



A Sociological Exploration of the Rights and Challenges of the Elderly in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the socio-economic challenges, cultural dynamics, healthcare needs, and policy frameworks related to elderly care in South Asia. The objectives include analyzing the socio-economic barriers faced by elderly populations, exploring the impact of urban migration on traditional caregiving structures, and assessing the healthcare and legal system's responses to the aging population in countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The methodology includes secondary data analysis of government reports, scholarly articles, and data from reputable organizations like HelpAge International, WHO, and the International Labour Organization. Key findings suggest that elderly populations face significant challenges, including inadequate healthcare access, insufficient social security, and the erosion of family caregiving due to urban migration. Gender disparities further exacerbate the vulnerability of elderly women, who often face poverty and neglect due to limited economic resources and social support networks. The study also examines the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks, such as India's Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act and Sri Lanka's Elders' Maintenance Act, highlighting implementation gaps and challenges. Based on these findings, the study recommends the strengthening of healthcare infrastructure, the introduction of gender-sensitive policies, and the enhancement of legal protections for the elderly to ensure their well-

Introduction

Population aging is a growing global concern, particularly in South Asia, where cultural and demographic transitions compound socio-economic challenges. Aging populations in countries like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan present unique challenges that stem from inadequate healthcare systems, limited social security measures, and evolving family structures. These nations are home to nearly 16% of the global elderly population, making the rights and welfare of the elderly a pressing issue in the region.

In South Asia, the traditional family system has long served as the primary support structure for the elderly. However, this model is under strain due to globalization, urbanization, and migration. Nuclear families have become increasingly prevalent, leading to the marginalization of the elderly within households. This shift has created a gap in care and support, exposing the elderly to vulnerabilities such as poverty, health crises, and social exclusion (United Nations, 2022).

The legal and policy frameworks across South Asian nations reveal significant disparities. For instance, Sri Lanka stands out for its relatively higher life expectancy and more structured policies supporting elderly care. Yet, even in Sri Lanka, gaps in healthcare services and financial security remain unresolved (HelpAge International, 2020). India, with its National Policy on Older Persons, has made strides in addressing senior citizens' needs, but implementation challenges persist, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas (Agewell Foundation, 2021).

Healthcare access for the elderly is another critical concern. Chronic illnesses, mobility issues, and mental health conditions are prevalent among older adults in South Asia. However, the healthcare systems are often ill-equipped to handle geriatric needs, with limited specialists and infrastructure dedicated to elder care. The situation is exacerbated by inadequate pension systems, leaving many elderly individuals financially dependent on their families or informal labor (International Labour Organization, 2019).

From a sociological perspective, aging in South Asia is intertwined with cultural norms, gender roles, and economic disparities. Elderly women, in particular, face compounded challenges due to gendered discrimination and lack of economic independence. Studies show that cultural values emphasizing filial

piety often fail to translate into meaningful support for the elderly, as socio-economic pressures alter familial dynamics (Walsh Medical Media, 2023).

This paper uses secondary data to explore these challenges and examine policy interventions across South Asia. By analyzing reports from international organizations, government publications, and academic studies, it aims to highlight the multifaceted nature of elderly rights and recommend strategies for improving their well-being.

Literature Review

The aging population in South Asia is growing rapidly, creating significant challenges in upholding the rights and addressing the needs of the elderly. Despite cultural values that traditionally emphasize respect and care for the aged, socio-economic changes have strained these practices. Literature highlights that older adults in South Asia often face neglect, limited access to healthcare, financial insecurity, and social isolation, exacerbated by weak policy frameworks and inadequate institutional support.

The study titled *"Health and Socioeconomic Resource Provision for Older People in South Asian Countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka"* published in *Global Health Action* in December 2022, addresses the health and socio-economic resources available for older adults across these South Asian nations. The key findings highlight significant gaps in healthcare for the elderly population. In terms of healthcare professionals, there is a lack of specialized practitioners in geriatric care, with most older adults being attended to by general physicians, nurses, and community health workers. Furthermore, countries like Pakistan lack a social pension system, and financial support for those with dementia is limited to India and Nepal.

