



COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effects on Mental Health: Challenges of Senior Citizens in Nepal

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Abstract

This study explores the mental health problems of senior citizens (above 60 years) due to the COVID-19 pandemic in Kirtipur municipality. A qualitative research design with purposive sampling was used to choose the senior citizens and the study area. Data were taken from ten in-depth interviews and ten observations. Data were analyzed through thematic and verbatim methods. It is found that senior citizens had mental tension such as losing self-confidence, anxiety, forgetfulness, and loss of interest in work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this study, it is recommended that the Kirtipur municipality must identify the causes of the mental problems of senior citizens and support them to minimize the effects.

Background

A senior citizen is a citizen of Nepal who has completed the age of sixty years. Ageing is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable process. Every living being is born, develops, grows old, and dies. Ageing is a gradual change in physical appearance and has succeeded in lowering the process of ageing (Bhandary, 2019). Population statistics show that the number of elderly people (senior citizens) has been increasing because of an increment in the average life expectancy at birth. In

Nepal, the population above sixty years of age comprised 5.8% of the total population [Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), 1991]. While after ten years, it increased to 6.5% (CBS, 2001) and 8.13% increased (CBS, 2011). To address the right and authority of senior citizens in Nepal, Senior Citizens Act was organized in 2006. This act aimed to make provisions immediately for protection. Social security of senior citizens and enhancement of trust, respect, and good faith towards them by utilizing knowledge, skills, capability, and

experiences inherent in them is a must. Senior citizen act declared that senior citizen means a citizen of Nepal having completed the age of sixty years [Nepal Senior Citizens Act (NSCA), 2006].

Furthermore, it helps to assist the abandoned senior citizen to provide an income source or property for earning their livelihood. It also assists family members in maintaining and taking care of them despite the existence of family members, being compelled to live a disregarded life because of not being maintained by the member. The establishment of a care center for them shelter is also important [Nepal Law Commission (NLC), 2006]. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. People infected with the COVID-19 virus experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people are more likely to develop serious illnesses due to this disease (Andrade, 2020).

Due to coronavirus, older people are being challenged by requirements to spend more time at home, lack of physical contact with other family members, friends, and colleagues, and other activities; and anxiety and fear of illness and death on their own and others (Banerjee, 2020). World Health Organization together with its partners is providing guidance and advice during the COVID-19 pandemic for older people and their households, health- and social care workers and local authorities, and community group. Among adults, the risk for severe illness from COVID-19 increases with age, with older adults at the highest risk. Severe illness means that the person with COVID-19 may require hospitalization, intensive care, or a ventilator to help the elderly people to breathe, or they may even die.

In this regard, this study seeks to explore the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the mental and physical health of senior citizens (60 years above) in Kirtipur municipality. This study helps to plan and formulate local rules and regulations to minimize the effects of coronavirus on senior citizens. Further composition of male and female elderly is measured through the sex ratio which gives the number of male elderlies per 100 female elderly. A sex ratio above 100 is considered as an excess of males and a sex ratio below 100 is considered as an excess of females. The sex ratio of 100 implies both male and female is equal. The total sex ratio of the elderly 60 years and above in Nepal was 97.7 which implies there was excess of a woman in the total elderly population. In other words, there were nearly 98 males per hundred female elderly. In the context of federal Nepal, province 1 has nearly equal male and female elderly. Province dominated by elderly males is Province 2 and Province 5 only. Province dominated by female elderly is province 3, province 4, province 6, and province 7. Province 7 has only 84 males per hundred female elderly.

Ageing has always been a global issue and Nepal has also taken this issue as one of the priorities of the government. On the other, the fertility rate has been declining in recent years and the tempo is expected to be unexpectedly fast as the mortality is declining and the life expectancy is continuing to increase for both sexes in Nepal. It is important to understand the ageing issue in the proper demographic and national context. In a country like Nepal, a marginal increase in the proportion of older people possesses problems when the country is characterized by greater spatial inequalities, poverty, overly used land resources, a stagnant economy, high illiteracy, and poor health status. Nepal has introduced a non-contributory social pension scheme since

1994/95 to ensure social security for elderly citizens. This system is unique to Asia being the primary universal pension scheme in the region and a model for other developing countries.

The primary motive behind this scheme is to promote a long-established tradition of taking care of the elderly by their family. All the Policies, Acts, and Regulations for the elderly have focused special attention on the promotion of family support for the well-being of older people. In some developed countries, state pensions ensure old-age income security for a significant proportion of the population, while in developing countries relatively few have access to retirement pensions. In countries with low rates of occupational or retirement pension coverage, other social policy instruments are functioning to ensure access to cash the kind assistance for older persons. The social pension schemes which do not provide adequate income or coverage may need to be expanded for wider coverage (MoHP, 2010).

