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Psycho-Social problems of elderly during the time of pandemic and ways towards its solutions: A social work study on India

*“The old can go through every plague”.
His lines shows us the way of wisdom to take the golden aged population together integrating them through the process of our pains, sorrows, struggle and recoup as we live through this troubled times.*

Albert Camus

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the face of the earth and future seems to be uncertain for many vulnerable groups. Among them, the golden population are the group who are silently succumbing to the mixed negative emotions of fear, doubts, insecurities, risks and even a taboo or a stigma of, having a least resilience and immunity to the infection, even to an extent of being called a source of community spread due to their higher severity, prolong illness and fatality of the infection. The reason being their prior existing health infirmities.

Therefore, this paper is an effort towards drawing the attention of the Government agencies, NGOs and other stakeholders of the society to the different aspect of problems of the most revered sections of the society during this global tragic time of Covid-19 Lockdown. The present study wants to overview the problems the golden populations are silently suffering using the content analysis methodology. The researcher made use of secondary source data and the relevant and comprehensive literature on the subject. And as a Social Work professional, help giving appropriate suggestions for effective solutions to help the elderly move ahead in this crisis not only as a takes but as a crisis responders for different tasks at hand for the country as a caregivers, health workers, volunteers and community leaders.

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Introduction

The causative agent of COVID-19 or Novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 is definitely less deadly than its earlier congeners SARS and MERS. But it has very high risk of human to human transmission due to its contagious nature. Many International and National reports, have confirmed that the severity and fatality of the infection is higher in the golden aged population who are susceptible; due to their suppressed immune and body reserves, multiple associated co-morbidities like diabetes, hypertension, chronic kidney disease and obstructive pulmonary disease, under-detection of symptoms and other chronic medical problems hence increasing the mortality rate of elderly section.

The Census 2011, shows the elderly population are nearly 104 million (53 million females and 51 million males) that makes it the world's second-largest after China. The elderly comprises of aged 60 years and above in India. Both the share and size of elderly population is increasing over time from 5.6% (1961) the proportion has increased to 8.6% (2011). The majority 73 million live in the rural areas, and 41 million live in urban areas.

There are many elderly physiological and psycho-social health concerns that are alarmingly rising due to many structural and functional changes in the society and role change in the family that has affected the life of elderly in many ways. More so during the lockdown due to many factors like growing anxiety due to daily updates of rise of the new cases and deaths of elderly, elderly neglect and abuse, age-based discrimination due to age-specific vulnerability that has triggered elderly abuse and stigma.

Objectives of the Research

1. To know about the Psycho-Social problems of elderly during the time of pandemic.
2. To analyze the ways towards its solutions with the help of Social Work study.

Methodology

In this study, the researcher made use of secondary source data and the relevant and comprehensive literature on the subject.

Analysis of Some Issues of Elderly during the lockdown

COVID 19 not only had a worse impact on their health but also the economy.

Normally more than 1/3rd of the elderly in India live below the poverty line and 1/3rd just above it. With the pandemic the economy is badly hit with further loss of opportunity of employment for various reasons:

- Developed fear psychosis of going out and contracting infection,
- Huge competition looming on job market and
- Unemployment scenario of the main bread winner in most of the family.

Such job loss in the market would have the worse impact on fulfillment of their basic necessities of life along with medical expenses. (The elder story: ground reality during covid 19 Impact & challenges nationwide survey a Helpage India Report (June 2020)

Due to stringent practice of social distancing that has made their life so secluded and socially isolated. The social distancing and confinement in their houses and institution for such a long time have already started showing negative results in their poor mental wellbeing and affected their feeling of sense of social inclusion.(The elder story: ground reality during covid 19 impact & challenges nationwide survey, A help age India report, (June 2020)

The survey has brought about the details about the vulnerabilities and fears of the elderly on the situation of pandemic. The kind of fears of elderly is broadly clustered in 3 categories:

The 38 % of elderly feared of getting infected by COVID 19 through Socializing but at the same if they don't go out they feared Loss of Income.

The 34% of elderly had fear of loss of Economy, work and followed by starvation.

