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Impact of COVID-19 on Older People in Liberia

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Abstract

Social policy development in Liberia falls short in representing the voices of the country's 180,000 people 65+ in determining policies aimed at enhancing their quality of life. There are the lack of legislation and a national social protection policy for older people's rights, including housing, health care and transportation which may enhance exclusion practices of the elderly. The continued neglect of older people in Liberia did manifest significantly during the deadly Ebola outbreak in the country in 2014, which claimed the lives of over 4,800 persons and over 10,000 Ebola-infected persons (Slewion, 2015). The Government's National Ebola Response Policy specifically mentioned women and children as the vulnerable groups amid the health crisis. Meanwhile older people, who we refer to as the most "vulnerable of the vulnerable" social groups were not mentioned. Now when the government is appointing national structures and mechanisms to respond to the prevailing global pandemic manifested by the Coronavirus also known as COVID-19 we are witnessing the same situation. Data were collected and reviewed based on Personal Social and Home Assessments of 200 Older People, as part of a national Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign launched on May 15, 2020, and being implemented by the Coalition of Caregivers and Advocates for the Elderly in Liberia (COCAEL). Preliminary findings suggest, among others, that there is a continued neglect and marginalization of older people in Liberia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government has no global action plan on how to ensure the older persons safety and needs in Covid-19 pandemia. Due to the lack of the elderly empowerment in Liberia through social protection programs the seniors' quality of life remain low or even worsen because of present higher risk of serious illness of Covid-19 and poverty.

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Background

In 2017, Africa was home to 69 million older persons accounting for 7.1% of global population of older persons. With a projection of 229% increase between 2017 and 2050, this figure is projected to reach 226 million in 2050 and may account for 10.9 % of 60+ globally. The rapidly increasing demographics heighten concerns about wellbeing and protection of rights of older persons (Helpage International Forum Report, 2017).

In Liberia , Policy development appears to often overlook the welfare of the over 180, 000 older people who seem to be an after-thought instead of an inclusive segment of any social policy aimed at enhancing the quality of life of older citizens of the country. This subtle exclusion of older people in social policies is manifesting in Liberia in the context of the lack of legislation and a national social protection policy for older people's rights and improvement of their quality of life, including housing, health care and transportation. According to the 2010 revision of the World Population Prospects, 53.7 percent of the Liberian population is between 15 and 65 years of age. The dependency ratio for the total population is 84%, while the dependency ratio for children is 79.3% and that of the elders is 5.6%. Liberia's Poverty Reduction Strategy estimates that more 1.3 million people, including the elder population, out of a total of 4 million people are living in extreme poverty today (LISGIS Census-2008).

Problem Statement

Africa's older persons have a right to effective inclusion and participation in the implementation of sustainable development agenda 2030 and African Union agenda 2063 and in the enjoyment of the benefits from development. SDGs implementation progress measured so far indicate however, that the policy priorities within the SDGs that must be measured and reported for older persons as requested by UN Statistics Division on behalf of the International Agency and Expert Group on SDGs (IAEG-SDGs) are lacking in indicators and age disaggregated data. Older persons are disproportionately voiceless, marginalized and vulnerable. (Global Economic Forum.-2017).

The continued neglect of older people in Liberia did manifest significantly during the deadly Ebola outbreak in the country in 2014, which claimed the lives of over 4,800 persons and over 10,000 Ebola-infected persons. The Government's National Ebola Response Policy specifically mentioned women and children as the vulnerable groups amid the health crisis -leaving out older people, or whom we refer to as the most "vulnerable of the vulnerable" social groups. As a matter of fact older persons were invisible during the crisis until a group of caregivers and advocates came together and organized themselves into an umbrella group known today as the Coalition of Caregivers and Advocates for the Elderly in Liberia (COCAEL), which comprises 16

registered NGOs catering to older people in Liberia in residential homes and in the communities. . (WHO Ebola Report-2015)

Unfortunately it appears we are witnessing similar situation as the government appoints national structures and mechanisms to respond the prevailing global pandemic manifested by the Coronavirus also known as COVID-19. This is evident by the appointment of a National Executive Committee on COVID-19 and the subsequent appointment of a National Taskforce with the exclusion of civil society groups that represent the voice of the older people in Liberia, including the COCAEL and the Global Fight Against Ageism Project in Liberia supported by the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP). However, while these policy matters are being discussed to remedy the situation, older people are roaming the streets and congregating daily in large numbers to beg for food and other basic necessities without practicing necessary health protocols, including social and physical distancing, wearing of mask and washing their hands. This daily high risk situation is seen particularly at a place known as Vamoma House which has become a regular meeting place for a huge crowd of older people to gather and wait for hands out from humanitarian individuals and organization.

