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Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Elderly People: A Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns adversely affected every sphere of the life throughout the world. The negative impacts of COVID-19 affected all age groups, including senior citizens. The pandemic and the lockdown brought severe psychological, social, cultural and economic impacts on the lives of elderly people. This study aims to know about the economic and psychological impact of COVID-19 on senior citizens. The nature of the study is qualitative. For the study, 20 respondents were selected through purposive sampling technique from the village Rehankot, Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Data has been collected through in-depth interviews and then analyzed through the technique of thematic analysis. The results show that COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown brought negative psychological and economic impacts on senior citizens in the form of anxiety, depression, poverty.

Keywords: COVID-19, Senior Citizens, Mortality, Lock down, psychological impact

تلخیص

COVID-19 وبائی بیماری اور اس کے نتیجے میں لاک ڈاؤن نے پوری دنیا میں زندگی کے ہر شعبے کو بری طرح متاثر کیا۔ COVID-19 کے منفی اثرات نے بزرگ شہریوں سمیت تمام عمر کے گروپوں کو متاثر کیا۔ وبائی مرض اور لاک ڈاؤن نے بزرگ افراد کی زندگیوں پر شدید نفسیاتی، سماجی، ثقافتی اور معاشی اثرات مرتب کیے۔ اس مطالعے کا مقصد بزرگ شہریوں پر COVID-19 کے معاشی اور نفسیاتی اثرات کے بارے میں جاننا ہے۔ مطالعہ کی نوعیت معیاری ہے۔ مطالعہ کے لیے، 20 جواب دہندگان کو مقصدی نمونے لینے کی تکنیک کے ذریعے گاؤں ریحان کوٹ، دیر لوئر، خیبر پختونخوا، پاکستان سے منتخب کیا گیا۔ گہرائی سے انٹرویو کے ذریعے ڈیٹا اکٹھا کیا گیا ہے اور پھر موضوعاتی تجزیہ کی تکنیک کے ذریعے تجزیہ کیا گیا ہے۔ نتائج سے پتہ چلتا ہے

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کہ COVID-19 وبائی بیماری اور لاک ڈاؤن نے اضطراب، ڈپریشن، غربت کی صورت میں بزرگ شہریوں پر منفی نفسیاتی اور معاشی اثرات مرتب کیے۔

کلیدی الفاظ: کوویڈ-19، بزرگ شہری، اموات، لاک ڈاؤن، نفسیاتی اثرات

Introduction

Universally, there is no definite and single definition of old age. It is a relative term and its definition varies from society to society. Old age is viewed differently in developed and developing countries of the world. In most developed countries, the life expectancy is higher than the developing countries (Gorman, 1999). Life expectancy is considered the number of years a person is expected to live. In developed countries, higher life expectancy is considered the result of different factors including better health facilities, literacy, economic status, GDP, GNP and per capita income (Khan, Khan and Khan, 2016). In 2020, Hong Kong, being a developed country had the highest average life expectancy of 85.29 years while Chad, being a developing country had the lowest average life expectancy of 55.17 years (World meter, 2020). As a result of higher life expectancy, in developed countries the chronological age of 65 years is considered the beginning of old age (Gorman, 1999) while in developing countries the chronological age of 60 years is considered the beginning of old age (Gorman, 1999). In Pakistan, the age limit of 60 years is considered as the beginning of old age (Ashiq & Asad, 2017).

In Pakistan, the demographic transition had started in the decade of 90s (Arif & Ahmed, 2010). Pakistan is included among the top 15 countries of the world having population more than ten million elderly people. Globally, Pakistan is one of the 15 countries with over ten million older people. It is estimated that elderly people (having age 60 years and above) constitute 7 percent of the total population. It is expected that the rising average life expectancy in Pakistan would further lead to increase in the population of elderly people. This situation would create new challenges for the Pakistani society (Zaidi, Stefanoni & Khalil, 2019).