The considerable number of elderly population i.e. 12% had fear on their Low Immunity levels, travelling around and community spread. (The elder story: ground reality during covid 19 impact & challenges nationwide survey, A Help Age India report (June 2020)

The health and well-being of older adults is affected by the level of social activity and the mood states. Researchers have reported the negative effects of loneliness on health in old age (Heikkinen et al.1995).

Social isolation is a major risk factor for functional difficulties in older persons. Loss of important relationships can lead to feelings of emptiness and depression. (*Hanson & Carpenter, 1994*).

Social Work and Elder Abuse: Professional social workers have a special responsibility and unique task and contributions in relation to the prevention of, investigation and intervention into cases of physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect of older people.Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work' (IFSW 2012).

Physiological:

As of August 07, 2020, the Coronavirus Cases has risen to 2,034,593 at 06:59 GMT. The virus has already taken the lives of some 5,608 people and the death rates for elderly is much higher than the global average that has started showing pressure on the health and social protection systems.

The elderly are not only the depended population but they are even working as a frontline workers in different hospitals, health care centers, elderly homes as older home-based carers. Hence, exposing themselves to the risks of virus in the situations where health care systems especially the long-term care facilities are not up to the mark.

The recent age – wise comparative study among hospitalized cases of COVID-19 had very conspicuous features of higher susceptibility of the golden population (aged 50 above years) to the infection due to the following:

- Prolonged duration of hospital stay
- Slow and sluggish clinical recovery
- Acute Lung Infection
- Faster development and progress of the infection
- Ultimately higher Mortality Rate.
- Increased requirement and use of mechanical ventilation and oxygen therapy
- Declined lymphocytes and C-reactive protein in the blood that acts as an agents to suitable immune response to the virus.
- Issues with decreased mobility
- Prolonged Chronic illnesses (like diabetes, hypertension, pneumonitis, osteoarthritis and cognitive decline)
- Multiple medications (polypharmacy) and increased need for hospitalizations health-care need and physical support due to various pre-existing health problems.

There are many physiological limitations and infirmities related to the Sensory problems like problems in vision, hearing that can work as a big hindrance to good health practices for the prevention, protection and promotion of good health against the virus.

During the pandemic situation there is scarcity and struggle for the elderly to even avail the provision of testing kits that can result in less detection of the cases of infection that can put them at risk to become asymptomatic carriers.

The elderly are undergoing lot of negative emotions of fear, panic-attacks, self-isolation and stigma for not only being the potential population for being the source but also highest risks of infection, lack or inadequate Family care, avoiding the early signs of infections by the family for early tests for proper diagnosis and treatment, Self-medication has already proved fatal for many elderly therefore Medical advice is the best choice for any clarification if any health problem arises.

Psychological:

The Psycho-social problems are the most complex issues in the elderly that can be represented in many hidden, direct or indirect ways that are symptomatic in their thinking, moods, and behavior. The mental health problem that has been diagnosed or underdiagnosed can be helped timely by the well qualified mental health professional if the families are sensitive to them.

The unpredictable situation of pandemic with worldwide lockdown and varied associated problems that are discussed in the family, in the news or on other media etc. has given rise to the high level of stress, signs of excessive panic, depression, sleep problems or suicidal tendency. The GOI, NGOs and many institutions are extending their hands to support the mental health conditions of elderly with their direct hel-

plines with features of timely service, a good web resource round the clock support like Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFw) .GOI ; NIMHANS, AIIMS, and Help Age India.

Although the scenario of neglect, insensitiveness, abuse has been the common features against an elderly in their own homes, health care institution, elderly home care facilities, long term care institution etc. It got added with trauma of stigma and discrimination during the pandemic crisis with the several incidences like they were left out without the health care facilities against the conditions related or not related to COVID-19, faced age related discrimination on medical care, triage, life-saving therapies and drastic reduction or neglect on the non-COVID-19 health issues.

