

Research article

Socio-economic status of elderly people in rural setting of Nepal

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Abstract

Background: Ageing is an emerging issue for Nepal because of the declining fertility and mortality of the population with continuous increase in life expectancy for both sexes. It is important to understand the issue of ageing in the proper demographic and national context.

Objective: The main objective of this paper was to provide some information about the socio-economic profile of elderly people living in rural area of Nepal.

Methods: This is a cross sectional study carried out in 2017. In total, 547 people who were 60 years and older living in a particular rural area of Kailali district were interviewed using the structured questionnaire. Descriptive technique was used to analyze the data.

Results: The result of this study shows majority (85.2%) of older adults reported that they were residing with their son and daughter-in-law, followed by spouse only (7.9%); and less than three percent (2.7%) respondents were residing alone. Over half of respondents (52.3%) reported that their decision making role in the family declined after they grew older. A majority of older adults (55.9%) did not attend any public meetings in the previous one year. Amongst the respondents 39.1% of males and 13.7% of females were literate; 48.4 % had owned some land; 30.2% of males and 24.8% of females were not working at the time of survey due to health problems or other causes. The majority (66.9%) of respondents were receiving the old age allowances. **Conclusion:** There is a need to work at a societal level to increase social and community participation of older people to prevent isolation and improving their well-being.

Key words

Ageing, Elderly, Living Arrangements, Nepal, Socioeconomic Status, Social Activities

Introduction

The living and non-living things in the world get old with time along its motion. This is the universal law of nature, whether it is a human being or other creatures, all get old with the passing of the years.¹ Elderly population is difficult to define because age sixty is usually considered the dividing line between middle age and old age. All persons aged 60 and above were considered as elderly in

the World Assembly on Ageing held at Vienna (Austria) in 1982. Similarly, in the United Nations International Conferences on Ageing and Urbanization in 1991, the term elderly is defined as the population aged 60 years and above.² For international comparison, the population aged 65 years and above is categorized as the ageing population. But in the case of developing countries like Nepal, the population aged 60 years and above is categorized as elderly population. Senior Citizen Act of Nepal (2006) defined elderly population as those people who are aged 60 years and above.³ In this study, the elderly population is defined as those people whose age is 60 years and above, considering the definition provided by the United Nations and the Senior Citizen Act of Nepal.

Among various issues faced by elderly people, socio-economic problems are of prime importance especially in a developing country like Nepal.⁴ The socio-economic background of older people helps in understanding their living conditions, quality of life, and expectations from their family, community and state in terms of their own needs.⁵ There is a need to explore economic characteristics such as working status, land holding and dependence on social security scheme; along with involvement in decision making in the family. These may also reflect upon the quality of life, living arrangement, involvement in social activities of the elderly people.

The main objective of this study was to provide information about the socio-economic condition of elderly people living in rural areas of Nepal. Specifically, the social status (such as: living arrangements, decision making status, involvement in social activities and education) and economic status (such as: working status, land holding and social security scheme) were assessed.

Methods

This is a cross-sectional study carried out in 2017. For this study, the Kailali district, in the western part of Nepal is chosen purposively. Two Village Development Committees (VDCs) (local administrative unit) were chosen as convenient sampling. Total sample size for this study was determined as 396 households through Yamane formula.⁶ A multi-stage sampling design was adopted for this study. At the first stage, two VDCs named (Hasuliya and Basauti (now renamed as Kailari Rural municipality) of Kailali districts which represent the highest proportion

of elderly population were selected as sampling area. At the next stage, all the 18 wards of selected VDCs were sampled. All the wards of selected VDCs were considered as cluster. So, there were 18 clusters in this study. All the sampled clusters were considered as primary sampling units (PSU) for this study. At the last stage, 22 households with at least one elderly 60 years and above were selected from each sampled cluster. Systematic random sampling method was used for the selection of 22 households from each cluster. However, in the survey a total of 396 households were visited and 547 elderly people aged 60+ were successfully interviewed. All the elderly persons in the sampled households were enumerated. Enumeration of all elderly persons in the sampled household would ensure coverage of both males and females and all age.

Data was collected using face-to-face structured interview method. Respondent’s right to refuse and withdraw from the interview at any time was emphasized. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality. Informed verbal consent of respondents was sought, before the interview. The data was statistically analyzed by using SPSS version 20.0. For the statistical analysis: frequency table, percentage, mean, standard deviation (SD), and chi square test were used and the results were presented in a descriptive way.