Conceptual Framework

It is in view of the prevailing situation facing older people amid the COVID-19 health crisis in Liberia that the leadership of COCAEL resolved to establish a **COCAEL COVID-19 Response Committee**, which is charged with the responsibility to, among other things, implement a national **Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign** to mitigate the health risk of older people, considering that they are most susceptible to the virus due to their age, pre-existing health conditions and economic status. The Campaign will be implemented to provide sustainable support for older people in their communities and homes to ensure that their health and social needs are addressed to encourage them to stay at home amid the health crisis. The implementation of the Campaign will be done in a collaborative and partnership manner to engender support from diverse sectors of the country, including government, non-governmental organizations and community-based structures, as well as humanitarian individuals.

The primary services to be provided to older people directly in their homes and communities will include food items, preventative materials and targeted awareness messages. It is expected that our focus will address over time income security and social protection of older people as well as build the capacity of older people to succeed in their communities, including caring for themselves and their dependents during this health emergency and long term. Basically we want to address equity and fairness in the ways older persons are treated and systems of laws which can challenge and replace inequities, discrimination, abuse and violence against older persons most especially during crisis.

Goal: The overall goal of the **Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign** amid the COVID-19 health crisis is to establish a collaborative and coordinated initiative, involving government and non-governmental organizations, as well as community-based resources, to provide sustainable support to older persons to mitigate health risk and transmission of the virus among older people and ensure that rights of older people are protected without discrimination in any form, including during the provision of government services to its citizens.

Hence, the primary objective of the pilot study was to identify the deficiencies and gaps in the government health care services and social service delivery system as well as policies amid the COVID-19 pandemic to the older population in Liberia and address these deficiencies and gaps to improve policy outcomes and enhance services to older citizens, most especially during health epidemic and pandemic. A secondary objective was to strengthen the capacity non-governmental organizations, including COCAEL, and communities where older people reside in Liberia by increasing their social service delivery services and advocacy skills through engaging them directly in applied research on issues impacting older adults.

Methods

A mixed-method approach was utilized, including documents reviewed, in-person Personal Social Profile and Home Assessments administered to older people and engagements with other stakeholders in communities in which the older people reside. The research began with a Personal Social Profile Assessment of 200 older persons who attended the launching of the Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign on May 15, 2020; Home Assessments of the homes of the older persons were conducted in their communities and engagements with leaders in geographically diverse communities where the older people reside. The communities were selected because they are a macrocosm of the greater Liberian society in terms of the ethnic and religious diversity. For example, Central Monrovia, Sinkor, Congo Town, Caldwell and Jamaica Road in Montserrado County and Duport Road in Paynesville City, are bustling business cities that attract lot of people on a daily basis. Policy reports were reviewed from HelpAge International documenting the socio economic condition older people face due to lack of a universal protection instrument such a UN Convention for older people, WHO Report on the Ebola epidemic in 2015 in Liberia, the African Social Work Journal highlighting the challenges of older people during the Ebola outbreak in three West African countries, including Liberia and the dismal socio-economic conditions endured (HelpAge International newsletter, 2017; Slewion, 2015); and statistical data about the population of older people in Liberia (LISGIS, 2008). Policy on Cash Transfer for Vulnerable Population being implemented by the Ministry of Gender and Social Protection of Liberia.

Community leaders were engaged to raise awareness among them about the concerns of older people in their communities and together determine means to

mobilize resources within these communities to cater to the needs of older people and build support system for those residing in their communities. The community leaders who participated were purposively selected based on their interest and commitment to aging issues. The survey sample included males and females of different ages, ethnic backgrounds and social economic status as reflected\

The survey was administered in-person among targeted groups of older people who showed for the launching of the Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign and with those who were engaged in their homes during the follow-up Home Assessments. The Assessments forms were filled by Social Workers in person in the participant's home to ensure that privacy and confidentiality were not compromised. In addition to the volunteer social workers, mainly comprising staff of the CECAFE and graduates as well as undergraduate students majoring in Social Work from the United Methodist University(UMU) and University of Liberia, some members of the Coalition of Car-givers and Advocates for the Elderly in Liberia (COCAEL) assisted in the research.

The survey design included a brief description of the study, confidentiality statement, demographic questions, and sets of both closed and open-ended questions. There Assessments questions were designed to determine the participant support system, participant knowledge of their community leadership structure, participant living condition and dependents; participant income generation capacity; and participant understanding of the social service delivery and health care system in the context of ageism. Five hundred older people, including women and men, mainly residing in Montserrado County were targeted but 200 persons were assessed yielding a 45% (200) response rate. The Assessments were done only Montserrado County due to travel restrictions based on the State of Emergency declared by the Government to mitigate the transmission of the virus among counties and considering we were only operating in Montserrado at the time. limiting the ability of the research team to reach other areas with a high concentration of older people.

