



African Journal of Social Work
 Afri. j. soc. work
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Author(s)
 ISSN Print 1563-3934
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Easing the lock but locking the vulnerable: a COVID-19 experience of the aged in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) resulted in a lockdown in Nigeria. When the lockdown eased, there were continued restrictions of the aged due to their vulnerability to the virus occasioned by underlying chronic illnesses that are associated with aging. This study examined the experiences of the aged in the on-going COVID-19 pandemic with a view to assessing its psychological and emotional impact on the aged and the aged expectations towards being integrated back into the society. The qualitative study was conducted in Ilorin in Kwara State North-central Nigeria while 20 participants aged 65 years and above were interviewed in the study. Fear, anxiety, unhappiness, isolation, alienation, loneliness, worry and frustration were the major psychological and emotional impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the participants. Integrating the aged back into the society would also require social support, spiritual support, strict compliance to government protocols and provision of drugs and herbs. The study strongly recommends social work intervention to assist the aged in coping with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

KEY TERMS: coronavirus, fear, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, social support, spiritual support, social work

KEY DATES

Received: July 2020
 Revised: December 2020
 Accepted: April 2021
 Published: August 2021

Funding: None
 Conflict of Interest: None
 Permission: None
 Ethics approval: Not applicable

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://africasocialwork.net/current-and-past-issues/>



How to reference using ASWNet style:

Oluyemi, J. A. and Adijat, J. A. (2021). Easing the lock but locking the vulnerable: a COVID-19 experience of the aged in Nigeria. *African Journal of Social Work*, 11(4), 250-256.

INTRODUCTION

This article reports the experiences of the aged in the on-going corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic with a view to understanding the psychological and emotional impact on the aged and the aged expectations towards being integrated back into the society after lockdowns to contain the virus. The qualitative study was conducted in Ilorin in Kwara State North-Central Nigeria while 20 participants aged 65 years and above were interviewed in the study. Fear, anxiety, unhappiness, isolation, alienation, loneliness, worry and frustration were the major psychological and emotional impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the participants. Integrating the aged back into the society would also require social support, spiritual support, strict compliance to government protocols and provision of drugs and herbs.

BACKGROUND

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Although it was first discovered in Wuhan, China in December 2019, its onset has since given rise to the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. Regrettably, millions of cases of COVID-19 infection have been reported across the globe including many fatalities due to complications from underlying health conditions. Among those that are severely affected by the disease are the aged due to aging and underlying health conditions common to their age. Common symptoms of COVID-19 include cough, sneezing, sore throat, fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, shortness of breath sputum production, muscle and joint pains as well as loss of smell and taste (Africa Center for Disease Control, ACDC, 2020). In some cases, symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea in varying proportions are also presented. Although most of the cases present in mild symptoms, some eventually progress to acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) possibly precipitated by cytokine storm hence, resulting into multi-organ failure, septic shock, and blood clots.

COVID-19 is primarily spread through close contact among people, most often through small droplets produced by sneezing; coughing and talking since such droplets commonly fall to the ground or onto surfaces rather than travelling through air over long distances. Studies have also shown that transmission of the disease may also occur as a result of touching a contaminated surface and then touching the eyes, nose and mouth with such infected hand (World Health Organization, 2020). The disease can be prevention through regular hand washing, maintaining of social distance from people particularly people that show symptoms, quarantine especially for people that show symptoms, covering coughs with elbow as well as keeping unwashed hands away from the face (WHO, 2020). Although the time from exposure to the virus to onset of symptoms is usually around five days; sometimes it may range from two to fourteen days (ACDC, 2020). As of June 2020, there was no vaccine or precise antiviral treatments for COVID-19 however, the disease can be managed through isolation of infected people, treating the symptoms, supportive care and experimental measures (ACDC, 2020). The aged, especially those with underlying chronic illness such cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are likely to be more vulnerable to the disease.

