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Ageing with Dignity: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Economically Vulnerable Elderly Engaged in Late-Life Employment in Pakistan

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Original Article

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Abstract

The last ten years or so have seen a rise in academic interest in working past retirement age and an increase in the public discourse surrounding post-retirement employment. In Asian countries like China, India, and South Korea, the majority of workers are in their early to late 50s, and many of them work well into their late 60s. An ageing population struggles to make ends meet in a developing country beset by political upheaval, sluggish economic growth, low senior savings, and a precarious pension system. The study investigated the experiences of older people who continue to work after the usual retirement age using a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design. Thematic analysis revealed different perceptions and meanings associated with the experience of late-life employment broadly grouped into four main themes including the weight of responsibility, perspectives on ageing and work, maintaining dignity, and, physical and mental toll of ageing. Elderly people's reasoning and decision-making were greatly influenced by how they navigated the challenges of working into their later years and cultural norms. The accounts provided by the participants on employment and ageing enhance our comprehension of the experiences of elderly individuals in the workforce.

Introduction

Globally, the number of elderly people is increasing, and Pakistan is not an exception (Jalal & Younis, 2014). The fastest growth rate is seen in the elderly compared to all other age groups. Ageing populations are predicted to make up around 22% of the global population by 2050 (He, Goodkind & Kowal, 2016). In Pakistan, with 40 million individuals over 60, it is anticipated that this number of elderly people would double in 2050 (Zainab et al., 2021). In South Asia, ageing populations are creating a number of issues, such as increased healthcare and pension

expenditures, an increase in dependency ratios, and altered family structures (Chand, 2018). On the other hand, ageing population finds life difficult in a developing nation with multiple issues including political unrest, slow economic growth, low senior financial savings, and a fragile pension system (Jalal & Younis, 2014). Family support is also dwindling in developing nations due to socioeconomic circumstances and government social programs are essentially nonexistent. Over the last ten years or so, academic interest in working beyond old age has peaked, and post-retirement employment has grown in importance as a topic of public discussion (Fasbender et al., 2016). The OECD research on retirement age trends revealed that although the legal minimum retirement ages in several Asian nations, such as China, India, and South Korea, are in the early to late 50s, substantial numbers of workers continue to work far into their late 60s (Retirement age trends around the globe, 2023).

Pakistan's ageing population faces serious health and care giving challenges. The elderly in poverty have no one to rely on for support. Senior citizens were once viewed as a blessing by Pakistani society, but these days they are seen as an enforced responsibility (Noor & Qureshi, 2023). In a study aimed at identifying health promotion activities among elderly people, over one-third of the participants were still employed, and over half of them could afford their daily needs (Zainab et al., 2021). Four key categories of factors are identified in the literature as impacting employment at 65: the need to earn a living (including income, owning a house, and pensions); the capacity to work (including health and skills); domestic circumstances (connected to partnership status); and workplace considerations (Lain, 2015). The majority of the time, poverty forces older citizens to continue working in order to support themselves. However, the dearth of favorable employment prospects makes it difficult for them to find suitable employment. An analysis of the differences in the working status and income expenditure gap between literate and illiterate senior citizens showed that the former had a comparative advantage over the latter in finding employment, which improved their monthly income level relative to the latter. Furthermore, literate senior individuals' current health was in better shape than that of illiterate senior citizens (Arbab, Ram & Khawaj, 2020).

There are reports of high physical workloads for many elderly people in physically demanding jobs, which raises the risk of illness or disability. Age-related reductions in aerobic and musculoskeletal capacities have been linked to an average 20% reduction in physical labor capacity between 40 and 60 years of age. These factors may lead to a reduction in one's ability to work and, as a result, a rise in illnesses and injuries related to the workplace (Kenny et al., 2008). Due to age-related declines in physical performance, senior workers in physically demanding environments may regrettably no longer be able to maintain the ability to complete the physical requirements of their occupations (Norheim et al., 2017). Moreover, the industry frequently lacks the knowledge or resources necessary to put into practice suitable work management techniques that would safeguard its most vulnerable employees (Kenny et al., 2016). The influence of long-term health problems in older age makes the link between health and employment especially important for older workers performing manual labor. For older workers, the supportive environment of their supervisors and the overall health of the organization are just as crucial as their perceived ability to work (Previtali et al., 2022). For certain people, working past the conventional retirement age may be advantageous for mental health. The intricate mechanisms underlying this phenomenon are probably mediated by the preservation of productive societal positions, sustained income, and social support. According to a Chinese study, employment has a beneficial effect on the mental health of older persons in China. For a greater number of elderly individuals, up to 80 years old,