Sample Description

The survey sample size of 200 persons was comprised males and females age 50 years old and above. There were no other inclusion criteria beyond age and the resulting sample represented diverse backgrounds of participants reflecting the broad profile of older people in Liberia. Christianity is the dominant religious group in the country and there is an assumption that more Christian older people are facing challenges. The data presented in this study illustrate that social service delivery and health care service challenges among older people are being experienced by other religious groups as well. (See below Assessments forms)

Results

The data from the both Assessments indicates that there is a consistent increase in the number of older persons begging in the streets and most especially during the

pandemic. The data also illustrate that while there some older adults engage in some level of income generation business on a small scale, most of the older people still are vulnerable and living in inhumane conditions likely to homelessness without any substantial support from the government or international non-governmental organizations operating in the country on a consistent basis.

Barriers and Challenges Revealed

The survey findings suggest that the empowerment of older people in Liberia through socio-economic programs and creation of a partnership will lead to not only devising strategies to improve the livelihood for older people, but also the capacities of relevant actors to effectively serve older adults and address the critical concerns of that population. The major themes that emerged from the survey analysis were awareness, accessibility of social and health care services, and display of ageism in the context of service delivery to older people.

Conclusion

This study provided insight into the barriers and challenges facing older people's participation during epidemic and pandemic in Liberia. It also enabled the researchers to engage with older people from diverse backgrounds and understand from them the approaches to be used to address these challenges. In addition, the study provided an opportunity for social work students to engage directly with older people and helped to create an environment for intergenerational dialogue on the socio-economic issues confronting older people. This engagement enabled students to come face to face with the realities of life that older people live in the country on a daily basis. Most of the students expressed that they were not aware that older people were not only living in poverty, but also were disenfranchised due to harsh conditions they face during epidemic and pandemic throughout the country. They observed that older women were a majority of the victims. Some students seemed to be motivated to join advocacy campaigns and groups to advocate for improvement in the quality of life of older people in Liberia. "I was not aware that most of these older people did not vote because of these problems," one female student said. "Our government needs to do more for our old people," quipped a male student. It was also observed that the lack of political capital seems to be a contributing factor for the high level of poverty, abuse, discrimination and isolation being experienced by older people in Liberia. Despite all of these different social issues, the emerging themes consistent from the assessments and engagements with older people in their homes and communities were the high level of poverty, a lack of trust in the government and marginalization of older people in the social service system in Liberia due to inaccessible health care and social services and insensitivity of the government and international non-governmental organizations.

It is important to note that during the COVID-19 pandemic and during the national Older People Stay-At-Home Campaign, It was observed that some older people did receive food and preventive items provided by humanitarian organizations and individuals, especially to those older people who gathered at Vamoma House daily. Despite the slight improvement, there is still a lot to be done to improve the quality of life of older people in Liberia.

It is expected that this study will stimulate opportunities for other on-going activities, including strengthening the advocacy efforts among advocates for the elderly in Liberia, using the data and findings obtained to engage stakeholders to develop a national policy for aging and make policy changes. These policy changes can include the Ratification of the African Protocol for the Rights of Older People and Enactment of the Bill to create a Commission for Older People in the context of policy and mechanisms to enhance the quality of life of older people in in the country and the social protection for the 180,000 older Liberians.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerged from this research.

That the government works with various stakeholders, including the advocates and caregivers for older people, and older people themselves, to design strategies to increase the services that could be leveraged to improve the socio-economic conditions of older people.

That the government of Liberia intentionally design mechanisms, including targeted health care and social services accessible to older people to mitigate the disenfranchisement of older people, most especially during epidemic and pandemic and increase their participation in the policy-making process for older people.

That the government includes cultural sensitivity training into its training for its social services staff to to improve their sensitivity to serve older people effectively.

(4) That older people and advocates in Liberia continue their participation in international campaigns (i.e. Global Alliance for the Rights for Older People-GAROP through the Open-Ended-Working -Group) to advocate for the enactment of a UN Convention for older people to mandate governments to create programs and infrastructures to lift older people out of poverty, abuse and isolation.

(5) That the older people and advocates in Liberia engage with policy makers in Liberia to ratify the African Protocol on the Rights of Older People in Africa to mandate governments to create

Programs and infrastructures to lift older people out of poverty, abuse and isolation.

(6) That advocacy groups for older people strive to create an environment for generational engagement to include young people in their advocacy campaign for the rights of and improved services for older people.

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