In Nigeria, majority of fatalities recorded are also said to be over 50 years of age and those with underlying chronic illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, and hypertension, among others which are common with the aged as a result of aging (Adelakun, 2020). Despite the federal government recent nationwide lockdown ease on religious gatherings, Kwara state in the North central part of the country has placed further prohibition on the aged especially people from 65years and above from such gatherings undermining the role of religion in the society.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It has been reported that as people grow older, the risk for severe illness from COVID-19 increases (CDC, 2020). According to the report, people from the age of 50 years and above are at greater risk for severe illness than people that are younger likewise, people in their 60s or 70s are, in general are at higher risk for severe illness than people in their 50s. However, the greatest risk for severe illness from COVID-19 is usually among those aged 85 or older. Although, there is no generally acceptable definition of aged since there is no particular age at which a person actually turns out to be old. The corporate use of a chronological age to mark the inception of old age assumes sameness with biological age nonetheless, it can be said that these two actually mean different things. Whereas, developed countries have accepted the calendar age of 65 years as a definition of the aged, the same is not the case for developing countries (WHO, 2020b). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic the aged all over the world including Nigeria have been encouraged to stay at home as much as possible in order to stay safe hence being isolated from the society. Even though it is somewhat true that being isolated from the society could help contain the spread of the disease this may do more harm than good to the aged since, being isolated from the society may cause psychological and emotional problems.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Ilorin, Kwara State in North-Central Nigeria in July 2020. Kwara State is one of the few states in Nigeria that have further prohibited older people from the age of 65 years from attending religious gatherings since the Federal government eased the nationwide lockdown in June 2020. A total of 20 participants from 65 years and above selected through a two-staged non-probability sampling of purposive and convenience sampling methods was involved in the qualitative study. Primary data was retrieved by the researcher through telephone interview with participants using a pre-set semi-structured interview guide consisting of questions such as the psychological and emotional impacts of COVID-19 on the participants and measures that can be put in place by the government in integrating them back into the society. Informed consent was sought from the participants before the research was conducted. Participants were also duly informed of the significance and purpose of the study prior to the interview. Identities of participants were treated with anonymity while participants were identified with their age and sex in the study.

RESULTS

Following series of interviews with the participants, the study revealed that COVID-19 pandemic had enormous psychological and emotional impacts on the participants in the study. This ranged from fear to anxiety, sadness, isolation, loneliness, worry and frustration. As regards measures that could be put in place by the government to integrate the aged back into the society, participants in the study suggested social and spiritual support, strict compliance to COVID-19 guidelines by the populace and provision of drugs and herbs to citizens. This section will therefore enumerate and elaborate the results of the study in the order by which it has been stated above.

Psychological and emotional impact of COVID-19 on the aged

Findings from the study revealed the following as some of the psychological and emotional impacts of COVID-19 on the participants.

Fear

One of the major impacts of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic on the participants is fear. Some of the participants shared their experiences and this is what they had to say:

"...The disease creates so much fear in me because I have been hearing the way it is killing people all over the world especially people of my age...." (71 years, Male).

Another participant shared a similar opinion this was what he has to say:

"...All through my life I have never heard of something like this before. Even in the history of mankind this kind of thing has never happened before. It's really scary I must say..." (80 years old male).

Likewise, another participant also shared his opinion on this:

"...Seeing people dying of the disease creates so much fear in me I must confess ..." (72 years old female).

Anxiety

Another significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the participants in the study is anxiety. The following are some of the experiences of the participants in the study:

"...The thought of COVID-19 alone brings anxiety to me. The disease has killed many big people in Nigeria and you don't know if you are going to be the next victim..." (67 years old, male).

Another participant shared a similar view, and this was what he had to say:

"...Since the disease broke out in Nigeria, I have been taking hot water and some herbs to boost my immunity against the disease..." (65 years old, male).

"...It makes me panic because no one knows who is carrying the disease. Everyone is a suspect..." (74 years old, male).

Sadness

Some of the participants in the study also claimed that COVID-19 pandemic lockdown made them sad at one time or another. This was what some of the participants' have to say:

"... Prohibiting the aged like me from going to church is a thing that makes me sad. I strongly believe in corporate worship and that when humans have a problem like this, it is only God that we can run to..." (73-year-old, male).

Likewise, one other participant has this to say:

"...This COVID-19 thing makes me sad. My children that support me financially are finding it difficult to make ends meet. It's something that saddens my heart..." (76 years old, male).

In the same vein, the next participant shared the same view:

"... My happiness has drastically reduced since this COVID-19 came into limelight because I hardly see someone to share my problems with. (75-year-old, female).

Isolation

It was also revealed that some of the participants in the study felt isolated, these were their views:

"...Honestly I feel so isolated from the society. At my age it's not easy staying at home all day without going out..." (73-year-old, male).

Another participant shared similar view:

"...COVID-19 has severely restricted my movement I now find it difficult to interact with other people and it's also very difficult to know what is going on out there (72-year-old, female).

Alienation

Some of the participants in the study also felt alienated. These were their views:

"...I feel alienated from the society because I cannot enjoy my normal life like I use to do before. It's like the government is depriving us of our right to freedom of movement..." (80 years old, male).

Another participant has this to say:

"... All my friends and relations now run away from me, interacting with people has since been reduced to phone calls and other forms of social media..." (70 years old, female).

Loneliness

Another impact of the covid-19 pandemic lock down on the participants in the study is feeling of loneliness. This is what some of the participants have to say:

"...I feel so lonely especially when all the children are away and there is no one around to keep my company..." (67 years old, female).

A similar opinion was shared by another participant in the study and this is what she said:

"... My children have warned me not to go out for any reason at all. Even though they make all the things that I need available for me I must confess I still feel very lonely staying at home alone..." (65 years old, female).

