



EXPLORING OCCUPATIONAL CHALLENGES OF CAREGIVERS IN ELDERLY CARE FACILITIES IN SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka, a South Asian nation with a rapidly aging population, has witnessed a significant rise in elderly care homes. Limited research has focused on the caregivers who play a vital role in these institutions. According to the National Secretariat for Elders (2024), Colombo District hosts the highest concentration of elderly homes, representing both urban and rural characteristics, thereby offering a unique setting to explore caregiver challenges. This qualitative study employed purposive sampling to select participants from 86 elderly homes in Colombo. Homes with only male or female residents were excluded, leaving 18 homes with at least 10 adults eligible for study. From these, 60 caregivers with more than one year of experience were purposively selected, ensuring diversity in gender and professional roles, including direct care staff, personal care workers, and maintenance staff. Such variation enhanced the reliability and relevance of the findings. Data were collected through 60 semi-structured interviews. The analysis revealed five key themes of caregiver challenges. First, caregivers experienced mental and emotional distress, including secondary trauma and exhaustion. Second, limited resources and inadequate training in modern elder care methods restricted service quality. Third, low wages and poor professional recognition resulted in financial strain and diminished social acceptance. Fourth, weak institutional management and insufficient support highlighted issues of understaffing and lack of managerial backing. Finally, sociocultural pressures, such as negative societal attitudes towards elder care, compounded the burden. Although these problems were present across both urban and rural contexts, their severity varied. The study concludes that caregivers in Sri Lanka face interrelated challenges that directly impact their well-being and service delivery. To address this, the study recommends national training and certification programs, mental health support services, fair wage structures, management reforms, and public awareness initiatives. These measures are essential to strengthen caregiver well-being and improve elder care quality.

Keywords: aged care, care facilities, caregivers, elderly homes, occupational stress

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Introduction

Amid the challenges Sri Lanka faces in terms of the geographical and socio economic dynamics of its ageing population, the role played by caregivers in elderly homes is extremely crucial. This essential workforce constantly faces a number of systemic and structural challenges, which directly affect their mental and physical wellbeing as well as the quality of service provided. In here the main research problem is the lack of a deep and contextual understanding of the professional challenges faced by service providers in elderly homes in Sri Lanka, the underlying causes of them, and how these challenges affect their service performance. There is a need to explore in detail the psychological, emotional, social, economic, and institutional issues faced by those employed in this service. The main objective of this qualitative study was to gain a deep and contextual understanding of the multiple professional challenges faced by service providers working in elderly homes in Sri Lanka, the underlying causes of them, and how these challenges affect their service performance. Another objective was to propose policies to improve the wellbeing of those providing services to residents of elderly homes.

Methodology/Materials and Methods

The Colombo District was used as the study area for this study. Several main reasons influenced the selection of the Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka as the study area for this research. Data from the Sri Lanka Elders Secretariat (2024) confirms that the highest number of registered elderly homes in the country is concentrated in the Colombo District. Furthermore, Colombo is a geographical unit that exhibits both urban and rural characteristics, which provides an opportunity to investigate the problems faced by caregivers across rural and urban contexts. This was facilitated by the high urban demand for elder care services in Colombo and the specific challenges associated with it (large number of employees, elderly population with diverse backgrounds, complex management issues). As an urban hub, the presence of different types of elderly homes (government, private, religious, with various facilities) in the Colombo district provides an opportunity for a detailed analysis of the nature of the problems faced by care givers.



Purposive sampling was used to select suitable caregivers for this qualitative research from among 86 elderly homes in the Colombo district. 22 elderly homes with only males or females were excluded, and 18 homes with at least 10 adults were identified from the remaining 64 homes. Due to the efficiency of data collection, a purposively selected sixty caregivers, who is working elderly homes, were used as data contributors. The sample included both genders, individuals with more than one year of service and experience, and those engaged in various professional roles (direct care, personal care, maintenance workers). This diversity helped to enhance the reliability and relevance of the research findings. For collecting data, sixty semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). This six-step process (familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the report) identified five main themes: mental and emotional exhaustion, limited resources and inadequate training, low pay and minimal professional recognition, poor organizational management and lack of support, and socio-cultural pressures. Methods such as triangulation and participant validity testing were used to ensure the reliability of the data. Although these issues were common in both urban and rural contexts, their intensity and impact varied.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the analysis, five main themes were identified regarding the challenges faced by service providers in elderly homes representing urban and rural contexts in the Colombo district of Sri Lanka. These themes are analyzed based on data from rural and urban contexts as well as factors that influenced the selection of service providers (gender, tenure, professional roles).

