



EXPLORING RESILIENCE AMONG ELDERLY WIDOWS IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Many traditional societies still lack a strong social security systems for the elderly people. They generally view elderly people living with family as dependent on the family structure for social support, health and wellbeing. However, widows lack privileges and protection even when they live in traditional joint families, with at least one child and grandchildren. In reality, their resilience plays a significant role in their health and wellbeing as they age. To identify research gap about resilience among elderly widows, this study assessed the situation of 25 elderly widows aged 65 and above residing with their families in Kathmandu district , Nepal and identified key factors bringing about resilience in their day-to-day life. The resilience index comprised of four dimensions: psychological, physical health and fitness, food and nutrition and life support. The findings indicate that financial independence and education are two critical factors that best support resilience in elderly widows. This has far-reaching impacts on vulnerable groups like elderly people, especially elderly widows. The resilience index will be helpful for policy makers, stakeholders and other researchers to study the wellbeing and resilience among older widows.

Keywords: elderly widows - aging - resilience - Asia - Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional societies still lack in robust social security systems for the elderly. The elderly living with families are generally viewed as relying on the family for social support, health and wellbeing (Lodhi *et al.* 2021, Tantray & Mir 2021). However, widows lack rights and respect even when they live in traditional joint families, with at least one child and grandchildren ((Seltzer & Friedman 2014). The geriatric population is growing steadily worldwide (UN.ESCAP 2016) and Nepal is no exception

(Aryal 2019). Five percent of the population in the country is above the age of 65 years and this percentage is projected to double by 2030 (Government of Nepal 2014). With this increase, many factors like social relations, mobility, and lifestyles are likely to make elderly widows more vulnerable. A study carried out by Tausig and Subedi (2022) reports that 90 percent of older adults live with family and only 6 percent live alone. Living with family and getting support from family member is considered as cultural responsibility in Nepali society. The elderly care policies, programs and services are not same everywhere among countries and societies. The elderly concerns differs from different context and must be addressed according to their socio-cultural context (Shrestha *et al.* 2021). The government of Nepal is providing allowances and pension to senior citizens and widows but there is further barriers in sociocultural and economic aspect faced by elderly widows in society.

Elderly people have special needs like health, financial and social support for survival. But the country lacks adequate resources and mechanisms to meet these needs (Kandel 2018). The vulnerability of elderly widows is even more (Carr & Bodnar-Deren 2009). In Nepal, widows are stereotyped as weak, dependent and unhappy. Men are mostly older than women at the time of marriage and also it is seen that they mostly get remarried after the death of their female counterpart, which is rarely seen in the context of women (Bennet & Soulsby 2014). Due to this, the number of widows outnumber widowers. The phenomenon of urbanization and modernization changes the structure of family from joint to nuclear. Nepalese society is going through a transformation, although the rates may vary (Subedi & Sah 2015). Some researches have classified widowhood as a time of bereavement with low self-esteem whereas others have shown that widows supported by social networks (friends, relatives, neighbours), gradually develop coping mechanisms which support the wellbeing of elderly widows (Hahn *et al.* 2012). However, when women become more vulnerable after widowhood, social support is not enough for them as there are other factors that contribute to resilience too. Resilience is a dynamic process which varies in developmental stages. The adaption rests on the both inside and outside relationship of individual. The role of family and community is vital in developing resilience among vulnerable people. The capacity of resilience depends on relationship with primary caregivers and the approach of socialization by vulnerable people (Luthar & Bidwell 2003).

The current study shows that elderly widows living with family or relatives, whether in joint or nuclear families, with some amount of financial security and education have higher levels of resilience. Education and financial security as pension, or other means of financial support, contribute more to resilience than other variables like physical health, food and nutrition.

