Quality of Life Determinants among Dalit and Non-Dalit Elderly Populations in Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines socio-demographic and economic determinants regarding the quality of life (QoL) among Dalits and Non-Dalit in the elderly populations of Nepal, particularly in Palungtar Municipality, Gorkha District. It employs a descriptive and explanatory design, interviewing 430 individuals aged 60 and above. The major evidence found includes various disparities in QoL determinants, illiteracy among Dalits registered at 78.11 percent, whereas Non-Dalit had an illiteracy rate of 64.92 percent (χ^2 (2) = 8.7406, P = 0.000). This gap is even clear in terms of employment; the retired employee status is reported by only 1.8 percent of Dalits compared to 6.5 percent of Non-Dalit (χ^2 (1) = 5.1930, P = 0.023). The income group is alarming; around 72.7 percent of Non-Dalit earn more than Rs.500,000 in a year, as opposed to only 27.3 percent of Dalits (χ^2 (1) =8.67010, P=0.031). The logistic regression analysis yielded significant predictors of QoL with age found to be positively associated with QoL (β=0.129, p<0.01), which could indicate prospective adaptability among older adults. Literacy (β = -0.374, p < .01) and school education (β = -0.380, p < .05) are negatively related parameters, signifying the need for educational equity along the dimension. Employment (β = 0.569, p < .05) and income (β = -0.045, p < .05) contribute positively to QoL, while retirement (β = 1.282, p < .01) presents as a significant measure of determining one's experience of QoL. This study points to systemic inequities and calls for specific measures in education, equity in income, and inclusive policies to improve QoL in marginalized (Dalit) aging populations.

Keywords: Quality of Life (QoL), Aging, Dalit, Socio-economic disparities, Caste-based discrimination

Introduction

The quality of life in old age is greatly influenced by the socio-economic and demographic factors that differ from one social group to another. Among these, the Dalit population, historically marginalized and subjected to systemic oppression in South Asia, particularly in Nepal and India, stands out in facing challenges that make satisfactory life generally indefinable in their later years. The important determinants of quality of life in the older age groups that need to be understood by Dalit and non-Dalit elderly group members are vital for developing inclusive policies and interventions toward equitable well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) purports that quality of life (QoL) is the individual's appraisal of his or her position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which he or she lives and with his or her goals, expectations, and concerns. The scenario in Nepal, however, comprises caste-based discrimination and socio-economic inequalities compounding the problems faced by the aging, especially marginalized groups like the Dalit. Thus, certain disparities demand to be addressed in evidence-based research to decipher the factors influencing QoL and to plan for its improvement.

Old populations, aged from all corners of Nepal, face many problems, among which are limited fortune to health care, inadequate social security, and economic vulnerabilities. Reservations in such access appear to be much graver in the case of a Dalit population given their history of exclusion, lower literacy rates in comparison with the national overall statistics, and limited access to basic resources. Subedi and Gurung (2021) noted caste differences remain in

the pattern of attainment by sex of education, income, and employment, aspects that have the most impacts on the QoL of Dalits. Although many studies have been conducted worldwide concerning aging and QoL, limited studies have been conducted on the relationship between caste and aging in Nepal. This research intends to fill that gap basal by looking at socioeconomic and demographic determinants of QoL among the Dalit and Non-Dalit aging populations within the context of Nepal.

The research study was concerned with the quality of life among Dalit and Non-Dalit aging populations and analyzed the relationship between socioeconomic variables and quality of life. Promote Equity and Well-being among Marginalized Elderly Communities: This study attempts to uncover the systemic inequalities and indeed the corresponding policies needed to address more inclusive measures for older people with marginalized identities with all the intersectionality of age, caste, and socio-economic conditions.

Literature Review

Quality of life is an extremely broad term and has dimensions such as physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and material conditions (World Health Organization [WHO], 1997). Therefore, the QoL for senior citizens is linked to healthcare access, economic security, social inclusion, and cultural dignity. However, the Dalit communities have historically suffered exclusion from these resources on grounds of their socio-economic conditions and have been facing continued stigmatization due to caste-based discrimination (Deshpande, 2011). Thus, a different blend of aging and caste presents unique issues worth exploring.