With every passing day of the lockdown due to the pandemic the golden population are experiencing many Psycho-social vulnerability there is increasing incidences of violence inflicted upon the depended elderly and there are big challenges on their essential – care that are indispensable for the elderly care and support. The golden populations have been suffering with Isolation, negligence, loneliness, abuse, anxiety, uncertainty and poor- nourishment in different setups. The recent report has indicated that the elderly are at increased risk of Grief and bereavement depressive disorders, insomnia and chronic stress due high percentage of elderly deaths or quarantine that has distanced them from their loved ones. There is alarming concern on the rise of post-traumatic stress syndrome, if the stress is prolonged and rise in the case of under-reported suicide cases:

Mental Health:

The country-wide lock down has augmented the mental pressure or stress and has brought about a damaging effect on the well-being and mental health of this vulnerable golden population. Due to higher risk factors or the elderly being vulnerable to the infection that is causing lot of frailty and fatality. There have been many reports that have indicated increasing mental health issues among elderly. There are instances of neglect or mistreatment violence, abuse, in the various Care Homes, Long Term Care homes or even in their own homes that is taking a distressing toll on the lives of elderly. The plight does get augmented when they face high mental health Vulnerability and risks during the time they are quarantined or on a long lockdown with their caregivers. As we all know, as a person age they become a childlike in their behavior and they seek for more love and warmth to help them keep up with their mental health.

But due to Covid, the practice of social distancing is keeping them locked within the four walls of their homes robbed off of their recreational time with their friends, of their age; in the park or around their homes, visiting the worship places etc. That has caused lot of distress, boredom and depression in a long run. The mental health risk is higher if an elderly are living alone due to loss of the partners or children being away from their homes for work.

The elderly are facing digital challenges during the lock down as they have to fully depend on digital world to stay in touch with their near and dear ones, payments and to carry on with day today work and responsibilities. This has brought them at high risks of many unforeseeable consequences due to increasing dependency. Due to this the social distancing might be a big challenge as they have to depend on the various individuals of several specialties involved in their care and support, including care takers or any domestic help for those staying alone or afford to have service providers.

The mental health of elderly are affected with fear and anxiety amidst multiple information and misinformation that are sourced from different modes that gets entangled with their personal insecurities and worries for their own life and the family lives in their absence

Economical:

As far as economic repercussion of covid-situation on the golden population are concerned. They are the most vulnerable of all, as they are the depended adults on their younger family members. If they have a source of income flow through pensions or any kind of insurance that also adds a lot of challenge; that includes digital use and the elderly are not allowed to venture out so en-cashing with physical presence is impossible, due to their high susceptibility to the virus that adds to their stress and mental trauma. Prior to covid there was good rise in the elderly participation in the labour force. But now with the lockdown scenario and things moving fast towards hyper-technology use, the employability of elderly is decreasing with lowering income among them. The impacts on income and long periods of isolation could have a serious effect on the mental health of elderly. In developing country like India the provision of Social protection as a safety net is sizable due to coverage gaps with very less percentage of older persons of retirement age receiving a pension. Therefore, the question of economic well-being of elderly is a serious concern as they are financially hard pressed for their many daily needs and others due to pandemic situation like those in isolation or quarantine need, special care with concern to adequate nutrition, telephonic counseling, digital contact with family etc.

Social-Economic well-being:

The social vulnerabilities of golden population are varied and multi-dimensional. The elderly living in their own homes, single (spouse dead), children away from them are going through very isolated and depressing time and more so in the case of elderly living in perilous conditions on the street, disserted, being isolated in the refugee camps, informal settlements and as an inmate in the prisons are at a greater risk due to many factors like

- Congested situations,
- Lack or inadequate access to health care support and services,
- Lack or inadequate supply of clean water and hygienic environment.
- Lack or potential challenges to accessing humanitarian support and assistance.

The Post-Covid scenario has affected the social life of the elderly as they are restricted to free movement outside of their homes to meet their friend at different spots in the community like parks, place of worship etc. The golden population are feeling threatened as they are experiencing severe boredom with loss of their social networks of friend, the access to proper health services, their jobs and their pensions. The physical distancing has really affected the lives of elderly and even has become one of the conspicuous causes of mortality.