with lesser educational backgrounds and rural household registration, the employment-related promotional effect was significant. Furthermore, the understanding that employment improves older people's mental health is highly mediated by individual annual income, financial help given to children, and support received from children (Cheng, Lan & Ci, 2023).

Prior studies on the ageing population in Pakistan have focused on investigating the experiences of the elderly. The majority of qualitative research has been on older individuals' experiences living in retirement homes and the difficulties they encounter while obtaining health care services. Unquestionable truths that humans encounter on a daily basis are called experiences. Investigating experiences is essential to understanding intricate social processes, and ageing is such a sensitive and complex phenomenon that it calls for careful study. The goal of this research is to examine the real-world experiences of elderly people who continue to work. The unique experiences of older individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are forced to work offer important insights for the development of culturally sensitive policies and initiatives that are aimed at this specific demographic group in Pakistan. It also explores the deep cultural meaning of respect and how working in older life presents challenges.

Research Questions

1. How do older people from lower socioeconomic origins in Pakistan view problems involved with late-life employment, and what meanings do they ascribe to this experience?
2. How do cultural elements common in communities with low economic status influence older people who are forced to work into their later years of life?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological research design to investigate the experiences of elderly individuals who are work beyond the traditional retirement age. Ten men and one woman, altogether eleven older adults, participated in this study. The participants were chosen by convenience sampling from Sargodha city's suburbs. Before the interviews began, each participant was told about the goal of the study and consent was obtained. To protect the participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were utilized. To gather information, in-depth interviews have been employed and data gathered was meticulously organized and described using thematic analysis. The demographic characteristics of the participants are given below:

Results

To examine the data, a thematic analysis method was employed. Identifying the recurring and frequent narratives allowed for the extraction of major themes. Information about the workers' demographics shows that most of the senior workers were in the 62–74 age range. Different perceptions and meanings associated with the experience of late-life employment could be broadly grouped into four main themes including the weight of responsibility, perspectives on ageing and work, maintaining dignity, and, physical and mental toll of ageing.

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation
AK	65	Male	Vegetable seller
HN	70	Male	Construction worker
KY	62	Male	Construction worker
TS	64	Male	Security guard
KK	74	Male	Dry fruits seller
GI	71	Male	Shop Keeper
FN	67	Male	Construction worker
CK	65	Female	Housemaid
AN	69	Male	Street vendor
HM	63	Male	Construction worker
NK	64	Male	Construction worker

Theme 1: Weight of Responsibility

This theme highlights the pressure to continue working amid financial challenges compounded by high inflation and the burden of being the sole breadwinner in their families. These narratives reflect the challenges of maintaining livelihoods and the determination of working-class families. They feel a sense of obligation and responsibility towards providing for loved ones.

"It's already hard to pay the bills at home because of how high inflation is. How do we survive if I stop working? My only son works from early in the morning till late at night as a mechanic"

"My kid, how will we eat if I stop working? In my household, I am the sole wage earner"

"Although there are moments when I wish I could stop working, people like us have no such choice. Working in construction has been my career for my entire life. I constructed my house with what I had saved up. My son works as a labourer also, but I have to work because of high inflation"

Theme 2: Perspectives on Ageing and Work

This theme reveals different perspectives on working in late life. Participants mostly expressed gratitude despite the challenges of working at an older age. One of the participants expressed disappointment that the hope for relaxing retirement is challenged by difficult economic circumstances in the country. The narratives of the respondents also reflected the desire to maintain self-sufficiency and not burden the family members.