Some socio-economic variables such as income, education, and occupation have a vital role in determining QoL among the aging population. For instance, economic security meets the needs vis-à-vis access to healthcare, good nutrition, and a stable living environment, which are otherwise critical components of QoL in old age (Chakrabarti & Sarkar, 2019). In the case of Dalits, however, their limited access to employment with sustained means and financial resources is exacerbated in their old age owing to marginalization over a few centuries (Guru, 2009).

Education has a different health literacy, easier access to information, and the ability to understand healthcare systems (Shankar & Thapa, 2020). Dalit communities have and for centuries they were made to suffer because of educational discrimination, unequal societal structures, and the lack of basic resources, ultimately leading to fuller literacy and, in turn, poorer quality of life later on (Singh, 2015).

Facility-defining demographic characteristics such as gender and marital and family structure play crucial roles in determining the life quality of older populations. Disparities due to gender courses are most acute among Dalits as the double whammy of caste and gender generally weighs heavily on Dalit women (Aryal, 2019).

Marital status is one biological characteristic that defines an individual's demographic profile. Generally, therefore, the married category has a better quality of life due to emotional and economic support from spouses (Wright & Brown, 2017). Such a scenario is not possible in the case of early widowhood among Dalits as they very hardly possess social security. The result is isolation and economic challenges in old age leading to further downgrading of their quality of life (Thorat & Newman, 2007).

Family structure and intergenerational ties as joint families, which are still widely prevalent in South Asia, provide a sort of insurance against aging. However, such an erosion of the traditional family is brought about by rapid urbanization and economic pressures, which affect mainly the Dalit community, who do not have alternative arrangements for social security (Mishra, 2020).

The elderly population, who regularly require medical attention for chronic diseases and are required to keep their physical health in check, receives good medical services. Dalits face systematic barriers as obstacles to health access providing biased and discriminatory healthcare personnel and lack of access in marginalized areas (Acharya et al., 2019). Socioeconomic disadvantages further add to the troubles that Dalits would have faced in terms of the affordability of health programs. On the other hand, non-Dalits have better access to healthcare resources, mainly based on their economy and tied with that, the absence of caste-based discrimination. Addressing this apparent gap relative to societal needs thus calls for policy interventions, especially in ensuring access to health care for increasingly aging Dalits (Narula, 2018).

It comprises genera social networks, community participation, and a sense of belonging. These develop emotional health and resilience in late adulthood (Berkman & Glass, 2000). However, social exclusion is often found among Dalit people within the purview of caste discrimination, which carries the perception of the individual being isolated and beholding little self-worth (Kamble et al., 2017). The difference indicates that caste-based social exclusion should be addressed as an avenue for the enhancement of QoL among Dalit elders.

The quality of life for people ages is substantially contingent upon social norms and governance policies. This acquired cultural attitude in South Asia and some countries have been one of respect and care for the elderly.

However, the same cultural practices do not apply uniformly as they often deny Dalits such cultural reverence because of caste bias (Rawat, 2012).

Besides, public policy measures towards improving the quality of life for the elderly, such as pension schemes and health care subsidies, do not provide an effective response for the Dalit communities due to inefficiencies and social discrimination (Kumar & Kumar, 2020).

The elimination of the discrimination gap will require an understanding of a comprehensive strategy with specific targeted policies, community-based involvements, and the abolishment of caste-based discrimination along its different levels. The precise understanding of the issues faced by Dalit elders is likely, thereby, to enable stakeholders to put in place frameworks in an imaginative way for equity and well-being among aging populations.

Data and Methods

This study was conducted as a comparative quality of life across the socio-economic and demographic status. The elderly population aged 60 years and over were considered study participants, coinciding with the aging demographic trends in Nepal (Subedi, 2005). Palungtar is accessibly lying to represent a rural-semi-urban mix from which the anticipated insight into varied socio-economic dynamics was expected. A descriptive design for socioeconomic and demographic variables was complemented with explanatory research for the analysis of causal relationships to ensure aging challenges (Creswell, 2014). This has led to the calculation of sample size through the formula: Z (1.96 for a 95 % confidence interval), p (91.9%), q (8.1%), d (5% allowable error), and DE (design effect of 1.5) =minimum sample size is 430 (Trochim, 2006). Thus, the study population had an elderly population aged 60 years and over, with representation from all the 10 wards of Palungtar Municipality. Since Palungtar Municipality has a total of 3,012 males and 3,373 females, representing a total population of 6,385, sampling was done proportionately by allocating and applying systematic random sampling in selecting samples (NPHC, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Age