Worry

Some of the participants in the study expressed worry and this was what they had to say:

"...It gives me worry because I need to go out and earn a living to support my family but I can't. At the end of the day survival becomes a big issue whereas government is doing nothing to assist us..." (66 years old, male).

Likewise, another participant had this to say:

"...The pandemic has really made things worse for some of us because it is very difficult to survive in Nigeria today without working..." (68 years old, male).

Frustration

Also, some of the participants expressed frustration and these were some of their views:

"...It's so frustrating to me because I find it difficult to move around the way I want. Everyday my health keeps deteriorating because all I do is stay at home..." (84 years old, female).

Similarly, another participant shared the same opinion:

"...I have profession which I practice and I can't go out. This affects my daily routine and passion for what I always love to do, it's really frustrating..." (80 years old, male)

What can be done to integrate the aged back to the society?

Another research questions the study also attempted to answer is the question of what can be done to integrate the aged back into the society. The following and the following were the views of the participants.

Social support

According to the participants provision of social support is germane if the aged would be integrated back into the society. This was what they had to say.

"...What the government can do to integrate the aged into the society is to provide us with social support since at this age many of us are not meaningfully productive ..." (73 years old, male).

Similar to this is what the next participant said:

"...The government should endeavour to assist the aged with palliatives to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic..." (68 years old, male).

Spiritual support

Another measure that can be taken to integrate the aged back into the society that was identified in the study spiritual support. They shared their views and this was what they had to say.

"...One important thing that can be done to integrate the aged back into the society is to offer spiritual support because it is God that has spared our lives to this old age, it is also him that will sustain us in this difficult time..." (80 years old, male).

Likewise, another participant shared similar opinion:

"...I think it will be nice if the government can lift the ban on the aged going to religious gatherings, its high time we turn to God for help..." (66 years old, male).

Strict compliance to government preventive protocols

Some of the participants in the study were also of the opinion that integrating them back into the society would require strict compliance to government COVID-19 preventive measures. This was what they had to say:

"...I will employ the aged to comply strictly with the government protocols such as regular washing our hands, wearing our face masks and social distancing. Our destiny lies in our hands..." (80 years old, male).

Another participant shared a similar opinion, this was what she said:

“...The best thing is for the aged to comply with the government directives by avoiding large gatherings, washing their hands regularly and using their facemask. I really don't expect much from the government the burden lies more on the people...” (72 years old, female).

Provision of drugs and herbs

Some of the participants in the study were also of the opinion that integrating the aged back into the society would require the provision of drugs and herbs that would help to cure the disease. These are their views:

“...I suggest that our researchers need to go to the drawing board and find a drug for this disease that is killing and wiping out the human race...” (69-year-old, male).

In the same vein a similar view was shared by another participant in the study. This was what he had to say:

“...Government should make available drugs and herbs that we can be using to treat the diseases just like Madagascar has done...” (67 years old, male).

DISCUSSION

The study examined the psychological and emotional impact of covid-19 pandemic lockdown among the aged in Ilorin Kwara State North central Nigeria as well as measure that can be put in place to integrate the aged back into the society. The first impact identified in the study is fear, also found in WHO studies (WHO, 2020). Anxiety was also mentioned supporting the previous view of ACDC (2020) which suggests that COVID-19 causes unnecessary panic in people resulting in people attempting to take different medications and treatments to prevent themselves from being infected with the virus. Further findings from the study also revealed that some of the participants became sad as a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic while some other participants felt isolated and alienated. Furthermore, it was revealed from the study that some of the participants were lonely while others expressed worry and frustration. With regards to the participants expectations of what can be done to integrate the aged back into the society, the study revealed that some of the participants expect social support from the government. This corroborates the opinion of Ogundipe (2020) who opined that, imposing a total lockdown is detrimental in a country like Nigeria where majority of the population live in abject poverty and depend on daily earnings to survive. Some of the participants in the study also suggested that they would require spiritual support in order to be integrated back into the society. This however upholds the view of Ohuabunwa (2018) which submits that Nigerians are a very religious people. Furthermore, findings from the study also suggests that participants would require strict compliance to the recommended government protocols for COVID-19 prevention and provision of drugs and herbs in order to be properly integrated back into the society. This suggests that the destiny of the aged lies in their hands, while they need to take responsibility by adhering strictly to the recommended government preventive protocols; currently there is no vaccine or drugs to prevent or cure the virus. Following the forgoing, this study therefore strongly recommends social work intervention for the aged in coping with the on-going COVID-19 pandemic and to assist them in integrating them back into the society.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the psychological and emotional impact of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Ilorin, Kwara State North central Nigeria. Fear, anxiety, unhappiness, isolation, alienation, loneliness, worry and frustration were the major psychological and emotional impact of the COVID-19 lockdown identified in the study by the participants. With regards to integrating the aged back into the society, social support, spiritual support, strict compliance to government protocols and provision of drugs and herbs were identified as imperative.

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