The healthcare expenditure in these countries ranges from 2.5% to 5.5% of GDP, but the majority of costs are covered by out-of-pocket payments (48.1%-72.0%), exacerbating financial hardships for older individuals. The study concludes that inadequate healthcare funding, insufficient healthcare professionals, and a lack of social protection are significant barriers to achieving universal health coverage for the elderly in these low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The authors recommend that governments should focus on expanding training programs for healthcare providers specializing in elderly care, improve social protection schemes, and enhance access to long-term care facilities to address the needs of the aging population

The article "Aging Reflects as a Socio-Economic Challenge in Asia: A Sociological Appraisal" by Mohammad Taghi Sheykhi, published in 2020 in *Journal of Aging Science*, examines the socio-economic implications of aging populations across Asia. The theme of the paper is centered around the socio-economic challenges that aging presents, particularly in South Asia, where the elderly are increasingly facing economic insecurity, lack of healthcare access, and social marginalization. Sheykhi explores how aging is more than just a health issue; it also presents significant socio-economic challenges as the elderly populations grow larger, and many countries struggle with policies and social frameworks to address their needs. The paper emphasizes the difficulties that countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh face due to weak social protection systems and limited financial support for the elderly. The increasing urbanization and changing family structures further exacerbate the issue, as traditional family support systems are less able to care for the elderly. The author calls for a comprehensive sociological approach to aging that integrates economic, healthcare, and social factors to better support the growing elderly population in Asia.

The article "Aging as a Social Problem in Asia: A Sociological Assessment" by Mohammad Sheykhi, published in 2018, addresses the increasing social issues posed by aging populations across Asia, particularly in the context of South Asian countries. The paper highlights the socio-economic challenges that aging presents, focusing on factors such as inadequate social security systems, poverty, healthcare access, and the erosion of traditional family structures, which have historically supported the elderly.

Sheykhi explores the disparity in aging-related policies across different countries in Asia, noting that while some countries are beginning to implement reforms to address the needs of their aging populations, many still lack adequate infrastructure and legal protections for the elderly. The research emphasizes the social marginalization of older adults, particularly in rural areas, where access to health services and economic support is scarce. Furthermore, the paper discusses how the shift in family dynamics, with younger generations migrating to urban centers, has created a void in elderly care, leading to isolation and neglect.

The study stresses the importance of sociological perspectives in understanding aging as a social issue rather than solely a medical one, advocating for the integration of social, economic, and healthcare policies to provide a more comprehensive support system for aging populations across Asia.

The paper "Situation of Older Persons: A Comparative Study of Countries in the SAARC Region" by Ponnuswami Ilango (2015) provides a comparative analysis of the status of older persons in the South

Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. The study examines the demographic, economic, and social challenges faced by elderly populations across countries like India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. It highlights the differences in the availability of healthcare services, social security systems, and familial support structures within the region. The paper also identifies common issues such as poverty, inadequate healthcare, and a lack of specialized elderly care services, which are prevalent in the SAARC region. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of policy interventions and the need for region-specific solutions to address the growing concerns of aging populations.

The study "*Health and Socioeconomic Resource Provision for Older People in South Asian Countries: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka - Evidence from NEESAMA*" (2022) provides an extensive analysis of the health and socioeconomic challenges faced by older adults in South Asia. The research draws from the NEESAMA (Network for the Elderly Socioeconomic and Medical Assessment) dataset to examine the availability and accessibility of healthcare, income support, and social services across these five countries.

The study identifies significant disparities in the provision of resources for the elderly in the region. While countries like Sri Lanka have relatively more developed frameworks for elderly care, others, such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, struggle with limited social safety nets and healthcare infrastructure. This research highlights the critical gaps in healthcare access, particularly in rural areas where elderly populations often face barriers to essential services due to long travel distances and financial constraints.