Results

There were 547 elderly people aged 60 years and above included as participants in the study. The mean age of research participants was 71.4±8.0 years (Table 1). Majority of the respondents were female (58.9%). Over three fifths (63.1%) of the respondents were married. Average household size was 6.9±3.3 persons. Majority of respondents (85.2%) reported that they were residing with

their son/daughter-in-law, followed by spouse only (7.9%). It was found that about less than two percent (1.5%) respondents were residing with their daughter/son-in-law. Furthermore, it was also found that about three percent (2.7%) respondents were residing alone. Female literacy rate was observed low compared to male elderly people. The literacy rate for elderly males was 39.1% and that for females was only 13.7%. About half of the respondents (48.4%) had owned some land in the study area.

Living Arrangements

Living arrangement about with whom the elderly people reside would suggest who the main care-givers are. Sometimes this may also reflect the support that the elderly people receive in the family or non-family context. Moreover, economic conditions and support systems available to elderly persons and the health status of individuals influence the degree of independence that can be maintained into advanced ages.⁷

Majority (85.2%) of respondents reported that they were residing with their son/daughter-in-law followed by spouse only (7.9%). Less than two percent (1.5%) respondents were residing with their daughter/son-in-law. Furthermore, it was also found that about three percent (2.7%) of respondents were residing alone. More females (3.1%) than males (2.2%) were residing alone. The data on caste/ethnic group of the respondents reflect that one third of elderly people (33.3%) of Hill Janajati group were residing with spouse only; while the corresponding figure for elderly of Hill Caste group was found as one fifth (20.5%). About eleven percent (11.1%) of elderly people of Hill Dalit caste/ethnic group were residing alone while the corresponding figure for elderly people of Hill Caste group was less than three percent (2.6%).

Table 1: Living arrangements of elderly population in different demographic groups

Demographic variables	Types living arrangement						N
	Spouse only	Son/daughter-in-law	Daughter/son-in-law	Grand children	Alone	Other family members*	
Sex							
Male	10.2	84.4	0.9	1.8	2.2	0.4	225
Female	6.2	85.7	1.9	2.5	3.1	0.6	322
Age group							
60-74	8.9	85.9	1.8	0.5	2.9	0.0	382
75+	5.5	83.6	0.6	6.1	2.4	1.8	165
Caste/ethnicity[#]							
Hill caste	20.5	73.1	0.0	3.8	2.6	0.0	78
Hill janajati	33.3	33.3	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	6
Tharu	4.6	90.0	1.2	1.7	1.7	0.7	409
Hill Dalit	11.1	72.2	1.9	3.7	11.1	0.0	54
Total	7.9	85.2	1.5	2.2	2.7	0.5	547

*Other family members include Nephew/niece in law and brother /sister in law. [#] Hill Caste includes Hill Bhraman, Chhetri and Thakuri; Hill Janajati includes Magar and Gurung; Hill Dalit incudes Kami, Damai/Dholi, Sarki, Sonar, Lohar, Tamata and Badi caste group.

Demographic variables	Participation in public meetings				N	P
	Never	Once or twice per year	Once or twice per month	Once or twice per week		
Sex						
Male	47.1	27.6	21.8	3.6	225	<0.001
Female	62.1	2.7	24.8	0.3	322	
Age group						
60 - 74	43.7	13.3	30.9	2.1	382	<0.001
75 +	84.2	8.5	6.7	0.6	165	
Caste/ethnicity						
Hill caste	56.4	17.9	19.2	6.4	78	<0.001
Hill Janajati	0.0	67.7	33.3	0.0	6	
Tharu	4.4	17.8	19.8	1.0	409	
Hill Dalit	20.4	22.4	57.4	0.0	54	
Total	55.9	18.8	23.6	1.6	547	

Demographic variables	Role of decision making in the family			N	P
	Declined	Remain the same	Improved		
Sex					
Male	46.2	51.6	2.2	225	P=0.05
Female	56.5	41.0	2.5	322	
Age group					
60 - 74	46.1	51.0	2.9	382	<0.001
75 +	66.7	32.1	1.2	165	
Caste/ethnicity					
Hill caste	7.7	92.3	0.0	78	<0.001
Hill Janajati	33.3	66.7	0.0	6	
Tharu	66.5	30.3	3.2	409	
Hill Dalit	11.1	88.9	1.3	54	
Total	52.3	45.3	2.4	547	

