected to patriarchal norms that encouraged child marriage —this affected her educational attainment and subsequently (her employment options) limited her ability to accumulate financial resources—old age abuse (see table 5.2). Bi Mwenda’s example reflects the structural constraints in exercising agency. Her experience shows that structural factors (e.g. cultural norms) can constrain a woman’s agency, and can even block all opportunities to exercise agency.
On the other hand, Bi Somoe was both privileged and disadvantaged by structural context. In her childhood, she was subjected to patriarchal norms (exercised through early marriage), which was reinforced by her family. Bi Somoe, was privileged to go to school with the help of “White priests” (colonial time) who facilitated her education and her escape from early child marriage. Yet, her account demonstrates the tensions and problems embedded in intersecting disadvantages, including gender, age and ethnicity as well as poverty that pushed her into other disadvantages such as working and caring for the family at a very young age. By looking at these three cases, we can argue that women can create their own life path through choices and decisions (Keizer et al., 2008). However, their choices can be constrained by life circumstances which they have little or no control over at times.

**Individual trajectories, location and agencies**

The findings show that although all women in this study had experienced multiple forms of discrimination or disadvantages at different points in their lives (see figure 5.1), their realities differ, and although bound by limiting conditions at distinct points of their life-trajectories, some of them are agentic actors (having the ability to improve their lives), (subvert norms) and (refute the common notions regarding the passivity of women) —challenging the existing patriarchal order. For instance, Bi Mishi’s decisions to subvert norms (by filing the divorce) was made possible by intersecting sources of advantages such as level education, which improved her status as a woman, having a job gave her ability to accumulate financial resources and gave her the confidence to be independent (end abusive marriage) (see table 5.2). Likewise, Bi Somoe, took the other path – breaks away from cultural norms by not attending Unyago (and arranged marriage) – instead, with the help of priests she went to school. The education she received gave her knowledge to question the assigned status of “an incomplete woman”. These findings seem to back up the assertions (Pande 2015, p.181) that not all women living in a patriarchal system lack the ability to exercise agency—women are not offered the same opportunities for exercising agency. As Elder (2000) noted, the ability to make specific choices depends on opportunities and constraints. These opportunities are such as resources/ capital: i.e., to social capital (social networks), education, and material resources Kabeer (1999). Thus, the presence or absence of resources (including material resources and linked lives e.g., family, friends, and other networks account for ways in which the interlocking sources of disadvantages are mitigated or aggravated.

The ability of an individual to exercise agency also depends on the forms of discrimination within the wider social context (Irazábal and Huerta 2016). There are a variety of social structures within a patriarchal system and interlocking structural
position that complicate an individual’s ability to exercise agency (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). For instance, Bi Mwenda’s interlocking sources of disadvantages (see table 5.1) limited her choices. Her lack of agency is rooted in the nature of the patriarchal system that operates in her childhood—historical time (child marriages) and the nature of the patriarchal system that operates (in Tanzania today), such as the customary laws that deny women the right to inherit property (Ezer 2006). In addition, our findings reveal that while linked lives in the form of family or beyond family network can be sources of support, they can also be a sort of limitation for an individual to exercise agency. For example, while Bi Somoe’s grandmother supported her when she escaped from violence, she forced her to drop out of school for Unyago and get married. Bi Mishi’s worries about her children’s future were the other reason she delayed ending an abusive marriage. Likewise, her mother and mother-in-law encouraged her to stay in the marriage despite the violence.

Accumulated dis (advantages), linked lives, resources and shifting identities across the life course

The case studies of women’s life experiences articulate dynamic realities accumulated over time (including shifting intersecting identities), with different meanings for each woman (see table 5.2). This is what Grenier (2012) refers to as ‘multiple and intersecting transitions’ experienced over the life course. The notion of the dynamic realities and shifting identities seems to echo Krekula (2007) and Calasanti (2008) that a woman’s interlocking structural position within society are dynamic and fluid, with different meanings for each woman and shapes how she experiences her old age. The study further found that that the experiences of a woman in later life are connected to her opportunities/constraints or privileges/disadvantages encountered along her life course and in many cases are influenced by such earlier life events or conditions as poverty, work trajectories, family influences and linked lives. Moreover, most of the transitions women made are related or tied to their family life. Majority of feminists argue that families and marriage institutions are the root causes of women discrimination, thus the tendency for a woman’s life to be more strongly interwoven with the family domain can be problematic because the family domain operates on non-linear time, with many irregularities (Hutchison, 2011).

The study further discloses that financial resources and social networks – Family Networks Linked lives with family members, spouses and/or children are important sources of quality of life in old age (Elder and Pellerin, 1998; Grenier, 2012). As they assist in addressing the emotional, economic and social needs/support in later life (see table 5.1). For example, Bi Somoe and Bi Mishi’s positive view of old age were largely linked to their financial status, achievements they made and the support they
receive from their children, i.e. in terms of financial, emotional and social support. In the absence of these support, old age becomes “unbearable”, for instance Bi Mwenda’s negative perceptions of old age were largely related to lack of support and assistance in terms of financial, housing, food, emotional and social support. In the context of Global south such as Tanzania, where social welfare is not well established, support by one’s children become important as participants grow older. Bi Mwenda’s childlessness affects her quality of life and well-being. Besides, her case provides a different picture about the role of extended family in Tanzania because, significant others (linked life) pose more disadvantages than advantages in her life course, and continue to worsen her subordinated positions. We deduce from our findings that linked lives in the form of marriage have both advantages and disadvantages (see table 5.2) across the life course of a woman. The three women in this study had a life transition to marriage (divorce and death) had some different realities, with different meanings for each woman. In line with (Zubair & Norris, 2015) we argue that, linked lives are a ‘prominent’ and ‘compelling’ component of life course—older women accumulated their disadvantages and privileges in a manner unique to their social locations (Zubair & Norris, 2015).