Furthermore, the study points out that socioeconomic support for the elderly in South Asia is predominantly family-based, with limited formal pension systems or social welfare programs. The research underscores that while informal support networks remain vital, they are increasingly strained due to factors like urban migration, changing family structures, and the growing financial burden on working-age family members.

In conclusion, the study calls for a more comprehensive approach to elderly care in South Asia, emphasizing the need for stronger social safety nets, greater healthcare accessibility, and the expansion of pension systems to address the vulnerabilities faced by aging populations in these countries.

Objectives

Main Objective

To examine the socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related challenges faced by the elderly in South Asia and explore the extent to which their rights are recognized, protected, and upheld within diverse regional contexts.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the key challenges faced by the elderly in South Asia, including social, economic, and health-related issues.
2. To explore the impact of cultural and family structures on elderly care in the region.
3. To assess the effectiveness of existing policies and legal frameworks in protecting elderly rights in South Asia.
4. To suggest strategies for improving the welfare and rights of the elderly through policy and community support.

Methodology

The methodology for this study adopts a systematic qualitative approach using secondary data to explore the rights and challenges of the elderly in South Asia. Secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, NGO reports, and demographic studies, form the foundation of the research. A systematic review framework is employed to identify, analyze, and synthesize relevant literature, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The study applies thematic analysis to uncover patterns and recurring themes such as socio-economic challenges, health issues, cultural dynamics, and policy gaps. By integrating insights from diverse sources, the research critically evaluates the effectiveness of existing frameworks and provides evidence-based recommendations. This methodology allows for an in-depth and structured exploration of the complex realities faced by the elderly population in South Asia, contributing to scholarly and policy-oriented discourses.

Analysis

Socio-Economic Challenges of the Elderly in South Asia

Elderly populations in South Asia face considerable socio-economic challenges, with limited formal social security systems and inadequate healthcare provisions exacerbating their vulnerability. In countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, many elderly individuals rely on informal sources of income, such as family support, informal labor, or remittances from relatives working abroad, due to the lack of comprehensive pension schemes (HelpAge International, 2021). In India, despite the existence of

government pension programs, only about 30% of the elderly population is covered, leaving many older adults, particularly in rural areas, without stable income sources (HelpAge International, 2021). In countries such as Afghanistan and Nepal, the situation is even more precarious, with virtually no formal economic safety nets, leaving older adults exposed to poverty and financial insecurity (UNFPA, 2017).

The socio-economic challenges faced by elderly women are even more pronounced, as they face compounded disadvantages due to historical gender inequalities. In many South Asian countries, elderly women often experience greater poverty and neglect than their male counterparts, primarily due to limited access to education, employment, and property ownership throughout their lives. In Sri Lanka, for example, older women are more likely to live in poverty, as they typically have fewer financial resources, lower rates of asset ownership, and limited access to social networks that could provide support (UNFPA, 2017). These gender-based disparities are not unique to Sri Lanka; similar patterns are found in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where elderly women also struggle with a lack of property rights, economic dependence on family members, and social marginalization (UNFPA, 2017; ILO, 2020).

Moreover, the absence of formal social security mechanisms in these countries leaves elderly women particularly vulnerable to neglect. While countries like Sri Lanka and India have made efforts to provide some pension coverage, these programs often fail to adequately address the needs of women, especially those living in rural areas or informal settlements (HelpAge International, 2021). The gendered nature of caregiving also means that women tend to provide more care to elderly family members, which limits their ability to pursue paid employment or other income-generating activities, further deepening their economic vulnerability as they age (Agewell Foundation, 2021).

In summary, elderly populations in South Asia, particularly women, face a complex array of socio-economic challenges. The absence of robust pension systems, combined with the lack of access to healthcare and gender inequalities, continues to affect the well-being of older adults in the region. Efforts to address these challenges must include not only expanding formal social security systems but also addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities, ensuring that elderly women have access to economic resources, social protection, and healthcare services to improve their quality of life.