Solutions

Elderly across the world are the most valued citizens of the country. They are the power-house of knowledge that comes with their real experience that they have endured through their own trial and errors, persistence and unshakable spirit. The enriching knowledge, their best practices and the stories of their resilience against many odds, calamities, disasters and diseases they have faced and have overcome could be good footprints to follow to fight against/overcome this deadly Covid-19 pandemic situation.

COVID-19 comes with an array of threats particularly for elderly even though person of all age groups are at an equal risk of contracting COVID-19, older persons are at a significantly higher risk of death and severe illness. Therefore, we all as a society need to value our golden population to keep them healthy, happy by promoting active ageing to receive the fruits of much-valued contributions they make in our society at large. It is important to ensure proper planning to build a very caring environments that advocates healthy ageing and ensures human rights and dignity of elderly

Many International and National both GOI and NGOs like WHO (World Health Organization) and CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) have issued an updated data and safety measures for the elderly during COVID-19, with a precise Health Advisory and stringent actions to prevent the further spread of COVID-19, including nation-wide lockdown. It is very crucial for each one of us as a citizen of the country to follow the protocols and take required precautions to break the chain of transmission of the disease.

The policy has to thrust on the immediate and long-term action or responses required on some key priorities in order to reduce or minimize the devastating social and economic impact of COVID-19 on older persons through both the crisis and the recovery phase. Therefore, the transmission of COVID-19, among the golden population can be contained with following measures such as:

Health care facility:

Considering the huge population in India it is very difficult on the part of the government to ensure proper health care, racing parallel with the very fast growing needs, especially during this crisis and challenging times. But all of us must understand that Health care is a human right, and every life has equal value. Therefore any serious

and tough health-care decisions that directly or indirectly affect the golden populations are all being guided by a pledge to dignity and the right to health for all. The elderly being the most vulnerable section of the population during these tough times of covid-19 are faced with high risks of multiple problems like difficulties of access to health care facilities that gets associated with age discrimination, neglect, maltreatment and violence at their own homes or in residential institutions. Such age related discrimination that reflects complete loss of reverence for the elderly, needs to be stringently monitored, regulated.

Few directives and best practices given by the government for the care and support of the golden population have to be followed religiously.

- Since they are most vulnerable groups its best practice to stay home and avoid going out or meeting people.

- Ensure the best practice of maintaining their hands and respiratory hygiene.

- The elderly should rely on Tele-consultations that have been started by many central Government institutes like NIMHANS (Bengaluru), AIIMS (New Delhi), PGI (Chandigarh) and CMC (Vellore) and even by other private set-ups. If in case of emergencies, there are Emergency services opened for 24x7. It is best to avoid the hospital set-ups for any kind of elective surgeries unless complicated during the pandemic.

Social Care and Support:

Every individual has a right to be loved, protected and included to be part of the group, unit of the society through the entire thick and thins of life. Therefore, the Government and National and International NGOs are advocating on strengthening the social support measures and targeted care for older persons strongly emphasizing on social inclusion and solidarity during physical distancing. Due to lock down the practice of physical distancing and restrictions on freedom of movement have become mandatory that has affected or disrupted the supply/access of essential care and support for older persons. Therefore, it's vital for every family or institution to maintain social support, cooperation and cohesion or closeness with the elderly to optimize their daily needs and living requirements for their all-round support. Physical distancing should be substituted with social connection/contacts, meeting and interaction with their near and dear ones by increasing their access to digital technologies that helps in enhancing psycho-socio and emotional supports.

- In order to uphold the elderly rights to information, the GOI have arranged to update the citizens about the datas related to covid-19.

- Their safety remain the matter of grave concern that's the reason the GOI and the National and International Organisation in the country are releasing many updated safety measures the elderly have to follow for their wellbeing.

- The elderly with sensory or cognitive difficulties are taken care with the updates about the latest status of the pandemic scenario in the country and also about the local

areas and the essential precautions/preventive measures that they have to be taken, is explained in a simple terms so as to avoid confusion.