In terms of age-wise literacy status of Dalit and Non-Dalit populations' comparison, significant divergence is also evident among the elderly ones. In the 60-69 age group, comparatively, literacy was higher with 56.8 percent of Dalit and 59.0 percent of Non-Dalit being literate.
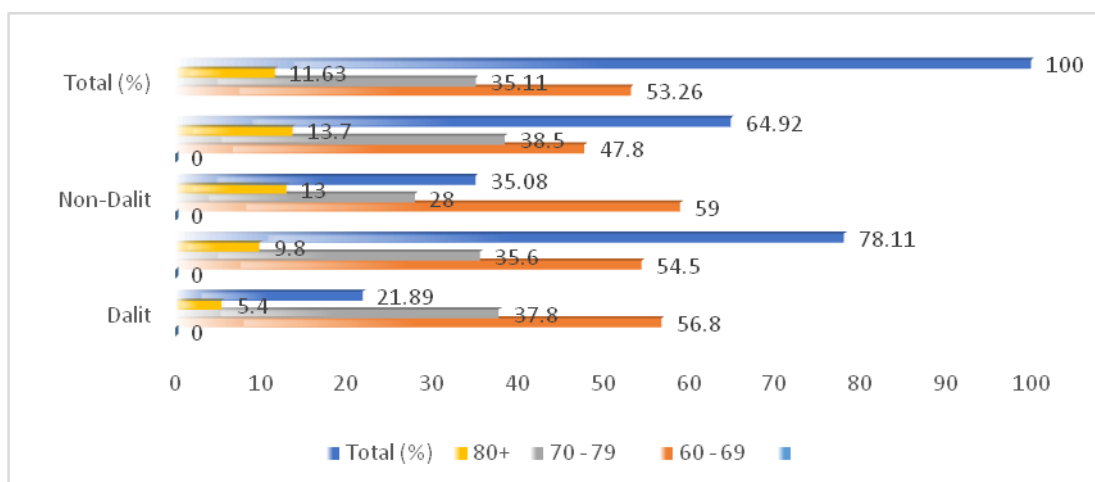

Figure 1: Distribution of age-wise literacy status in Dalit and Non-Dalit

Figure 1 shows declining literacy, with sharp decreases at the 70-79 age (37.8% Dalit and 28.0% Non-Dalit). The age of 80 onwards is minimal (5.4% Dalit having non-Dalit as 13.0 %.). The total literacy rate was 21.89 percent and 35.08 percent for Dalit and Non-Dalit, respectively, with the majority remaining illiterates (78.11% Dalit and 64.92% Non-Dalit). The Pearson chi-square test (χ^2 (2) = 8.7406, P = 0.000) has proved a significant association between literacy status and caste group.

Socio-economic variables

Socio-economic variables are measurable factors as Dalit and Non-Dalit in terms of their conditions relating to inequalities in education, religion, employment status, income, and educational attainment.

Table 1: Distribution of socio-economic variables in Dalit and Non-Dalit

Variables	Dalit (%)	Non-Dalit(%)	Total (n)	Total (%)
Education				
Literate	21.9	38.3	137	31.9
Illiterate	78.1	61.7	293	68.1
Pearson χ² (1) =12.7406, P=0.000				
Religion				
Hindu	82.3	74.8	338	78.6
Buddhist	7.4	11.5	41	9.5
Islam	0.6	0.5	2	0.5
Christian	6.9	8.1	32	7.4
Others	2.9	5.1	17	4.0
Pearson χ² (6) =5.7406, P=0.006				
Retired employee				
No	98.2	93.5	410	95.3
Yes	1.8	6.5	20	4.7
Pearson χ² (1) =5.1930, P=0.023				
Total	**202**	**228**	**430**	
Total (%)	**100.0**	**100.0**		**100.0**
Annual income in Rs.'000				
< 75	41.1	58.9	163	46.0
75-150	37.1	62.9	97	27.4
150-300	41.9	58.1	62	17.5
300-500	42.9	57.1	21	5.9
>500	27.3	72.7	11	3.1
Pearson χ² (1) =8.67010, P=0.031				
Total	**141**	**213**	**354**	
Total (n)	**39.8**	**60.2**	**100**	**100.0**
Level of Education				
Basic	48.3	37.7	58	42.6
Secondary (9-10)	24.6	13.8	26	18.8
Secondary (11-12) or Intermediate	12.7	8.0	14	10.2
Higher Degree (Bachelor, Master, and above than Intermediates)	4.2	2.9	5	3.5
Others	10.2	37.7	34	25.0
Pearson χ² (6) =5.7406, P=0.000				
Total (n)	**63**	**74**	**137**	
Total (%)	**100.0**	**100.0**		**100.0**