The senior citizen living in urban areas seem to be more privileged compared to rural elderly and but at the same time their condition is really worse in urban areas as well. The biggest issue for elderly people in urban areas is abandonment by their children (Flint, Bingham, & Iaboni, 2020; Shadmi et al., 2020). There are many cases where elderly people are abandoned by their children during their old age period. There are severe cases like leaving them in the street, or temple. In some cases, the children in urban areas keep their parents until they assign their property to their children's names. Urbanization and modernization are other big problems for the elderly to cope with. They don't have any activities to do the whole day (Dhakal & Aryal, 2022).

The above studies show that urban elderly people are facing so many psychological and mental problems such as depression, trauma, and stress. So this study intended to accomplish to identify the existing mental and psychological health problems of senior citizens during COVID-19.

Methodology

This study is based on qualitative research grounded within the interpretivism paradigm. It employed in-depth interviews and participant observations for the collection of data. Ten in-depth interviews were taken with the elderly population. Observations were done from the elderly people from whom in-depth interviews were taken. The elderly population aged 60 years and above with different socio-economic backgrounds within the Kirtipur municipality was the study population. Purposive sampling was used to select the elderly people for the study. Both males and females in the ratio of 1:1 are taken purposively for the study. The study site was also purposively selected from the Kirtipur municipality.

Qualitative data were recorded, collected, and transcribed according to the need of the study. Transcribed data from each interview was checked whether it was properly transcribed. Altogether, there is the transcription of interviews of ten elderly people among them five were male and five were female. Among them, two respondents were male Brahmin, two were female Brahmin, two were male Newar, two were female Newar and one-one was male and female from the Gurung ethnic group. After the data transcribing, themes were generated. At this point, I narrowed down the codes and create themes and categories. That is, similar codes were combined into a single theme.

In addition, it is the point where irrelevant codes were discarded and they focused on potential themes that were useful and made the analysis more credible. Following the coding and content analysis method, all the textual data from the transcribed interviews were analyzed by first breaking down the data into segments of meaning and then categorizing the segments. After one transcript, the data analyzers repeated the process to the remaining transcripts. New codes were found on the basis of interview transcripts as emerged, so there was always a constant comparison between the data. At this point, again, the codes were combined and discarded unnecessary codes. The intent of the comparing transcripts was to make the data as accurate as possible.

Findings

One of the main objectives of this study is to explore the situation of mental and psychological problems of senior citizens located in the Kirtipur municipality of Kathmandu district. In order to achieve this objective, the qualitative data i.e., in-depth interviews regarding the home environment. Activities done by the elderly population in the pandemic period. COVID-19 pandemic effects on senior citizens. COVID-19 has impacted almost every sector of human life. The findings are grouped under the following themes.

Theme 1: Home Environment of Senior Citizens

It was observed that the health of the senior citizens was affected mentally and emotionally. COVID-19 had an impact on the home environment more in comparison to other sectors. During that period, schools were closed for their grandchildren, the market was closed, and those family members

with jobs had no need to go to the offices. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic caused community closure physically.

Elderly people were unable to go to neighbours for sharing feelings, meet them, and pass the time during the day. I collected data from the homes of elderly people about alternative strategies for passing time in the elderly people and found that elderly people were lacking appropriate use of safety measures and other facilities like gloves, face masks, sanitizer, etc. (A senior citizen, male, Brahmin)

In the same way, another senior citizen said:

The home was locked during the COVID-19 pandemic period. It was impossible to move around. I had difficulty as time passed. As a senior citizen in my home, I requested all family members to stay far from me physically. So, we made a simple guideline to protect family members from COVID-19 disease. But this technique was not effective. Even though some of the homes from my neighbor areas moved here and there.

The respondent further told:

Due to this, my grandchildren were also affected causing no learning and less learning at home. Attempts like using face masks, sanitizer, and gloves were used for alternative approaches such as online classes but that was not effective for my grandchildren. Therefore, it was a difficult time for us as well as for the children.