In Pakistan, the healthcare system does not fulfill the international standard for general public, and the scenario is even more dismal for the increasing population of elderly people. Moreover, the elderly people are reported to have limited access to health services because such services are usually not available, especially in rural areas. In addition, it is difficult for the elderly people to afford the health expenditure. Transportation charges for access to medical centers and increasing price of medicines make it difficult for the elderly people to avail the available better health services. A research study found that in Karachi city, where comparatively better health facilities are available, 33 percent of older people suffered from hypertension and were unable to take medication due to financial problems. In Pakistan, the general public has to contribute 75 percent of the health service cost (Zaidi, Stefanoni & Khalil, 2019). On one side, the situation of health services in Pakistan is not satisfactory for the general population including elderly people; while on the other hand, COVID-19 poses a serious risk for the health of older people (Krylova & Balayeva, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has left no age group unscathed (Pant & Subedi, 2020). In the context of Pakistan, from 3rd January

2020 to 30th April 2021, there have been 815,711 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 17,680 deaths (WHO, n.d). However, the negative impact of COVID-19 on the health of the elderly seems greater as compared to other age groups (CDC, 2020).

Initial study from China and data from Italy showed that the risk of severity of COVID-19 was higher among the elderly (Pant & Subedi, 2020).

Different reports and studies show that elderly people are more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects. Co-morbidities add to the consequences of COVID-19 and make things worse.

Similarly, issues such as stress, depression, anxiety, and many other mental health issues develop among elderly people as a result of COVID-19 are linked to higher mortality rates in general, and particularly in those having age 65 years and above (Martins Van Jaarsveld G. 2020). Elderly people in a country may become easy victim of COVID-19 due to the following reasons

- Decreased in immunity level due to older age.
- Weak health condition of the elderly people in the form of hypertension, diabetes, heart problems, lung disease and cancer make them more vulnerable
- Lack of balanced diet and nutrition
- Elderly people collect the updated information about the corona virus through reading, writing, discussion and listening. Such information pushed the elderly people to get worried about their own and their family health (The Aga Khan University, 2021).

Corona virus has negatively affected the social, economic and health condition of the population. Corona pandemic and lock-down generally brought adverse impacts for the all human beings and specifically for the elderly people in different spheres of life (Krylova & Balayeva, 2020). COVID-19 is causing negative changes in the daily routine of elderly people, as they are more vulnerable to the mentioned disease. COVID-19 affected the social support which the elderly people used to avail in pre-pandemic times. Moreover, the COVID-19 affected the pattern of social connectivity of elderly people with other human beings. In addition, the preventive measures and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) of COVID-19 brought negative impacts for the elderly people. Furthermore, the fear of illness and their subsequent death or the death of their family members also played an important role about the fears related to COVID-19 among the elderly people (WHO, 2020).

The preventive measures in the form of social isolation, social distancing, social disconnectedness and loneliness have close association with the mental health of elderly people. Self-perceived social isolation and social

disconnectedness promoted anxiety and depression among the elderly people (Mukhtar, 2020). For elderly people, COVID-19 is like double-edge sword. On the one hand, due to fear of COVID-19, they are reluctant to go out of their houses; while on the other hand, they cannot cope with the loneliness and isolation at home (Age Uk, 2020). Among the preventive measures, social isolation and lock down has far-reaching consequences on the mental health of elderly people as compared to the general masses. Social isolation often leads to loneliness, which has close association with depression among the elderly people. Social isolation, loneliness, and depression can further exacerbate the vulnerability of elderly people to COVID-19 (Martins Van Jaarsveld G. 2020). Elderly people are aware about their vulnerability of COVID-19 and as a result they are anxious to go outside of their houses. Elderly people are anxious about their health and get more worried; when they observe the careless behavior of the public about COVID-19. The elderly people think that the careless behavior of the general public would push them toward the COVID-19 contracting among the elderly which may cause their death (Age UK, 2020).