5.6 Conclusion

The analysis and findings presented in this study unveil how structural (dis) advantages that occur over an extended period of time intersect with individual life trajectories. Participants in this study reported to have experienced discrimination and multiple disadvantages over their life course. The disadvantages and discriminations were influenced by such structural disadvantages as the patriarchal system operating at the individual, family and structural level (see figure 5.1). Consistent with Chant (2014), we argue that women are victims of unequal power relations, discriminations and limited agency. Emphasis on intersectionality however reveals that intersecting advantages can encourage women to make own choices.

The case studies illustrate ways in which overlapping forms of structural discrimination and (dis)advantages affect women differently (see figure 5.1). Bi Somoe, Bi Mishi, and Bi Mwenda have varying concerns, constraints and opportunities because of their social locations. These seem to have directed their experiences over their life course in certain ways. This study extends the literature by discussing how intersections create different experiences among women. The study also supports feminist gerontologists who suggest that the experiences of women in later life are diverse and heterogeneous in nature (Krekula, 2007; Manthorpe 2010; Zubair & Norris, 2015).
This study also contributes to the feminist debate on the meaning of women’s agency by affirming feminists’ argument that agency takes various shapes including and not limited to having the ability to make choices and improve their lives (Kabeer 1999; Brown and Westaway, 2011), subvert norms (Butler, 2004) and refute the common notions regarding the passivity of women ideal of resisting domination (Honkasalo 2009). In this study, agency also denotes how women responded to key life events exhibiting strength, capacities and resilience in the face of challenges. From the case studies, we can deduce that the life courses of women are characterized by the struggle to move from one location to another; i.e., to escape from forms of discrimination or disadvantages. Despite the disadvantages over their life course, some women come out as the ‘heroes’ who subverted the discriminative systems and violence in a multitude of forms and expressed a level of happiness with their current lives (despite of their disabilities). Happiness (subjective well-being) in later life was connected with social integration, such as spirituality, children and other social networks. Within the intersections of the multiple identities in this study, we found that there are some forms of disadvantages/discrimination that entangle themselves to form a vicious circle of deprivations. The deprivations became blockages on all opportunities and subsequently the ability to exercise agency (see figure 5.1). This then resulted into negative descriptions of later life.

Old age experience is therefore shaped by social location, for example, whereas the three women in this study described such experiences as loss, disability and deterioration in health status, the effects of a lifetime of disadvantage tend to accumulate in later life more for those who experienced intersectional systems of disadvantage. For example, Bi Mwenda’s health status and mobility worsened and were not accommodated appropriately; this pushed her into distress and despair. The impact, however, was made worse by the lack of appropriate support. Thus, this study calls for policies that take into account where individuals are located, and that provide solutions for people in a range of situations. Attention to these intersections will enhance the ability of practitioners to better serve needs of older people. Policy-makers and practitioners must look at the spaces in which older women live, and specifically at how the varying and interlocking structural positions within a society can be used to meet older women’s needs in ways that are appropriate and relevant to their life experiences.

Gender norms have made older women vulnerable to discrimination, poverty and violence in their entire life cycle. This serves to intensify the role of gender in shaping outcomes as women age. That is, by the nature of a patriarchal society, women are more likely to face discrimination. Thus, achieving the protection of older women
against violence requires instituting gender-sensitive policies and laws (including customary laws). Laws aimed at achieving gender equity and equality would break the multiple discriminations against women in accessing resources and enhance their mental health. Based on the findings, we suggest that enacting policies to enhance women’s ability to make decisions and move freely in domestic and public spaces from early stages in life to later stages may enhance women’s agency and protect them from discrimination. Women’s empowerment interventions through which women acquire resources that may enhance their agency such as education, or increase their ability to define their life choices are very crucial.

Lastly, the three women in this case study have revealed different features of (dis)advantages across the life course of women, confirming that their experiences are complex within gendered contexts that must be understood in the context of a life course developmental process. Policy, practice, and research must seek to protect women when they are susceptible to discrimination or victimization (for example in Bi Mishi’s case, the domestic violence that led into the permanent disability would have been prevented if legal help was obtained at the early stages. Moreover, in the case of Bi Mwenda, the disadvantages she accumulated from early life led into abuse, homelessness and lack of care, consequently, she is experiencing distress and depression affecting her well-being. Therefore, it is important for interventions to consider the complex relationships and interactions between the aforesaid discrimination and other social locations and identities. Appropriate coping resources such as social support and material resources should also be provided in a timely manner. The welfare system and social protection interventions should prioritize people with intersecting disadvantages such as childless, older, poor women. These findings are potentially useful for guiding policy development to avoid the creation of a new generation of older people with similar multiple disadvantages.

5.7 Limitations and Future Directions
This study explored the experiences of older people in the Tanzania context where little is known. The availability of large scale data is a limitation. Because these findings stem from a relatively small sample, they cannot be generalized to refer to a larger population. The findings may however serve as a guiding framework to administer a larger study involving quantitative survey data as it would provide insight into potential survey questions. This may be an important direction for future research on concept of linked lives/social, their social support and the subjective well-being of older people.
Moreover, as revealed in this paper some aspects of social location are dynamic, points to the importance of researching on cumulative (dis)advantages in shaping the experience of later life. In addition, examining potential mechanisms through which disadvantages may accumulate for women (and men), and understanding these pathways provide an important avenue of future research and for intervention strategies. Finally, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design, recall bias and participants’ current situations may bias or influence the way they account their past experiences, and influences the analysis of ‘trajectories. Future longitudinal research may be useful to supplement our results.
References