Table 1 shows that literacy levels among Dalits (21.9%) remained very low as compared to Non-Dalit (38.3%). Of these, 78.1 percent were illiterate: Dalit (78.1%) and Non-Dalit (61.7%), which formed a great disparity in education (Pearson χ^2 (1) = 12.7406, P= 0.000). These inequalities are a witness to the fact that Dalits have lost access to education, enabling them to be trapped in poverty, not only for themselves but also for generations to come. Among the majority, 82.3 percent of Dalits and 74.8 percent of Non-Dalits claim to be Hindu, with Buddhists making up only 7.4 percent of Dalits and 11.5 percent of Non-Dalit, followed by Christians (6.9% of Dalits and 8.1% of Non-Dalit), and other religions (2.9% of Dalit and 5.1% of Non-Dalit). The differences observed were statistically significant (Pearson χ^2 (6) = 5.7406, P= 0.006). Only 1.8 percent of Dalits have retired employees while 6.5 percent of Non-Dalit. Dalits can have formal employment and retirement benefits are highly limited as compared to others (Pearson χ^2 (1) = 5.1930, P = 0.023). The result thus highlights that it is a challenge for the Dalit to get secure, formal employment. Further explaining economic inequalities are the income levels, where 46.0 percent of respondents earned less than Rs.75000 annually while out of these, the proportion of such Dalit (41.1%) is higher than Non-Dalit (58.9%). In the higher income categories, there is an increased Non-Dalit proportion, especially for earnings above Rs.500000, where 72.7 percent were Non-Dalit compared to 27.3 percent Dalit. The above differences had economic significance being Pearson χ^2 (1) = 8.67010, P = 0.031.

The educational attainment as basic education is higher in Dalit (48.3%) than in Non-Dalit (37.7%), almost all Non-Dalit have a larger percentage of secondary (9-10) and higher education categories. Only 4.2 percent of Dalits have higher degrees compared to 2.9 percent of Non-Dalit, while the remaining choose alternative modes of education (Dalit 10.2 %, Non-Dalit 37.7%). These differences were statistically significant: Pearson χ^2 (6) = 5.7406, P = 0.000. The socio-economic variables have differences between Dalit and Non-Dalit populations as variables deemed

important lay systemic barriers that act disproportionately against the Dalit, particularly in education, income, and employment opportunities.

Working wage job in a week

Partly caste, gender, and education come into influence the working hours and make up different natures of employment. Compared to Non-Dalit, Dalits work more in the informal or poorly paying work areas and have a less secure job as well as fewer options for wage growth. Addressing such gaps regarding skill development, equitable wage policies, and inclusive hiring needs is essential for equitable employment opportunities across socio-economic status.
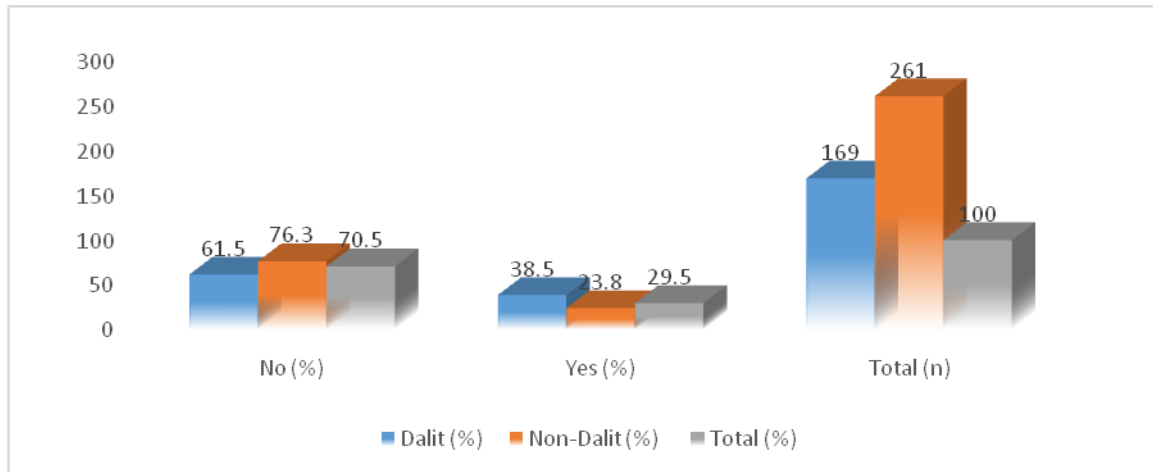