However, Vahia, Jeste, & Reynolds (2020) found that COVID-19 brings low level of stress for the elderly people as compared to other age groups. COVID-19 brings less negative impacts on the mental health of elderly people as compared to other age groups. The study further found that the elderly people who were dwelling in their concerned community in United States reported lower level of mental health issues in the form of anxiety, depression, trauma and stress as compared to the younger age groups. As a result of COVID-19 pandemic, the young age groups showed different mental health issues in the form of anxiety disorder and depressive disorder. The elderly people reported lower rates of substance use as well as suicidal thoughts.

COVID-19 has had impacts on every walk of life, economy in particular. These effects are going to last for years. Some of the effects are directly related to COVID-19 while others are a result of the subsequent lockdowns, and other safety measures taken to prevent the virus from spreading (Martins Van Jaarsveld G, 2020).

Literature review

Literature on the current study reveals that elderly people have become easy victims of the COVID-19 due to various reasons (Pant & Subedi, 2020). Initial studies from China and Italy also revealed that the risk of severity of COVID-19 was higher among the elderly people. Later on, global data showed that elderly people had higher chances of COVID-19 infection. Center for Disease Control (CDC), China analyzed all 72,314, COVID-19 cases reported till February 11, 2020. The results showed that the fatality rate was 3.6%, 8% and 14.8% in populations aged 60 to 69 years, 70 to 79 years, 80 years and above respectively (Pant & Subedi, 2020).

Research studies revealed that COVID-19 brought negative impacts on the mental health of elderly population (Ahmed, Ahmed, Aibao, Hanbin, Siyu, & Ahmad, 2020; Meda, Pardini , Slongo, Bodini, Rigobello, Visioli & Novara, 2020). Mental health refers to a state of the people where they are unable to

cope effectively with life stressors. A number of factors such as social distancing, self isolation, quarantine and uncertainty about the disease brought negative impacts on the mental of elderly people.

In the context of Pakistan, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in February 2020. For the control of the virus, the government and health professionals advised various preventive measures. Later on, these preventive measures were further tightened. The government of Pakistan implemented complete lockdown, closure of business activities, mosques and movement restrictions. These preventive measures sparked mental health issues among the general population including the elderly people. Research study reported COVID-19 created mental health issues among the elderly in the form of higher level of anxiety and fear and change in their routine behavior (Khan, Lodhi, Rabbani, Ahmed, Abrar, Arshad & Khan, 2021). The patients, who were living in nuclear families and having chronic illness, were significantly exposed to poor mental health. While, individuals who were having exercise; spending time with family members; reading books; taking healthy food; having a good sleep; participating in social welfare work; spending time on their hobbies; seeking spiritual support; and talking to family members & friends on the phone were significantly associated with better mental well-being (Khan, Lodhi, Rabbani, Ahmed, Abrar, Arshad & Khan, 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic caused negative consequences for elderly people throughout the world. A research study in United States of America revealed that among the elderly people, having 65 years age and above, 1 out of 5 faced economic insecurity as result of COVID-19 pandemic (Li & Mutchler, 2020).

Around 41% of Pakistanis were affected by the lockdowns during the first wave of COVID-19. The government however, initiated the ehsaas programs in order to minimize the negative impacts of the lockdown (Khan, Lodhi, Rabbani, Ahmed, Abrar, Arshad & Khan, 2021).

Similarly the government also prioritized the vaccination of the senior citizens of age 60 years and above. In the beginning 180, 000 (2.25 percent) senior citizens get themselves registered out of 8 million senior citizens (Junaidi, 2021).