This finding shows that the home environment of elderly people during COVID-19 was not good and happy. But, in the post-COVID

situation, the home environment is normal in terms of collaboration, division of work, etc. In connection to these findings particularly related to the home environment during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID pandemic, Glynn et al., (2021) researched that "the practice of family routines robustly predicted better child mental health" (p. 3). In the same line, "living environment deprivation was an important determinant of spatial clustering of COVID-19 hotspots" (Dass et al., 2021, p. 1). It was found that the home environment is normal. Arguing the finding, better child mental health, and this protective effect persisted (Glynn et al., 2021; Gaur et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Discontinuity in Morning Walks

Due to the lockdown during the pandemic, homes remained closed for a long time. Due to this, regular morning walk was discontinued. In this context, a Newari senior citizen from Kirtipur presented his dissatisfaction, "We could not succeed to support our own health by providing active life and walks. We had made a discussion on grandchildren and children on this matter of running day-to-day life activities, but we could not find any solution." He further shows his difficulties, "We were not able to go to neighbours houses individually and provide the necessary materials. After the reopening of lockdown, it was difficult to perform daily life activities. It is because our habit changes. We cut off the time for walking and started doing exercise a few hours daily.

When COVID-19 started, my grandson's exam ran, and immediately his school was closed. Especially the education of my smallest granddaughter was much disturbed. There were problems in continuous learning. We started some

online programmes from mobile phones. In the next session, she could not learn due to the long closure of the school. After the lockdown, only after six months, did the Nepal government pass Alternative Learning Directives that were prepared and circulated. In fact, severe learning loss was found in my granddaughter and that was proved after taking her achievement (Interview, Senior citizen, Male Brahmin).

It was found that continuous morning walks are discontinued even in post-COVID situations. In favour of this finding, Finlay et al., (2021) said exercising and going outdoors is adversely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID as well. This is supported by Gulia, and Sreedharan, (2022) researched that "Mood shifted toward a happier state in the post-COVID period" (p. 2).

After lockdown, senior citizens were discontinued from going to morning walks and doing exercise. Later when the community reopened after resuming the lockdown, I could not catch the morning walk rhythm. In this regard, one of the senior citizens supposed the loss of morning walk by the expression:

In normal times i.e., before the COVID-19 pandemic, I did regular exercise. I used to go to Chovar for a walk with my friends. It helped me to gain good health and learn a lot from my friends while sharing feelings and experiences during the walks. But, after COVID, I felt that the elderly population could not catch the morning walk, exercise, and listen to friends sharing. It adversely affected my health. I was unable to get the opportunity during COVID time as usual. Still, I with my friends cannot walk for a period of

one hour. COVID-19 made lots of health loss (Senior citizen, Gurung Male).

Similarly, another senior citizen from the Brahmin family stated:

I was very enthusiastic about morning walks daily but was hopeless due to the long-time closure. I was interested to read books and take part in meetings with my friends in the community. My friends were also keen to learn and share. Senior citizens were not going to the Chautaras for so long and are deprived of sharing, playing cards, and ludo (a game). But due to the closure, all these activities stopped. It made me unhappy (Senior citizen, Brahmin, Male).

A senior citizen reported,

Due to COVID-19, I forgot my previous day-to-day life routine and also was not focused on my pooja (worshipping God in the morning time). I focused on listening radio, and news, watching television, and know more about the cases, injured, and deaths of COVID patients.

On the same line, another grandmother from the same locality said

After COVID-19, my grandchildren were weaker in their studies, they have a learning loss. They are free at their homes and not interested in their study. Based on the observation of their behaviour, I can say that they have forgotten learning.

Different impacts are observed during lockdown. For example, grandchildren had a boredom feeling staying at home continuously. Their freedom was lost. They were scared. Their reading habit was stopped. They became lazy. They just spent time with

a mobile phone or with indoor games. As a result, a huge loss in their learning is being evaluated. On the other hand, I as a senior citizen also had a lot of tension, anxiety, sleeplessness, and indigestion. This was my psychological problem during the COVID-19 pandemic for me. Connecting to this finding, more research found that it was a difficult time during the pandemic period but in the post-COVID situation spending more time exercising or ensuring personal and household hygiene (Hou, Lai, Ben-Ezra, & Goodwin, 2020). In the same way, Carraro et al., (2022) found that many of the exercises could be performed in bed but not outside whereas in the post-COVID situation, life becomes normal.

Theme 3: Loss of Learning Habit on Grand Children

As the schools were closed at once for an uncertain time, the usual study routine of grandchildren was also discontinued. Then there was found a huge loss in achievement level in students. A grandmother assumed, "I found a huge gap between the achievement of my grandchildren before and after the lockdown. The problem is related to the misuse of mobile phones. My grandson is always on mobile. He forgets his learning and reading the text. It also made me unhappy that was another mental problem for me. At this time, parents were also busy watching television. There was a learning loss among our students and a vision loss among the elders.