Figure 2: Distribution of working wage jobs in Dalit and Non-Dalit

Figure 2 reveals that among Dalit populations, immediately and noticeably 38.5 percent affirm as opposed to 23.8 percent of Non-Dalit. Compared with the opposites, 61.5 percent are Dalit and 76.3 percent Non-Dalit. The total population has a negative response percentage of 70.5 percent (303 people) and a positive count of only 29.5 percent (127 people) in that regard.

Factors associated with quality of life in aging populations:

Quality of life (QoL) in old age is caused by various demographic and socioeconomic factors, as highlighted by the statistical data in Table 2. The predictions made in the logistic regression, the coefficients (B), standard errors (S.E.), and Wald statistics attached to it identify the strength and significance of the relationship in the specified order. The most important determinant of income, education, gender, and marital status justifies their significance with the corresponding p-values that determine the statistical significance of the factor. In econometrics, the Exp (B) values illustrate odds ratios showing the relational likelihood of having better QoL indicators for certain variables. The use of confidence intervals (95% C.I. for EXP(B)) serves to strengthen these estimates. All of these produce complementary information about the demographic variables and the QoL that need targeted involvement above squaring the circle. It understands evidence for formulating a good policy and program.

Table 2: Factors associated quality of life in aging populations

Demographic variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Df	p value	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)		Sig.
							Lower	Upper	
Age	.129	.0772	6.262	1	.000	.137	.143	.249	***
Literacy status	-.374	.409	.836	1	.000	.423	.329	.607	***
Education level	-.380	.048	7.582	1	.007	.345			**
Religion	-.141	.123	.664	1	.008	.387	.254	1.002	**
Working wage job	.569	.094	9.233	1	.021	.518	.408	1.035	**
Annual income	-.045	.431	.007	1	.031	0.547	.370	2.966	**
Retired employee	1.282	.099	5.60541	1	.000	.604	2.970		***
Constant	**1.553**	**.328**	**11.743**	**1**	**.000**	**3.241**			***

*** *p<.01, ** p<.05, * p<.1*

A positive correlation (-0.001 < p < 0.05, β = 1.287) shows that as age advances, QoL slightly increases, giving room for age-based resilience or adaptation. But literacy has a negative association with QoL: β = -0.374, p < .01. This means that illiterates very much reduce QoL and hence should advocate lifelong learning programs. With higher

levels of education, a person can significantly relate to a higher level of QoL (β = -0.380, p < .05). Religious affiliation brings with it a modest but significant impact on QoL (β = -0.141, p < .05). Employment status influences the sense of QoL significantly (β = 0.569, p < .05). And those with higher incomes tend to have a more positive relationship with their QoL-inferior income levels are positively correlated with QoL (β = -0.045, p < .05). This indicates, rather, that economic stability is the most important determinant. It is caused by a reduction in work stress and also ease time because the retired status effectively improves the quality of life (β = 1.282, p < .01. It is, therefore, expected for different areas of QoL determinants to be put together in a system. This means that integrated policies should include literacy, income, education, and employment in considering well-being among aging populations.

Discussion

This study shows the factors affecting quality of life (QoL) among aged individuals, with particular interest in the area between Dalits as opposed to Non-Dalits. This implies the fact that most demographic and socio-economic variables, behavioral as well as cultural form a significant influence on the quality of life. Literacy was higher among both Dalit (56.8%) and Non-Dalit (59.0%) being illiterate. In the older age groups, it increased, with the figures dropping to 37.8 percent and 28.0 percent for Dalit and Non-Dalit, respectively, in the age group 70-79. For those who are 80 years or older, literacy rates were low due to a lack of access to education during those days (Deshpande, 2011; Subedi, 2005).