Objectives of the Study

This study contains the following objectives:

1- To document the psychological impact of COVID-19 on senior citizens

2- To know about the economic consequences of lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions for senior citizens

Material and Methods

The current study was conducted in village Rehankote Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. For the collection of data, qualitative approach was adopted. In-depth interviews were conducted for the collection of data from the respondents (having age 60 years and above). A total of 20 senior citizens (10 male and 10 female) were selected through purposive sampling technique. Interviews were recorded in a mobile phone and were transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Through thematic analysis patterns of themes were identified and the data was analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Psychological Pressure during COVID-19 -19 Pandemic

COVID-19 can negatively affect the mental health of elderly people. The psychological problems of elderly people may range from neurosis to psychosis. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic increased anxiety among elderly people. They were worried about contracting COVID-19, about the well-being and safety of their family and about the future. For some older people, the anxiety has been debilitating; leading to panic attacks and physical symptoms which were having a profound impact on their day-to-day lives (Age UK, 2020). COVID-19 -19 pandemic affected the mental health of the elderly people in two ways. In one sense, COVID-19 was a new viral infection and the medical personnel were not fully updated regarding its proper treatment. As a result, different rumors emerged about COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic and the rumors related to the pandemic negatively affected the mental health of the elderly people. The psychological pressure pushed the elderly people toward the irrational and unscientific ways of COVID-19 treatment. According to a report more than 700 people died in Iran after ingesting toxic methanol; erroneously thinking it can cure the new Corona virus (Al-Jazeera, 2020).

Moreover, the new pattern of life under COVID-19 SOPs also affected the mental health (United Nations, 2020). Generally, in Pakhtun society, the elderly people live with their families in one house, as joint families. The family members keep close interaction with one another. However, the COVID-19 protocols pushed the elderly people towards social isolation. Social isolation is ‘a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, minimal number of social contacts. Besides, they are deficient in fulfilling and keeping quality relationships. Social isolation among the elderly people is a serious public health concern. Measures taken to control the spread of COVID-19 like physical distancing, movement restriction and home quarantine for the suspects have contributed to the increase in social isolation for all ages, especially for the elderly people (Pant & Subedi, 2020). Regarding social isolation, a female respondent commented as:

"Generally, I used to kiss the foreheads of my grand children when they would come from schools and colleges. During COVID-19 pandemic, my grandchildren stopped me to kiss their foreheads. This really tortured me……." (Respondent no. 5).

The virus is not just threatening the lives and safety of older persons; it is also threatening their social networks (United Nations, 2020). Generally, in the Pakhtun society, the relatives and neighbors strictly believed upon participation in joy and sorrows. There are strong cultural norms in the form of social gathering at the death of relatives. However, the COVID-19 promoted the fear of death, particularly among the elderly people. Resultantly, they hesitated to participate in death ceremonies of their relatives. This pattern of life led toward the social boycott among various families. In this regard, a female respondent narrated her experience as:

"*I am sick and old. Although, I came to know about the death of my brother and sister but I did not participate in their death due to fear of COVID-19. The relatives condemned my non-participation in their deaths. Moreover, the children of my deceased brother and sister have cut off their relations with me".* (Respondent no. 10)

Moreover, lack of proper and effective treatment also aggravated the worries of elderly people because it is believed that elderly people at a greater risk of COVID-19 as compared to other age groups (United Nations, 2020, Hollander & Carr, 2020; Mehrotra, Ray, Brockmeyer, Barnett & Bender, 2020; Webster, 2020; Zhou, Snoswell, Harding, Bambling , Edirippulige, Bai & Smith, 2020). This situation caused poor mental health among the elderly people. Moreover, the elderly people, particularly the elderly women faced discrimination, abuses and neglect. Regarding the abusive behavior of relatives, a female respondent commented as:

"My son took me to the house of a relative which is free from COVID-19 patients. However, the relatives scolded me on arrival to their house. My relatives blamed me of death fear. This situation tortured me and I came back to my house disappointed" (Respondent no. 15).

Lack of the *COVID-19* vaccine, its high prices and conspiracies about *COVID-19* vaccines also promoted mental health issues among them. A male respondent commented about this situation as:

"I am a poor man. I cannot afford its price. Moreover, I have heard that such vaccines can cause different biological changes in the body including infertility (respondent no. 17).