Economic support

The global forum like UN and many National and International organisations have come forward to make a strong call for the financial support for the countries that are likely to experience the devastating humanitarian crises with the worse human and economic impact of pandemic. Therefore, the elderly being the most vulnerable section of the population are to be cared and supported through the crisis not only as the receivers but even as the mainstream participants in the fight against the pandemic and its repercussions. The more urgent and ambitious response is needed to meet the Goals with following few steps:

- Sharing their knowledge of past experiences of endurances, good practices during the time of crisis and their relevant data and documents.
- Expand participation of eligible older adults in the economic revival of the country to restore the loss of Average National Income by harnessing their experience and expertise.
- The GOI is broadening its partnerships with civil society and others to ensure their inclusion in shaping and amending the policies that affect their lives
- The older adults have to be involved in consultation for their protection, promotion and engagement in the productivity of the country in different sectors harnessing their unique knowledge, expertise and wider experiences for their sustainability and self-reliance.

Legal and policy support

The senior citizens being the most revered members of the society needs to have a special focus in the planning, execution and implementation of any socio-economic and humanitarian response to the Pandemic that is based on their active participation. The age-discrimination in terms of care and support through preventive, protective and promotive health care is a cause of concern and is alarming that has added their vulnerability in this crisis.

Therefore, to address the issues it's vital to strengthen the legal and policy framework both at national and international levels to advocate and protect the human rights of older adults that guarantees universal health coverage, social protection through a strong legal formulation and implementation.

Psychological security and safety

Psychological security and safety is one of the pivotal area that is intangible but plays a great role in bringing up the quality of life of elderly. The prevailing stigma, discrimination ignorance and indifference towards the aged should be replaced with inclusion of elderly with Innovative approaches and relevant socio-economic char-

acteristics, are essential to effective public policy making that is backed by evidence and data disaggregated not only by only age, but also sex that gives visibility of older persons in public data analysis.

Conclusions

It really feels sad to be talking about the psycho-social problems of elderly in the country like India where the elderly had been living the life of reverence, dignity and accomplishment traditionally. But the recent reports reflecting the daily conversation of people doing rounds in the social media and electronic media about elderly with high vulnerability of being infected with covid-19 and they being the potential source of community spread has only been alleviating the problems of these golden populations during this uncertain lockdown times. These situations are not only affecting their mental health and its wellbeing, but hampering all aspects of their lives robbing them off of the meager sources of income leaving them with despair. The elderly with dependency on their younger members of family and paid carers are facing all kind of psycho-social and health problems due to world's largest lockdown with stringent mandate of social-distancing to break the chain of spread of virus. The repercussion of Covid-19 on Socio-physio-psychological health has impacted the immunity and can increase proneness to infections. In their own houses and Institutional care homes they are facing social segregation, Overcrowding, neglect, abuse, poor self-care, denial of medical care disrupting their human rights and self-dignity impacting their mood, appetite and sleep. In the case of many elderly people living alone they are struggling with basic amenities like food, domestic utilities and hygiene along with the lingering fear of the pandemic.

With the thoughtful initiative of the GOI and the International and National NGOs many preventative, protective and promotive measures are being adapted besides the mandatory lock-down and social distancing/physical distancing.

Therefore, the families and caregivers for elderly are given to follow many Dos and Don'ts to keep the elderly disease-free, spirited and mentally fit like World Health Organization's three-pronged strategy social distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene :Staying at home, Avoid meeting visitors or maintain a distance of one meter, Wash your hands and face at regular intervals with soap and water, Sneeze and cough and dispose of the tissue papers/ wash your handkerchief, Ensure proper nutrition with water and all kinds of fruits, Exercise and meditation, take the prescribed medicines regularly, keep in touch with family members ,relatives, friends via call or video conferencing, Talk to family members to take necessary help, Postpone elective surgeries if any, if they are not urgent/emergency, keep the surrounding clean on every day basis, monitor your health regularly if in case of any symptoms its advised to visit the nearest health care facility and strictly follow the medical advice being given and the last but not the least to reduce the 'Digital screen time' to reduce the level of anxiety and follow best practices with positivity.

Hence, 'ageism' should not be a prevalent 'social evil' but boon to the family, society country and the world as a whole.

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