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Active Ageing to Combat Declining Family Support for Elderly Care in Nepal

Based on the peer-reviewed publication Compernelle 2015 in *International Journal of Sociology*¹

Elderly care services and opportunities for economic independence are needed for older people in Nepal. Increases in education and international travel are among some of the causes that have led to declining support for the care of ageing Nepali parents. Education exposes individuals to Western values of independence and personal fulfilment, as well as new socialization forces with peers that emphasize personal freedom. Meanwhile, travel fosters a sense of individualism through reduced parental authority. Although government support for elderly care services does exist for older people in Nepal, the support is not sufficient.

This policy brief emphasizes the need for opportunities for economic independence for the elderly to embrace active ageing, and the additional provision of shelter homes.



Photo: Loritta Chan

Research Context

- Over the past few decades, Nepal's ageing population has been steadily growing.
- From 1981 to 2011, the percentage of elderly aged over 60 in Nepal's total population increased from 5.7% to 8.1%.²
- The ageing index³, has increased from 6.28% in 1911 to 15.50% in 2011, and is projected to increase to 35% by 2035, while the dependency rate has increased from 7.5% to 14.05% during the same years.⁴ This creates pressure on society and government finances to support the elderly, and increases demand for health services, housing and family care.⁵
- With the growing ageing population and increased out-migration of young adults, care services and opportunities for economic independence for Nepali elders must be emphasized in the coming years.

Data Source

This policy brief is based on a peer-reviewed publication¹ that analyzes data from the Chitwan Valley Family Study (CVFS) — a comprehensive mixed method panel study of individuals, families, and communities in the Chitwan Valley of Nepal.

The Chitwan Valley Family Study investigates the relationships between changing social contexts, environmental factors, land use, and population processes. CVFS data include individual interviews with full life histories for more than 10,000 individuals; tracking and interviews with all migrants; household assets, income, production, and consumption; continuous measurement of community change; more than 20 years of demographic event registry; and data linking human and natural systems.

Findings: Declining Family Support for Elderly Care

According to a study conducted in the Chitwan Valley, increases in education and international travel are two of the reasons that have led to decreasing support for care of ageing parents. In particular, support for sons to take care of ageing parents has decreased, suggesting a gradual social change as sons were historically expected to take up this responsibility. This emphasizes the importance of nonfamily initiatives to address this gap in care, and also to provide opportunities for the elderly to sustain their livelihoods.¹

Education and International Travel Exposes Individuals to New Values

Apart from the higher trend of out-migration of young adults for higher income and better opportunities², research shows that additional years of education has led to decreased support for men and women to care for ageing parents. Firstly, education exposes the individual to new socialization forces outside the family. Individuals spend more time with similar-aged peers, and such inter-

actions emphasize personal freedom but less on traditional notions of collectivism. Education leads to shifts in attitudes that continue into adulthood. Secondly, Nepal's education adopts from Western models that promote values of independence, personal fulfilment and financial success, which shapes expectations away from traditional family orientations. The effect is greater for males than females. While education can improve one's life chances, values of family and parental care should continue to be emphasized.

International travel also leads to similar shifts. International travel not only exposes the individual to new landscapes and new beliefs, but travelling also fosters a sense of individualism through reduced parental authority and increased financial independence. Contrary to education, the effect of international travel on women's attitudes towards elderly care is greater than that of men, particularly when international travel occurs later in life.

The Need for Elderly Support and Current Policies

As people age, they encounter illnesses such as hypertension, arthritis, back pain, gastritis, mental illness, diabetes and asthma.² Major causes of deaths in Nepal are chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (9.2%), ischaemic heart disease (9.2%), stroke (8.2%) and lower respiratory infections (7%).⁶ Likewise, neuropsychiatric disorders are estimated to contribute to 11.0% of the global burden of disease⁷ in 2012.