Another senior citizen of the same region opinioned:

Sure, we conducted guide our children at the community level. We also conducted online teachers' meetings, providing

teaching-learning materials, but due to the lockdown, the achievement of students after COVID-19 was decreasing. My grandson and granddaughter were unable to read the text for the continuously watching TV and were busy on their mobile phones. I do not know the curriculum, specification grid, loose correction of papers, and difficulty to prepare questions, and giving scores to them were the challenges. Learning loss among the students creates tension in me. This is my main cause of unhappiness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In relation to the education deterioration of grandchildren due to the COVID-19 pandemic, another senior citizen remarked:

The achievement of my granddaughter after COVID-19 was decreasing. Lack of educational materials, online class facility in school; access to ICT devices, TV, radio, incentives for internet knowledge in parents/family, lack of interactive class, support from the Municipality; limited knowledge in teachers about using online classes; and fear of COVID-19 were the major barriers.

In the same line, a Gurung senior citizen viewed, after lockdown, we got to know that the capacity or ability of children decreases not only in specific things. He further said, "I found about more loss of in achievement in overall. Anyway, students were promoted despite learning loss because there was no good learning environment in the home. Many research found that there is more learning loss among students due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Blaskó, Costa, & Schnepf, 2022; Dawadi, Giri, & Simkhada, 2020; Holt &

Murray, 2022; Latzer, Leitner, & Karnieli-Miller, 2021).

In this regard, one of the senior citizens from the Gurung ethnicity said:

The motivation level of children in the study was in degrading condition. Children had forgotten what they had learned. Those who had learned multiple and divide also had forgotten. Hence, we had to start from the beginning. Learning loss was visible after the lockdown. Psychologically children were affected negatively. Children from poor backgrounds lost their learning.

My grandson was unable to write the answer to a simple question. He copies questions and left the space for the answer. The achievement of my grandson had drastically decreased. He was not concentrated on his study. On the other hand, was not sufficient gazette to take online classes? We had economic problems as the job of my son was discontinued during that time. Learning loss of my grandson creates tension for me because I love him more than his father and mother.

Another senior citizen added, "During the pandemic time we could not evaluate the children's performance properly". Children were more capable before. In this connection, one of my friends said that the achievement level of his children also decreased. There are various reasons explained by him. He further said, "We were unable to do sufficient learning activities, unable to complete online curriculum and unable to conduct assessment properly. In such condition how present achievement could be increased?"

Children at home could not learn as they were meant in the face-to-face class. Still, with its alternative methods, the

Nepal government has been trying to make sure that they meet the optimum learning requirement to upgrade to higher grades considering the condensed curriculum. The students have learned through alternative methods but not to the optimum requirement.

Another senior citizen viewed:

The government announced the first lockdown intending to prevent people including students against COVID-19. All the academic activities become closed which impacted running classes, conducting examinations, and other academic activities of the schools. We thought that it will be settled on the 2nd week of Baisakh but the infection was increasing rapidly throughout the country which made us confused about what to do. I think students who have no teaching-learning environment and learning culture at home, who have no access to radio, television, computer, internet, smartphone, etc., suffered more from staying at home without learning.

Moreover, another senior citizen highlighted:

COVID-19 world problem and lockdown worldwide, schools of our children are also closed. At first, when the lockdown and schools were closed, we did not have any pre-planned alternative modes of teaching. Due to this, it adversely affected the learning of our children. At the first lockdown, there was no terminal examination. Children were not able to go to school, guardians were not also aware. This led to an adverse effect on the learning of the students.

It was found that students were adversely affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research found that there is a learning loss in students from the basic level to the university level (Adhikari et al., 2021; Laudari, Pariyar, & Maraseni, 2021; Kunwar, 2021).

Theme 4: Children's Discipline and Mental Tension of Senior Citizens

When children had not gone to school for a long time, they forgot the rules, discipline, and system of the school and the home. It took time to come back to the usual situation.

A senior citizen said,

“My grandchildren forget discipline. They become addicted to mobile phones and forget to read textbooks. We tried to bring them in normal condition but it was very difficult for us to make them normal to read the books, brush their teeth, and day to day life activities. Similarly, another senior citizen reported, “My children were lazy. At first we have shown YouTube videos to motivate them. It was effective to avoid fear”. The next senior citizen said that we were not able to make children free from fear, anxiety, and lack of interest to learn but we find a lack of good manners in them.”

It is found from this study that the discipline of children was lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Research showed that discipline became a problem when children stayed at home during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fabbri et al., 2021; Freisthler et al., 2022).