Furthermore, the findings also highlight that coping strategies make a big difference in widows' resilience; external support and social safety nets are no guarantee of resilience for them but rather a part of their overall resilience. The death of a spouse at times brings a devastating effect on elderly widow which may bring loss of identity, social network, and ultimately health issues (Hildon *et al.* 2010). Some bounce back from this difficult phase sooner with the support of family and friends by adapting different mechanisms of resilience (Lee 2014). Overall, it is the individual's ability to mobilize the mental and social-financial resources to find new footing for a fulfilling life as they move on.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study used exploratory design with mixed methodology - qualitative and quantitative. During this process, subjective realities were collected by qualitative methods from the elderly widow participants. The quantitative research helps to measure validity and reliability of the resilience scale. This exploratory study examined 25 elderly widows from urban areas of Kathmandu Metropolitan City as this was a pilot study to understand the situation of elderly widows since not many studies have been conducted in Nepal. The objective was to contribute towards a better understanding of the challenges that the elderly widows in Nepal face including the factors responsible for maintaining resilience among the elderly widows so as to guide future research in the area. All the participants were aged 65 and above and resided with their immediate families. The data were collected by purposive sampling technique using semi-structured questionnaires supplemented by face-to-face interviews from Dec, 2019-Mar, 2020. The sampling was purposive to ensure that the sample area has a good population of the target group and also because Kathmandu metropolitan area is moving away from the traditional family system rapidly. In eleven cases, telephonic conversations were also carried out with the participants to plug information gaps.

Consent from the participants and their family members was taken before data collection after explaining the purpose of the research, and they were assured about data confidentiality. All the responses were treated as confidential and private and not shared with anyone. The data were coded for anonymity. The collected data were first reviewed and then sorted out and coded. Resilience index in this paper has been developed as a composite index that includes four dimensions considered for measurement.

Resilience index is a composite index of four dimensions that were considered for its measurement based on a review of relevant literature and data collected. Contributing variables under each of the four dimensions were assessed and given an equal weightage and a resilience factor calculated. It included four dimensions namely psychological, physical, food & nutrition, and life support. The data was collected through detailed questionnaire survey and personal interviews on variables which included education, religion, and location, time of widow, daily food intake, daily activities (engagement), health conditions, income and satisfaction which have relation with resilience of elderly widows. The daily activity, health condition, social life and financial independence of elderly was taken into consideration while collecting data. This study aimed at investigating the attributes of resilience in elderly widows comprising of all the four dimensions of study.

All the four dimensions clearly gave information on the answers required for analysis. The psychological dimension comprised social support systems like social connection, societal network, friends, hobbies and volunteering done by elderly widows. Under this dimension the questions focused on social support group for sharing problems and offering help whom they meet on a regular basis, elderly widows with hobbies (reading, walking, writing, cooking etc.) which they follow in everyday life. The physical health and fitness dimension included debilitating disease or any other health conditions, lifestyle, and need for medical support. Under this dimension elderly widow's performance in day to day activities, and involvement in fitness related workout (exercise) like morning and evening walk, and medical support system requirement which included types, times and place of medical consultation, diseases suffered, visit of doctor and regularity of medicine consumption by elderly widows. Food and nutrition dimension included meals consumed by elderly widows and supplements which consisted of nutritious food, intake of fruits and other

supplements, and consumption of meat and eggs. Fourth dimension *i.e.* life support included financial independence, respectful and dignified life. The inquiry regarding satisfaction of elderly widows towards life, their respect and dignity in family, and the financial means and support which consisted of pension of self or spouse, fixed deposit, agriculture work and allowance . This scale will be helpful for other researchers to study the well-being and resilience among older widows. The data was managed by questionnaire survey sheets and note keeping. The data was then entered in excel sheets, organised appropriately and then appropriate statistical calculations made. Further analyses were carried out by blending both qualitative and quantitative information collected from respondents. This resilience factor was then plotted against each of the factors like education, financial independence, health, physical fitness etc. and education and financial independences of elderly widows were further correlated. The qualitative information was used to confirm, validate and qualify the data by narrative explanation and quantitative by tabulation and representation through graphs and their interpretation. The two key determinants that affect the state of elderly widows are explained in this study. They are financial support, education and engagement of elderly widows living in family.