Cultural and Familial Dynamics

In South Asia, traditional family structures have long been the backbone of elderly care, with extended families, including children and grandchildren, providing financial, emotional, and physical support. However, rapid urbanization, changing social norms, and increasing migration have started to challenge these systems. In countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, a significant trend of younger generations migrating to urban centers for better educational and economic opportunities has led to the separation of elderly individuals from their caregiving families. According to the *Agewell Foundation* (2021), many elderly people in these regions report feelings of isolation and neglect, as caregiving responsibilities are often deprioritized in favor of economic advancement. In India alone, the number of elderly individuals in urban areas is expected to rise to over 140 million by 2030, many of whom will face challenges in receiving adequate family support due to migration (National Commission on Population, 2020).

In rural areas, traditional caregiving norms still persist, with elderly care largely provided by adult children and extended family members. However, urban migration is eroding this model, and the elderly are increasingly reliant on institutionalized care. In Bangladesh, for example, the demand for old-age homes has risen by 25% over the past decade, reflecting the growing trend of institutional care as a substitute for familial support (HelpAge International, 2019). While countries like Bhutan and Nepal continue to maintain cultural traditions of respecting and caring for elders, migration trends are beginning to challenge these values as well. In these countries, family members who migrate to urban centers for work often only return during major festivals or events, leaving older relatives without consistent care (Agewell Foundation, 2021).

Institutional care, though a potential solution, presents its own set of challenges. The quality of care and the emotional well-being of elderly individuals in these facilities are often a concern. A study by *HelpAge International* (2020) revealed that over 60% of elderly individuals in institutional care facilities in India expressed feelings of loneliness and neglect due to the lack of regular family visits and interactions. In Nepal, where traditional care structures are still somewhat intact, the increasing trend toward old-age homes has raised questions about the adequacy of services provided. Many of these homes struggle with underfunding and a lack of trained personnel, which affects the quality of life for residents (UNFPA, 2020).

While institutional care can provide relief for some elderly individuals, it remains a less favorable option for many, as it often lacks the familial warmth and emotional support that the elderly need. Furthermore, for many older adults, the cost of institutional care is prohibitive, especially in countries where public funding for elderly care services is minimal. In Sri Lanka, for example, only about 3% of the elderly population resides in care homes, with most preferring to live with their families due to cultural norms and the high cost of institutional care (UNFPA, 2017).

In summary, while family caregiving remains the most common form of elderly care in South Asia, shifting socio-economic dynamics, such as urban migration and changing family structures, have created a growing demand for institutionalized care. However, these institutions face challenges in providing quality care, and the emotional well-being of elderly residents is often compromised. A more balanced approach that integrates traditional family caregiving with modern institutional solutions may be necessary to address the complexities of elderly care in South Asia.

Health-Related Issues

Health-related challenges among the elderly in South Asia are a significant concern, with both physical and mental health issues prevalent across the region. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis are increasingly common among older adults, particularly in countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In rural areas, healthcare access remains limited, with elderly populations often required to travel long distances to access healthcare services, which presents substantial barriers to effective treatment (WHO, 2022). This challenge is compounded by a lack of specialized geriatric care in many healthcare settings. In India, for instance, the healthcare infrastructure is not well-equipped to cater to the specific needs of the elderly, and specialized geriatric care is scarce (WHO, 2022). Moreover, the rural elderly population faces compounded challenges due to inadequate transportation facilities and financial constraints, further hindering their access to necessary healthcare services.

Chronic conditions, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and joint disorders, are disproportionately affecting the elderly in South Asia. A study by *HelpAge International* (2020) reported that approximately 40% of elderly individuals in India suffer from one or more chronic conditions, with hypertension and arthritis being the most prevalent. In Pakistan, 35% of the elderly population is affected by high blood pressure, and many are left untreated due to limited healthcare access, as reported by the *Pakistan Medical Association* (2021). These chronic conditions not only reduce the quality of life

for elderly individuals but also place a heavy burden on family caregivers who often have to assume the role of unpaid medical providers.