The much greater association between literacy status and caste (χ^2 (2) = 8.7406, P = 0.000), which marks the underdeveloped socio-economic inequality, continues to act at a disadvantage for the Dalit. Hence, a lot many more interventions that address lifelong learning and promote literacy at the grassroots would contribute to this gap in enhanced QOL among marginalized populations. It is Education, Income, and Employment status, as they stand out to be very important determinants of QoL. Literacy among Dalits (21.9%) standards much lower when compared to the rest of the country (38.3% in the case of Non-Dalit), with 78.1 percent being illiterate when speaking about the Dalit. The above correlates to previous studies that identified caste as a determinant of educational inequity (Thorat & Newman, 2007).

Disparities in the income levels were stark: a high percentage (41.1%) of Dalits earn less than Rs. 75,000 as compared to Non-Dalit (58.9%). The higher-income earning above Rs.500000, had significant representation from Non-Dalit: as disparities propose poor access to stable, well-paid employment possibilities by Dalits (Acharya et al., 2019). The differentials in employment too; only 1.8 percent of Dalits were reported to be retired employees as opposed to 6.5 percent of non-dalits. This difference shows how difficult it is for Dalits to secure employment with retirement benefits as tends to be the case with people generally. Behavioral and cultural factors have influenced QoL. Religious affiliation had a significant association with QoL, which further was assumed to be indicative of social support and spiritual support. Most of the Dalits were Hindus (82.3 %), but there were very few who adhered to Buddhism (7.4 %) and Christianity (6.9 %). This study is also consistent with the studies on cultural and spiritual practices about mental health and resilience among aged populations (Rawat, 2012).

Indeed, activity participation as well as the level of light activities between Dalits and Non-Dalits shows variation; 71.6 percent of Dalits took part in such light activities daily as against 67.9 percent of Non-Dalits who would say that they did the same. Such differences are likely due to differences in lifestyle and occupational engagement. Therefore, it encourages easy programs that promote regular physical activities among many so that people may benefit in mobility and reduce health inequalities (Berkman & Glass, 2000). This is the way physical exercise helps in health maintenance and well-being, mostly for old persons. About 79.9 percent of Dalits regularly do physical exercise, while 75.5 percent of Non-Dalits do so. There is a great difference in the frequency of exercise. A community-based program for fitness development and safe spaces for physical activities would address the gaps for 'exercise poor' Dalits due to the economy or the lack of structured facilities to access exercise facilities (Shankar & Thapa, 2020).

The logistic regression analysis yielded significant predictors of QoL with age found to be positively associated with QoL (β=0.129, p<0.01), which could indicate prospective adaptability among older adults. The conditions between education and literacy levels have shown a negative correlation with QoL (β=-0.374, p<0.01; β=-0.380, p<0.05), thus, pointing to the need for improving educational opportunities. Employment has been associated positively with the QoL (β=0.569, p<0.05) as well as income (β=-0.045, p<0.05), hence indicating the importance of financial security in well-being (Narula, 2018).

Retirement status ($\beta = 1.282$, $p < .01$) significantly enhanced QoL, possibly due to reduced work-related stress and increased leisure time. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of QoL determinants, advocating for integrated policies addressing literacy, income disparities, education, and employment (Creswell, 2014).

This study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address caste-based disparities in education, income, and employment. Policies promoting equitable access to education and skill development can empower marginalized communities, breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty. The present study emphasizes the very fine and complex interplay of demographic, socio-economic, and behavioral variables determining QoL among aging populations. Thus, addressing the voids would entail very comprehensive, generalized policies and community-level actions for equity and well-being.

Conclusion

The QoL is most deeply affected among aging populations by the variables of socio-economic factors to measure the difference in QoL between Dalit and Non-Dalit aging populations as caste-based discrimination. Younger generations generally report high literacy levels, but the gap broadens with increasing age, and it is more pronounced in Dalits than Non-Dalits. Lifestyle and cultural factors, physical activity, religion, and family structure have many important influences on the quality of life. A clear policy implication that can be derived from the study was that addressing the disparities will need a multi-pronged approach that includes equal education, classless programs for economic empowerment, equitable hiring practices, and community-driven programs. Above all, this research would strengthen the position that intersectionality must be addressed in the context of aging in Nepal. It would require holistic policies and partnerships for inclusivity and justice to eliminate the QoL gap between Dalit and Non-Dalit elders. With this, everything concerning old age would be bettered in Nepal, but even more so, this would be an attempt to fight for equity and justice within society.

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