In this study, life course perspective along with family system theory and social constructionist theory were used for analysis and interpretation of the data. Life course theory is multidisciplinary perspective which helps to understand the life of individual. This life course perspective allows to have a distinct way to look at ageing process by interacting with both individual and social structural which influence ageing process(Foster & Walker 2021). Family system theory interaction of family members their behaviour is taken into consideration (Johnson & Ray 2016). Social constructionism does not deny the existence of reality; they argue it is socially constructed .The subjective reality comes from interaction with the individual and the socio cultural situation. (Andrews 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Current situation of elderly widows

Widowhood is a difficult time in life. Life course perspective shows the impact of widowhood on the life of an individual and helps in creating a framework to study the cultural shift across generations. Thus this perspective can be used to study the life of widows and their resilience

capacity. A study by Bennett & Soulsby (2012) exhibits that younger widows adapt fast and have better coping mechanisms than elderly widows. There are different factors which influence the wellbeing and resilience of women in society they are age, gender, culture, economy, physical condition and lifestyle (Connor & Davidson 2003). One of the patterns is the socialization which compels them to stay within their family. A study in Bangladesh has revealed that elderly people are expected to be taken care by their family members due to cultural factors (Islam & Nath 2012).

This study evaluated socio-demographic information for the elderly widows based on their age, education, family type, caste, time since widowhood and income source. The ages of the elderly widows in the study ranged from 66-85 years of which 24% were 66-70 years old, 36% were 71-80 years old and the remaining 40% were 80-85 years old. The time of widowhood ranged from two to fifty two years. In terms of financial support, the income amount varied significantly from person to person. It ranged from less than 5,000 to 30,000 Rupees per month. The income came from different sources. There were 16% widows who were totally dependent upon children as they had no income of their own. It is notable here that 44% of the widows did not claim the old age allowance, though eligible. It was because they did not know the government's policy of social security and old age allowance. Family system theory focuses on how widows perceive and experience their widowhood within a family. The family environment influences the coping pattern of the widows in the family and society (Moss & Moss 2014). Here the elderly widows were given support from the family also to lead a dignified life.

Critical factors responsible for resilience

Resilience factor

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress,” or “bouncing back” from difficult experiences. Resilience is thus the adaptive capacity of an individual to pursue wellbeing. People build and exhibit resilience, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, personal experiences, or social environments. It is a coping process that can be developed by adapting different interventions in daily life (APA 2013). The resilience index developed for the study is shown in figure 1.

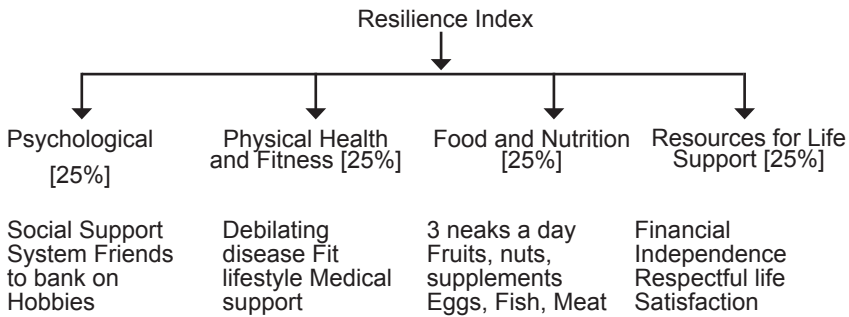


Figure 1: Resilience index and its components

The resilience index is calculated as a composite index of equally weighted four constituent dimensions studied in the paper. Thus each of the dimensions carried a weightage of 25%. Similarly, there are two key factors which are considered determinants of aging and thus impact the status of elderly widows. The key determinants of ageing are social and cultural, and the other one are physical and psychological. The elderly have different ways to address the challenges during their widowhood. When they exhibit resilience, they are considered to have better coping mechanisms (Bonanno *et al* 2004). The two determinants influence the aging process. An imbalance among them can lead to depression, health issues, malnourishment and poor lifestyle. The two key determinants thus affect the state of elderly widows in our society.