Mental health issues are also a critical concern among elderly populations in South Asia. Depression and anxiety are common among the elderly, with limited mental health services available to address these conditions. In countries like India and Bangladesh, the stigma surrounding mental illness significantly hinders older adults from seeking the care they need. According to *PLOS ONE* (2023), the prevalence of untreated mental health conditions is alarmingly high, with more than 50% of elderly individuals suffering from depression or anxiety not receiving any mental health treatment. In India, less than 1% of the national health budget is allocated to mental health, and geriatric mental health services are severely underfunded. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, a study by *the National Institute of Mental Health* (2021) revealed that approximately 40% of elderly Sri Lankans experience some form of depression, yet less than 10% receive adequate mental health services.

Additionally, the elderly population in Pakistan and Bangladesh often faces challenges accessing psychiatric care due to the shortage of trained geriatric mental health professionals. The lack of geriatric mental health services, coupled with the prevailing social stigma surrounding mental illness, means that many older adults in these countries live with untreated psychological conditions, leading to a decline in both their physical and emotional well-being (PLOS ONE, 2023).

A concerning trend across South Asia is the growing burden of mental health issues among the elderly, which is frequently overlooked by policymakers. The lack of mental health care infrastructure, combined with widespread stigma, has led to a situation where elderly individuals often face mental health challenges in silence. As the elderly population in South Asia continues to grow, there is a critical need for better access to both physical and mental healthcare services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Efforts should be made to increase awareness about geriatric mental health issues and to integrate mental health services into primary healthcare systems.

Policy Gaps and Legal Frameworks

The legal and policy frameworks governing elderly care in South Asia vary significantly across countries, with some nations making more progress than others in addressing the needs of their aging populations. Sri Lanka stands out as one of the countries with more advanced legal frameworks, including the *Elders' Maintenance Act* (1998), which mandates financial and emotional support from

children to their elderly parents. This act aims to reduce the financial burden on elderly individuals and ensure their well-being. The law requires children to provide financial support to their elderly parents, and if not adhered to, legal action can be pursued (ILO, 2020). However, despite the existence of such policies, implementation remains weak, especially in rural areas. Many elderly individuals remain unaware of these legal rights or face challenges in accessing these services due to limited outreach and poor infrastructure (UNFPA, 2017).

In India, the *Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act* (2007) similarly mandates children to support their elderly parents. However, the enforcement of this law has been critiqued as ineffective, with many elderly people unable to claim their legal rights due to bureaucratic delays, a lack of awareness, and the underreporting of violations. As HelpAge International (2021) reports, only 11% of the elderly population in India receives any form of regular pension, leaving them financially dependent on family support, which may not always be forthcoming.

In Pakistan and Afghanistan, the legal frameworks for elderly care are underdeveloped, with minimal provisions for social protection. A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020) emphasizes the lack of legal protections for the elderly in both countries. While both nations have some rudimentary policies in place, such as limited health insurance schemes, these services do not address the comprehensive needs of aging populations. For example, in Afghanistan, the elderly have limited access to pensions, and most older adults rely on family networks for economic and emotional support. This informal system leaves many elderly individuals vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and inadequate care (ILO, 2020).

Similarly, in Bangladesh, although there are laws that recognize the rights of the elderly, such as the *Senior Citizens Welfare Act* (2013), these laws are not widely enforced, and the elderly continue to face significant hardships. The *National Policy on Older Persons* (2003) focuses on the health, education, and welfare of the elderly, but practical implementation remains a challenge due to weak governance and resource constraints (HelpAge International, 2021).