"I am grateful that I have the strength to work at this age. Many gratitude to God, who did not make me dependent on people"

"All my life, I've worked hard. I thought I would be able to relax at this age, but life appears to have different plans. What can we do when the situation in our country is so bad?"

"My children are all married. I live with my youngest son. I'll keep working till I run out of energy. I do not want to burden him with my expenses"

Theme 3: Maintaining Dignity

This theme reflects a strong sense of self-agency and a commitment to earning a livelihood through honest means. Despite cultural pressure or concerns from family members, there is a determination among many elderly people to continue working as long as one is physically able. There's a notable emphasis on respect earned through work. One of the participants' answers revealed a spiritual dimension to work, with gratitude for earning a livelihood through lawful sustenance (Rizq-e-Halal).

"My son frequently says he does not want me to work anymore. He told me that others taunt him for allowing me to work at this age. I told him I enjoy working and that sitting at home all day makes me sick. I have spent my entire life working hard, so now I can't sit freely.

"People admire me for my job. I have earned respect because of my labour, and I will continue to work until I have the energy.

"I earn Rizq-e-Halaal by hard effort. I hope I can continue to work for a longer period of time.

Theme 4: Physical and Mental Toll of Ageing

This theme reflects the physical and mental toll that age and financial difficulties can take on older adults. There's a feeling of exhaustion and reduced energy levels, as well as distraction from work due to financial stress. The narratives revealed that there's a sense of exhaustion from a lifetime of working and regret over the lack of time spent on personal pursuits. This indicates a potential feeling of regret and missed opportunities.

"As I am becoming older, I get fatigued more easily. I don't have as much energy as I did previously"

"My expenses had skyrocketed, and I couldn't concentrate on my work. I couldn't enjoy my work since I kept thinking about the expenses"

"Sometimes it feels like I've spent my entire life working. I didn't have time for myself or my family. Even at this age, I am still working"

Discussion

This study examines the lived experiences of elderly people who continue to work even after reaching the typical retirement age. Over the last few years, the number of elderly people in the labor has climbed. Evidence reveals that older adults work longer and a high majority of persons over 65 wish to continue working after the usual retirement age (Moberg, 2001). The experiences of older individuals in the workforce are diverse and multifaceted, heavily influenced by cultural beliefs. Furthermore, financial condition and health factors have a significant impact on their decision to continue working in old age (Fraser, 2009; Nilsson, 2017). There is an additional pressure on older people in the workforce to take care of family-related responsibilities. The elderly took on their responsibilities with dignity, individuals with more pressing financial needs continued to work even after reaching retirement age. Our findings are consistent with other studies suggesting that financial pressures, such as unexpected inflation or loss of pension income, allow people to work longer (Pettersson, 2014; Zhao & Burge, 2020). This study also demonstrates that, despite the obstacles and challenges, the majority of elderly individuals consider employment at

this age to be dignified. They are content because of their sentiments of self-reliance and self-worth. However, due to age-related losses in physical performance, they are fatigued and constantly concerned about their finances. Consistent with a study that found that senior workers in physically demanding situations may unfortunately be unable to maintain the ability to perform the physical requirements of their occupations (Norheim et al., 2017). Thus, despite the challenges, the ability to work at this point of life provides individuals with a sense of dignity, self-confidence, empowerment, and autonomy.

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges that older persons confront in the workplace, as well as the meanings they attribute to these. The interviewees made primarily positive associations with work in their daily lives. They valued their responsibilities and dignity the most, followed by their personal finances. The way in which the elderly dealt with the obstacles of late-life employment as well as the cultural norms had a significant impact on their reasoning and decision-making. The participants' narratives on employment and ageing contribute to our understanding of older people's experiences in the workforce. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the necessity of resolving the issues faced by economically disadvantaged older individuals, as their sense of dignity and independence may prevent them from seeking assistance from others. The most important prerequisite for developing a more inclusive society is including the elderly in the safety nets. Policymakers, employers, and families must recognize the importance of creating supportive environments by fostering age-friendly workplaces and implementing social protection measures. Through focused actions, we can build a society in which older people can live fulfilling and dignified lives.

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