Financial independence/support

The data from the study revealed that 16% of participants relied completely on their children as a main source of financial support, 28% had incomes less than 5000 Rupees, 24% had income between 5,000 -10,000 Rupees, 16% had income 10,000-15000 Rupees, 4% had income 15000 -20000 Rupees and 4% had income 20,000-25,000 Rupees. Only 8% of women had incomes over 25,000 Rupees. The elderly widows had income from different sources: 15% of the widows had pensions of their own, 20% had family pensions, 25% had income from house rent, and 40% had income from fixed deposits. Only 4% were dependent upon agriculture. 56% of them also got an old age allowance provided by the government. The resilience factor was calculated for each of the income categories and plotted against the incomes (see Fig 2). The data depicts that with an increase in financial independence, the resilience of elderly widows shows a slow but steady increasing trend. As depicted in the graph, there

is slight decline in the resilience index among the income group 10000-20000 Rupees. It was found that the average educational profile for the participants in this income group was lower than the other income groups. Economically dependent participants were found to be more docile and less confident with low scores in resilience index measurement whereas, participants who were economically independent showed confidence and activeness in their overall resilience.

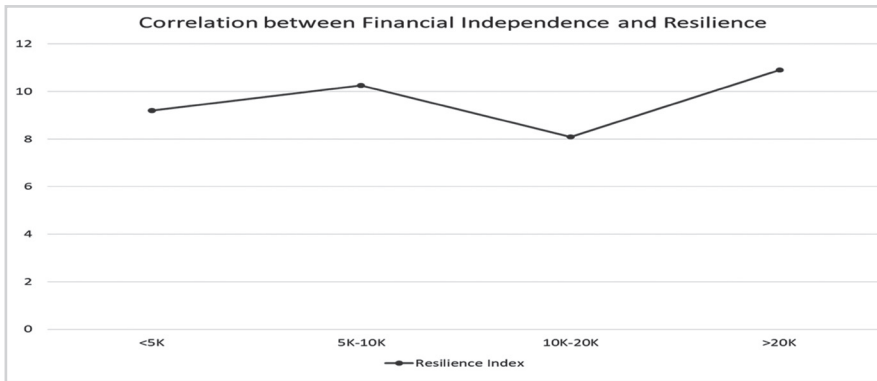


Figure 2: Financial independence and resilience

Education

In terms of education, 60% had not been to school but could read and sign, 28% left school before grade 5, 8% completed secondary school level and only 4% studied up to masters.

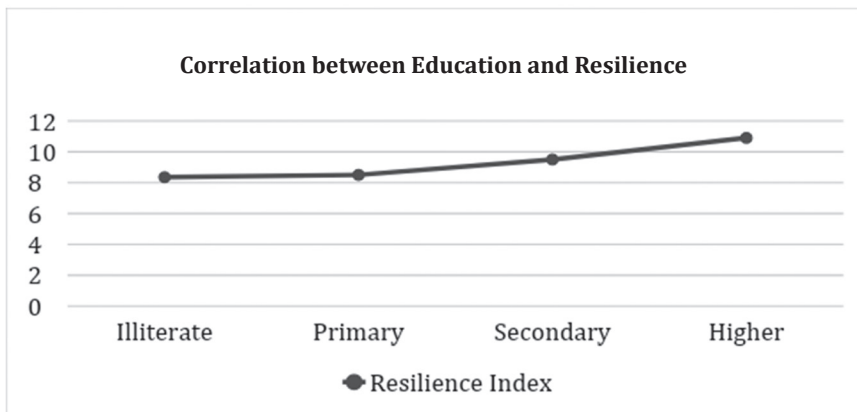


Figure 3: Education and resilience

With an increase in the levels of education from pre-primary to master's level, there was an increase in the resilience factors. This study also showed 60 % of participants only had informal education and thus basic reading ability, yet they had a reasonably good score in the resilience index (Fig 3). They read religious text and used other media to keep them informed, busy and entertained.

One of the widows whose husband passed away two years ago said:

I did not go to school for attaining formal education. Women in my village were restricted from attending school but I was taught to read and write at home by my brothers. Now that has become an asset for me. If I did not learn to read it would be very difficult for me to spend time. I love reading newspapers and other cultural text to pass my time. I share the stories from Nepali culture with my grandchildren and spread on the knowledge I have. I am very fortunate to be with my family even though my husband is no longer with us. My children bring different books and texts to keep me engaged.