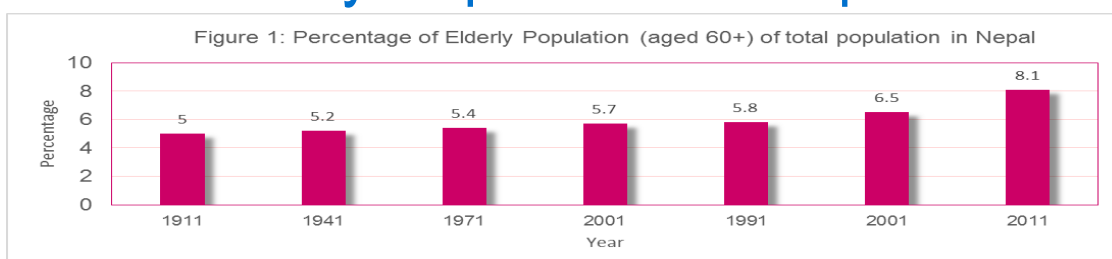
Currently, the Nepal government gives 2,000 rupees (around USD 18.70) per month as social security allowance where 1,000 is for elderly allowance and 1,000 is for medical allowance. However, it has been poorly implemented.⁸ There are also very few elderly shelters operating through the government sector. Currently, there is one in *Pashupati*, Kathmandu and another in *Devghat*, Tanahun district. However, these shelters are situated within Hindu holy places, thus not accounting for other

elderly from different religious beliefs. Furthermore, these shelters are situated apart from the socially and economically active areas which instills feelings of loneliness in the elderly.

Opportunities for Older Women

The number of elderly women is increasing as they have a longer life expectancy than men. The percentage of elderly females has increased from 47.99% in 1981 to 51.01% in 2011⁴, and the ratio of widowhood for females (25.1%) is still high compared to males (9.40%).⁹ Loss of spouse and loneliness as a consequence of reduced social network influences their quality of life and they experience a 66% increased likelihood of dying within the first three months after a spouse's death.¹⁰ With less social support, widows require more opportunities and support networks to combat the effects of loneliness, become self-sufficient and improve their quality of life.

Elderly Population in Nepal²



Policy Implications

With Nepal's growing ageing population and declining support for children, particularly sons, caring for ageing parents, the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nepal should promote economic opportunities for older people to continue contributing to their household and community.

Seed Grants and Older People-led Cooperatives

Similar projects to HelpAge's HOPE project should be further expanded across Nepal, particularly in the Hill region where there is a greater elderly population. With a seed grant to establish a small business such as bee-farming and supporting training workshops, elderly improve the quality of their life through satisfaction of continued economic productivity and regained dignity. With their earned income, they can purchase materials for their family and also afford health services. This not only improves their physical and mental well-being, but through these workshops, they also establish new positive support networks.

Additional Support for Old-age Widowed Women

In addition to seed grants, there should also be tailored workshops towards elderly widowed women to provide a comfortable space for them to meet other widows and establish new support networks. In these workshops, these women can also learn of government provisions specifically for them such as social security programs.

More Shelter Homes that Accommodate Different Backgrounds

The government should also expand the number of shelter homes towards other regions, and also areas which accommodate elderly who are from different religions. Current government-run shelter homes for the elderly are only situated in Hindu holy places and do not accommodate those from other religious beliefs. They also have unfriendly infrastructure and amenities for the elderly.

Conclusion

Increases in education and international travel lead to decreased support for the care of ageing parents. Care must be taken to facilitate learning family care values. More shelter homes and opportunities for economic independence should be provided for the elderly, particularly women. The government should establish more elderly care homes with adequate facilities, not only in the holy places but also in the town and economically active areas. In addition, more attention should be given to old-age widowed women as they suffer from less social support.

Case Study: Older People-led Cooperatives from HelpAge International Nepal

In order to improve the economic independence of the elderly, HelpAge has partnered with two local groups to implement the "Helping Older People through Active Ageing" project (HOPE) which involves providing seed grants to elderly through a community-based microcredit and revolving fund system.

Once they receive a seed grant, they can establish small-scale businesses to earn income and even contribute to the household, such as purchasing books for their grandchildren. The HOPE project also provides skills-based workshops and trainings on income-generation and financial management.

As these projects become more established, Older People-led cooperatives facilitate additional microfinance services, and encourage more elderly people from other neighborhoods to also join. As of May 2014, this project has been implemented in 6 districts and 24 villages, directly benefiting 4,329 beneficiaries.

Such financial cooperatives can improve the poverty and marginalized conditions of elderly, especially when it is difficult for older people to be eligible for loans without a steady income. Older people also regain a sense of self-respect from such opportunities for economic independence, thereby actively fulfilling the idea of **active ageing**, which is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security, in order to enhance the quality of life as people age. Active ageing does not only refer to ensuring adequate protection, security and care but also the continued ability to contribute to the household and their community.¹¹



Photo: Loritta Chan

Footnotes and References

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