There were some of the respondents who did not believe upon the COVID-19 -19 virus and its infection. Such respondents did not believe upon the preventive measures such as the use of mask, sanitizers, social distancing etc. As such respondents did not follow the Corona SOPs including quarantine and as a result they faced no mental health issues.

Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Senior Citizens

COVID-19 added to the existing economic and social disparities(Li & Mutchler, 2020).

All the measures taken to ensure public safety had impacts on economy throughout the world. The economy would shrink to what it was during the economic recession a decade back. This will result in losss of jobs, and hard times for the businesses. People without pensions started spending their own hard earned savings on medicines and groceries (Pant & Subedi, 2020).

This perspective identifies groups within the older population that confront the disproportionate economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting geographic differences related to the cost of living encountered by older adults, as well as the extent to which average living expenses are covered by Social Security benefits at the county level. It also discusses the short and long-term impacts of the economic downturn on the financial security of older Americans. We focused our discussion on people aged 65 years or older, including those who are still working and are therefore at risk of employment disruption, as well as people who have retired and are relying on non-wage income sources (Li & Mutchler, 2020). In the context of Pakistan, limited number of senior citizens avail social security in the form of old age pension. Currently, 0.85 million retired persons are getting old age pension out of the total aged people of over seven million (Ashiq & Asad, 2017).

In Pakistani society, limited numbers of senior citizens are economically independent. They are usually economically dependent upon their children. The *COVID-19* pandemic indirectly brought negatively impacts on their economic positions. The economic consequences of *COVID-19* were more severe for those senior citizens whose children belong to working class. On one hand, such people have limited resources to save, while on the other hand, they got unemployed due to lockdown. The poverty and unemployment of children brought negative consequences for their old parents. Regarding the negative impacts of *COVID-19* on the income of the family, senior citizens commented as:

"My son is a laborer. During lockdown, it was impossible to get employment and earning. As a result, the standard of our life got declined "(Respondent 19).

In rural areas, a growing number of people are earning their livelihood from labor on daily basis. During lockdown, they were unable to earn and their standard of life was affected negatively.

COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown brought negative impacts for the senior citizens in the context of the fulfillment of basic needs. A male senior citizen narrated his experience as:

"During lockdown, it was not easy for my son to afford the expenses of the house. Generally, I used to ignore some of my personal basic needs (Respondent no. 7).

Lockdown affected the earning activities in the entire country; however, it adversely affected the business class due to closure of markets. Nevertheless, the lockdown brought minimum financial hurdles for those senior citizens who either getting old age pension or their children were public sector employees and were attracting monthly salaries.

Conclusion

COVID-19 left enormous impacts on the world. Almost every segment of our society has been affected by it, in one way or the other. But most of all, it is the senior citizens that are the most vulnerable age group to COVID-19. Senior citizens can easily become the victim of COVID-19. COVID-19 oriented mortality ratio is higher among the senior citizens than any other age group. COVID-19 being a medical issue brings adverse psychological and economic impacts for the senior citizens. The COVID-19 precautionary measures in the form of social isolation, social distancing and quarantine negative affect the mental health of elderly people. COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown brought negative economic consequences for senior citizens particularly those who were either lacking old age pension or were dependent upon their families.

Recommendations

- In order to avoid COVID-19 oriented disruption and panic situation among the elderly people, the following measures are suggested.
- To promote vaccination among all age groups with special emphasis on the vaccination of elderly people. Those elderly people who are confused about the effects of COVID-19 vaccines, need to be convinced by the concerned experts for vaccination.
- Some media reports create panic regarding the COVID-19 and its vaccines. It is therefore suggested to avoid such negative reporting and conspiracies about COVID-19 and its vaccines.
- Elderly people must be convinced to adopt COVID-19 SOPs.
- Family members of elderly people need to be trained by Psychologists/Social workers to understand the psychological needs and issues of their elderly family members.
- The government of Pakistan should assist the elderly people financially at the time of lockdown.

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