Intergenerational co-residence is found to minimize the risk of depression among older people in society (Tosi & Grundy 2019). In the joint family system, elderly people can live with peace, respect and confidence with the support of family members and relatives (Pant, 2015). Thus family types have an impact upon the elderly widows. The widows co residing have more life satisfaction and resilience than the widows who live alone without children and relatives. Social relations are created by reciprocation of care and concerns among the people residing in the particular society. There is connectedness between social construction and construction of reality. Similarly social constructionism also focuses on the way people perceive themselves and others based on cultural symbols. Thus, to study the perception of elderly widows micro analysis is required which helps to know their social, physical and psychological well-being (McMullin 2000).

Other factors

Resilience is a gradual process dependent on multiple factors. The engagement of elderly widows in voluntary work and involving them in cultural activities (paid or unpaid) makes them happy and satisfied. It is also found that many widows participate in informal work with family, friends and relatives (Hahn *et al.* 2011). Some participants in this study were found volunteering in temples. One of the participants said:

I have done many things in my life by engaging and connecting with different activities. Now I engage myself in serving God and its disciples selflessly. This is a way I keep myself busy without being worried about the rest of my life.

Resilience is a process which gradually happens with the passage of time and multiple factors are associated with it. It depends upon the individual and assets which is provided by family and other support system depending upon culture. Religion and spirituality also have influences to some extent in coping the problems of widows (Fontes & Neri nd). The resilience capacity also varies from culture to culture as they are socially constructed by people living in society (Robben 2018).

It was found from the study that social engagement provided a positive perspective in the life of the elderly widows. Engaging in cultural activities enabled them to interact with the people around them, share their feelings and live a meaningful life (Bernardo & Carvalho 2020). Resilience can be achieved by support from family members or by other formal and informal mechanisms present in society. Different strategies may be used by elderly widows for coping with their grief. High resilience is linked with positive outcomes associated with productive and successful aging thus leading to a healthy lifestyle (MacLeod et al. 2016). Although several women had a good resilience index based on financial security, 16% of elderly widows with no income also showed a good resilience. This was evidenced by what a participant said:

I don't have any personal bank account or money. All my needs are fulfilled by my son. Everything cannot be attained by money. One needs love, care and affection from family.

Women constitute strong social relationships due to their traditional roles in the families. It has been found that social relations, networks and social support are fundamental strategies for adaptation among elderly widows. Their low economic, educational, and occupational status limits social relationships in society. The elderly do not rely on financial needs but also seek emotional support from family and other relations (Antonucci 2001). In this paper also it was found that the elderly widows who were living with their families and were supported and cared for were physically and psychologically fit even with growing age. The widows in cohabitation have more confidence and satisfaction with support of their family members and relatives. Elderly widows living with children and grandchildren are

found happier (Grundy & Murphy 2018). Their relationships with family members made them feel confident and energetic to carry out activities in the social environment efficiently. Thus, environmental factors are related to an individual's resilience capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

Resilience in elderly widows is multidimensional and this study attempts to explore and analyse some of the dimensions. Financial independence plays an important role in resilience among elderly widows, and so does education, which has a positive correlation with resilience. However, results may vary across rural and urban households. These factors enable a person to overcome adversities in life and bounce back from disruptive events. It is observed that financial independence compounded with other factors like education and cultural integrity, gradually improves resilience. It is also noticed from the study that elderly widows who were financially dependent also showed resilience as they were contented living in cohabitation with family members. The structure of family also plays important role in coping difficult times by elderly widows. The integration and social engagement of elderly widows in family also helps to develop resilience. It was found from the study that social engagement provided meaningfulness and connectedness in widows by interacting with people around them and thus adapting to life. The coping strategy differs from one culture to another as it is socially constructed phenomena. The study expands the available knowledge about ways to cultivate coping strategies among elderly widows using resilience. However, there is a need for further research and special policies for elderly widows to ensure an easier and healthy life for them within their family, community and society.

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