Psychological and Emotional Exhaustion

Psychological and emotional exhaustion was identified as a major challenge for caregivers. Interviews revealed that they were subject to significant psychological stress and emotional strain as they constantly deal with the illnesses, pain, deaths and emotional needs of older people. In particular, clear evidence of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue emerged from the data. Service providers often stated that they experienced the suffering of older people as their own, which negatively affected their mental health. In the Colombo district, caregivers in elderly homes were found to experience greater mental strain due to the high workload and pressure of providing services to a larger number of people. In homes with rural characteristics, such as those in the Colombo district, the number of caregivers and the need for the same person to perform multiple roles were



found to be factors contributing to mental strain. By gender, female caregivers reported more emotional strain, while male service providers emphasized physical strain. Caregivers with more than one year of service reported experiencing more emotional strain, particularly due to the challenges they face over a long period of time in their jobs.

Limited Resources and Inadequate Training

Limited resources (e.g. financial, technical, human resources) in elderly homes and inadequate training of caregivers were another major challenge. Lack of knowledge about modern elder care methods, gerontological knowledge and communication skills were found to be the main factors that hampered the quality of their services. This problem was common in both urban and rural elderly homes. However, while the private sector in elderly urban homes in Colombo sometimes had improved facilities, it did not fully address the training gap. In homes in rural areas, the inability to provide training opportunities was more pronounced due to financial constraints. It was also revealed that there were no specific training opportunities for different types of caregivers (e.g. kitchen staff). Even those with more than a year of experience emphasized the need for standardized training programs. This is seen as an obstacle to maintaining standards of care.

Low Remuneration and Lack of Professional Recognition

The low salaries of service providers, issues with job security and the lack of social and professional recognition for their work had led to a strong motivational breakdown. Many expressed concerns about their economic hardship and the lack of recognition by society of the importance of their role. This theme was particularly strong among service providers working in the urban context of Colombo, where economic pressures are increasing due to the rising cost of living. In areas with rural characteristics within the Colombo district itself, although salaries are low, the overall cost of living may be relatively low. Lack of professional recognition was a common issue across all service providers, regardless of length of service (including those with more than a year of experience) and gender.

Poor Institutional Management and Lack of Support

Inadequate staffing, heavy workloads, and lack of support and supervision from management in many elderly homes further challenged the role of service providers. Service providers often reported having to make decisions alone or with very little support. Although this problem existed in both urban and rural elderly homes in the Colombo district, the intensity of the workload was higher in urban



homes (especially larger homes). In rural elderly homes, the staff shortage was more pronounced due to the lack of resources. Providers who had been working for more than a year reported greater frustration with the lack of institutional support. Both direct care providers and medical providers complained about excessive workloads, while kitchen and cleaning staff commented on a lack of support in their roles.

Socio-Cultural Pressures

Some caregivers commented on the fear and discomfort of societal attitudes towards elder care, the involvement of family members of the elderly and sometimes incidents of abuse (towards the elderly caregivers). In a society where it is traditionally expected that the elderly will be cared for within the family, the negative social attitudes towards working in elderly homes were a source of pressure for them. While this theme is common across both urban and rural areas of the Colombo district, social pressures may be more intense in rural areas due to the greater community ties. In urban areas, the need for elderly homes was highlighted due to the busyness of families and the growth of small nuclear families, but social attitudes towards service providers were not very positive. It was found that these attitudes in society affected the mentality of service providers, regardless of their gender and professional role.

Conclusion

This qualitative study provides a deeper understanding of the multiple, complex and interconnected set of challenges faced by service providers in elderly homes, representing urban and rural contexts in the Colombo district of Sri Lanka. These challenges were clearly identified through the main themes of mental and emotional exhaustion, limited resources and lack of training, low pay and minimal professional recognition, poor institutional management and lack of support, and socio cultural pressures. It can be concluded that these challenges directly affect not only the mental and physical well-being of caregivers, but also the overall quality of the care services they provide. The existing problems are structural and systemic in nature, and require immediate and multifaceted interventions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following policy and practical recommendations are made to improve the service quality of elderly caregivers and the overall quality of the elderly care system in Sri Lanka.



1. Implementation of professional mental health support programs
2. Provision of continuous professional development training and resources
3. Fair remuneration structures and professional evaluation
4. Elderly home management reforms
5. National policy and legal interventions

Future Research Directions

Since this study is qualitative in nature, the themes identified here could be further confirmed through quantitative studies. In particular, statistical analyses could be conducted on the relationships between service providers' stress levels, job satisfaction, and service quality. Furthermore, conducting longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs would also be important for future research.

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