Overall, all the respondent's home was locked during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the difficulty for the senior citizens to time pass, maintain social and physical and social distancing. Due to the

school closure, the grandchildren of almost all the senior citizens were adversely affected causing no learning and less learning at home. It was found that senior citizens used face masks, sanitizer, and gloves even in the post-COVID pandemic to protect their bodies from diseases. Senior citizens were successful to support their own health by providing active life and walks in the post-COVID period. It was found that during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, senior citizens were not able to meet neighbours, unable to do daily life activities. It was found that the habit of senior citizens was changed. They cut off the time for walking and started doing exercise for a few hours daily at home. The study found that the respondents who are from the local business sector, managed regular expenses. But the elderly people from the agriculture sector, and daily wages base work were difficult to manage resources for day-to-day life activities. So, the students of parents whose income was not regular have more psychological problems like fear, depression, anxiety, and forgetfulness.

Discussion

All the respondent's home was locked during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that difficult for senior citizens to time pass and maintain social and physical and social distancing. In this connection, Brooke, and Clark, (2020) researched that it is difficult to do physical activities by the senior citizens. In this connection, most elderly people are unable to regain their normal work even in the post-COVID period (Van Orden et al., 2021). The physical problems are linked to the mental status of senior citizens due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jawaid, 2020). Further, due to the school closure, the grandchildren of almost all the senior citizens were adversely affected causing no learning and less learning at home. This finding is advocated by Fitzgerald,

Nunn, and Isaacs, (2020) researched that the learning of students is adversely affected by the pandemic. It is still the effect of the post-COVID situation.

Arguing this finding, Mohamad, (2020) found that COVID-19 adversely affects social distancing' among people. Due to this, physical and social distancing creates mental tension among elderly people. Also, mental tension like fear and anxiety is still the effect of the post-COVID period among senior citizens (Son et al., 2021).

Moreover, it was found that senior citizens used face masks, sanitizer, and gloves even in the post-COVID pandemic to protect their bodies from diseases. This finding is linked with the research that the use of preventive measures like face masks and sanitizers creates mental tension among elderly people (Heid et al., 2021). Also, Pedersen, and Favero, (2020) said that face masks and sanitizers create difficulty in speaking and may cause skin allergies. This became one of the causes of mental tension among elderly people. Another finding was that senior citizens were successful to support their own health by providing active life and walk in the post-COVID period. This was supported and proved by the research carried out by a number of researchers. They found that mental tension and physical activities are related to each other and those elderly people with physical problems have more mental tension like forgetfulness and body shivering (Acharya et al., 2021; Elihami, 2021; Hevia et al., 2022; Schult, Mahler, Fauth, & Lindner, 2022).

Likewise, it was found that during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, senior citizens were not able to meet neighbours, unable to do daily life activities. And, it was

also found that the habit of senior citizens is changing. They cut off the time for walking and started doing exercise for a few hours daily at home. These findings are argued by Reuge et al., (2021) said that most people cut off their time for regular exercise due to fear of the COVID-19 pandemic even in the post-COVID period. One interesting finding is that the respondents started to spend time on online programmes to listen and watch news on mobile phones. Due to this, physically they were found weak in the post-COVID period. This finding was advocated by Birkelund and Karlson, (2022). According to this research, elderly people become physically weak in the post-COVID period. It was the physical and mental effect of the COVID-19 pandemic among senior citizens. Mawkhlieng and Majumdar, (2021) researched that the use of facemasks during the pandemic period creates mental tension. They further said that the difficulty in breathing and conversation are also problems even in the post-COVID period. On the one hand, it hinders respiration, and on the other hand, this created mental tension.

Moreover, even in the post-COVID period, grandchildren of senior citizens have low achievement levels. There is a learning loss among most of the grandchildren. The research found that students lose learning capability due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Orzeł and Wolniak, (2021) proved that quality assurance is the main issue in this period. Also, there is the learning loss among the students that created anxiety and tension for their grandparents (Almulhim et al., 2021; Dharmaraj et al., 2021; Onigbinde et al., 2021). Senior citizens discontinued going on morning walks and doing exercise in the post-COVID situation.

Also, it is found that the psychological health of senior citizens is adversely affected. It is due to the fact that they were unable to walk, do simple exercises, meet friends, and walk around the nearby home. It was found that the physical health of the respondent affected their mental health. Linking these findings, many researchers have done the research and argued that COVID-19 left the psychological health of senior citizens (Acharya & Acharya, 2022; Caballini, Agostino, & Dalla Chiara, 2021; Grattagliano et al., 2020; Liska & Andreansky, 2021). Instead of knowing good news from the television, elderly people started to focus on listening radio, and news, watching television, and knowing more about the cases, injured, and deaths of people.

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