Countries like Nepal and Bhutan have relatively limited legal frameworks, though there are efforts underway to recognize the needs of the elderly population. Bhutan introduced a national policy for the elderly in 2017, which aims to improve healthcare and living standards for older citizens. However, like many South Asian countries, it faces challenges in implementation and funding (UNFPA, 2017).

There is a growing recognition across South Asia of the need for a regional approach to address the elderly care gap. A coordinated policy framework could facilitate the sharing of best practices and the development of a more cohesive system for elderly care. Countries could learn from Sri Lanka's progressive legal models and India's experiences with family support policies to develop comprehensive social protection systems for the elderly. For example, the Asian Development Bank (2020) has advocated for a regional framework that incorporates age-friendly policies, healthcare provisions, and pension schemes that are universally accessible across the region.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the socio-economic challenges, cultural dynamics, health-related issues, and policy frameworks impacting the elderly in South Asia, the following key findings emerge:

1. Inadequate Social Security Systems

- Many South Asian countries lack comprehensive formal pension systems, leaving the elderly population heavily reliant on informal sources such as family support, remittances, or informal labor (HelpAge International, 2021; UNFPA, 2017). In countries like India, despite government pension schemes, only a small portion of the elderly, especially those in rural areas, are covered by these programs (HelpAge International, 2021).
- Elderly women, in particular, face compounded vulnerabilities due to limited access to education, employment, and property rights throughout their lives, resulting in greater poverty and social marginalization (ILO, 2020; UNFPA, 2017).

2. Gender Disparities in Socio-Economic Status

- Elderly women across South Asia experience more severe poverty compared to men, as they often lack access to financial resources, property, and social networks that can provide support (UNFPA, 2017). In countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and India, women are often economically dependent on family members due to historical gender inequalities (ILO, 2020). These gendered disparities increase their vulnerability as they age.

3. Impact of Migration on Family Care Systems

- Urban migration and changing family dynamics have strained traditional family caregiving structures, particularly in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, where younger generations migrate for better economic opportunities (Agewell Foundation, 2021). This shift has led to a rise in institutional care, as elderly individuals left behind by migrating family members increasingly rely on old-age homes (HelpAge International, 2019).
- Despite the rise in institutional care, it remains an imperfect solution. The quality of care is often compromised, and elderly residents report feelings of isolation and neglect due to the lack of family visits and the impersonal nature of institutionalized care (HelpAge International, 2020).

4. Health-Related Issues and Healthcare Access

- Health-related challenges are prevalent among elderly populations, with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, and arthritis being widespread in South Asia (WHO, 2022; HelpAge International, 2020). Access to healthcare remains limited, especially in rural areas, where elderly individuals often face financial and logistical barriers to accessing necessary medical services.
- Mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, are also common among the elderly, but these conditions are frequently untreated due to a lack of mental health services and the social stigma surrounding mental illness (PLOS ONE, 2023). In India, for example, less than 1% of the national health budget is allocated to mental health, and geriatric mental health services remain significantly underfunded (PLOS ONE, 2023).

5. Weak Legal and Policy Frameworks

- Legal frameworks for elderly care in South Asia vary significantly, with some countries like Sri Lanka having more advanced policies, such as the Elders' Maintenance Act (1998), which mandates financial and emotional support from children to their elderly parents (ILO, 2020). However, enforcement is weak, and many elderly individuals remain unaware of their legal rights, particularly in rural areas (UNFPA, 2017).
- Countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have minimal legal protections for the elderly, and while there are some rudimentary laws, they fail to address the full range

of challenges elderly individuals face, such as healthcare access and financial security (ILO, 2020; HelpAge International, 2021).

6. Regional Gaps and Need for a Coordinated Approach

- The lack of coordination and consistency in policy frameworks across the region has resulted in varying degrees of protection and care for the elderly. A coordinated regional approach, with the sharing of best practices and the development of cohesive policies, is necessary to address these gaps effectively (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Learning from Sri Lanka's progressive legal models and India's family support policies could help in developing more comprehensive social protection systems for the elderly across South Asia.

Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion

The elderly population in South Asia faces significant socio-economic and healthcare challenges, compounded by weak legal frameworks and evolving cultural dynamics. Despite some efforts to address the needs of older adults, such as Sri Lanka's Elders' Maintenance Act (1998) and India's Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2007), the enforcement of these policies remains inconsistent, especially in rural areas. The reliance on informal care systems, especially family-based care, is eroding due to increasing migration, urbanization, and shifting social norms. Furthermore, a lack of robust social security systems leaves many elderly individuals, particularly women, in vulnerable positions, struggling with poverty and isolation. Access to healthcare, especially mental health services, is limited, and the existing facilities are often underfunded, leading to untreated chronic and mental health conditions.

The absence of a cohesive regional policy framework further exacerbates these challenges, as elderly populations across South Asia experience varying degrees of care and protection depending on their country's policy landscape. The findings indicate an urgent need for comprehensive reforms to ensure that the elderly have access to the necessary resources, legal protections, and social support systems to improve their quality of life.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Policy Implementation

- Governments across South Asia should prioritize the enforcement of existing laws that support elderly welfare. This includes ensuring that programs like Sri Lanka's Elders' Maintenance Act and India's Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act are adequately enforced, with particular focus on increasing awareness and outreach, especially in rural areas (HelpAge International, 2021; UNFPA, 2017).
- It is essential to introduce national policies that guarantee basic financial security for all elderly citizens through inclusive pension schemes, as many countries in the region have very limited pension coverage. Governments should work towards extending coverage to those excluded, particularly in rural areas, and include social protection systems for elderly women, who are often the most marginalized (ILO, 2020; UNFPA, 2017).

2. Addressing Gender-Specific Vulnerabilities

- Tailored interventions are needed to address the specific vulnerabilities of elderly women, such as poverty, social isolation, and lack of access to economic resources. This includes ensuring that elderly women have access to social security benefits, healthcare, and property rights. Programs aimed at empowering women economically and increasing their financial independence throughout their lives will help alleviate the socio-economic burdens they face in old age (ILO, 2020; UNFPA, 2017).
- Countries should work to eliminate barriers to women's access to property, inheritance, and financial resources, providing support for women caregivers, who are disproportionately impacted by caregiving duties and lack of income-generating opportunities (Agewell Foundation, 2021).

3. Enhancing Healthcare Access and Geriatric Care

- There is an urgent need to invest in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in rural and underserved areas, to provide accessible and affordable healthcare for the elderly. Specialized geriatric care services should be integrated into public healthcare systems to

address the growing prevalence of chronic diseases and age-related health issues (WHO, 2022; HelpAge International, 2020).

- Mental health services for the elderly must be prioritized. Given the high prevalence of depression and anxiety among older adults, especially among those who are isolated, South Asian governments should allocate greater resources to mental health services and work to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in older adults (PLOS ONE, 2023; National Institute of Mental Health, 2021).

4. Promoting Family-Based and Institutional Care Solutions

- While family-based caregiving remains a deeply rooted cultural norm, the challenges posed by urbanization and migration require a more integrated care system. Governments should support families with caregiving responsibilities through financial incentives and educational programs on elderly care (Agewell Foundation, 2021).
- Institutional care, where necessary, should be improved by increasing funding and training for staff. Additionally, policies should be implemented to reduce the cost of institutional care, making it more accessible for elderly individuals who may not have family support, especially in urban areas (HelpAge International, 2019).

5. Regional Collaboration and Policy Development

- A regional framework for elderly care should be established, with countries in South Asia sharing best practices and collaborating on strategies to address common challenges. This could include the development of uniform policies for elderly healthcare, pension systems, and social protection that ensure all elderly individuals in the region have access to the resources and support they need (Asian Development Bank, 2020).
- Regional organizations, such as SAARC, could play a key role in coordinating these efforts, ensuring that elderly populations in South Asia benefit from more integrated and comprehensive support systems.

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