Demographic variables	Literacy status and educational attainment						N	P
	Literacy rate	No education	Non-formal education	Primary education	Secondary education (6-10)	SLC [#] and above		
Sex								
Male	39.1	60.9	27.1	8.9	2.7	0.4	225	<0.001
Female	13.7	86.3	12.7	0.6	0.0	0.3	322	
Age group								
60 - 74	29.3	70.7	23.3	4.7	1.3	0.0	382	<0.001
75 +	12.1	87.9	7.9	2.4	0.6	1.2	165	
Caste/ethnicity								
Hill caste	39.7	60.3	25.6	6.4	5.1	2.6	78	<0.001
Hill Janajati	66.7	33.3	50.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	6	
Tharu	19.1	80.9	15.4	3.2	0.5	0.0	409	
Hill Dalit	35.2	64.8	29.6	5.6	0.0	0.0	54	
Total	24.1	75.9	18.6	4.0	1.1	0.4	547	

[#]SLC: School Leaving Certificate

Involvement in Social Activities

Elderly people in Nepal especially in rural areas are prone to social isolation and exclusion due to lack of social capital. Elderly peoples’ participation in social networks is a significant component of well-being. Frequency of attending any group, club, society, or organizational meetings ensures active participation of elderly people in social matters and helps them feel independent and capable of taking decisions.⁸ Generally, the types of the public meetings which were organized in the study area included: *Aama Samuha* (Mother’s club), *Kishan Samuha* (Farmer’s club), *Tole Sudhar Samiti* (Neighbour’s club) and elderly club.

All the respondents were asked about the frequency of attending public meetings held in their community. Over half of respondents (55.9%) reported that they never attended any public meetings in last one year. An almost negligible proportion (1.6%) of respondents attended public meetings once or twice per week in last one year.

The data on sex of the respondents reflect that majority of female respondents (62.1%) reported that they have never attended any public meeting in the last one year while the corresponding figure for male respondents was less than half (47.1%) (p<0.001). This suggested that the practice of participation in public meeting was significantly different between the genders.

Caste/ethnic group wise data shows that majority of Tharu respondents (61.4%) reported that they have never attended public meeting in the last one year while the corresponding figure for Hill Caste group respondents was over half (56.4%). On the other hand, majority of respondents of Hill Janjati caste/ethnic group (66.7%) reported that they have attended a public meeting once a year in the last one year (Table 2). This is statistically significant. This means the frequency and practice of participation in public meeting is significantly different according to caste/ethnic group of respondents.

Involvement in decision making in the family

Over half of respondents (52.3%) reported that their decision making role has declined after they grew older

and slightly less than half of the respondents (45.3%) placed in the ‘remain the same’ category (Table 3). Less than three percent (2.4%) of respondents reported that their decision-making role has improved as they grew older.

Among the elderly males interviewed, over half of the respondents (51.6%) reported that their role as a decision maker has remained the same as they grew older compared with only 41% of females. Over half of female respondents (56.5%) reported that their role has declined as they grew older.

The data on caste/ethnic group of the respondents shows that the majority of respondents of Hill Caste group (92.3%) and Hill Dalit group (88.9%) and the majority of the respondents of Hill Janajati group (66.7%) reported that their role as a decision maker in the family has remained same as they grew older while majority of respondents of Tharu ethnic group (66.5%) reported that their role as a decision maker in the family has declined as they grew older. The results suggested that the role of decision making in the family in different caste/ethnic groups were significantly different.

Educational Status

Educational status includes both literacy status and educational attainment of the respondents. In this study, a literate person is one who can read and write. Table 4 shows the literacy status and educational attainment of the respondents according to background variables.

The literacy rate of elderly people was 24.1%. The educational status of female respondents was found to be lower as compared to male respondents at all levels. Caste/ethnic group data shows that majority of respondents of Tharu ethnic group (80.9%) and majority of respondents of Hill Dalit group (64.8%) and Hill Caste group (60.3%) reported that they were literate while corresponding figure for Hill Janjati group was about one third (23.3%) of the respondents.

Demographic variables	Currently working			Status of current work				N
	Yes	No	P	Employer	Wages	Self employed	Household work	
Sex								
Male	69.8	30.2	0.16	0.6	7.0	83.5	8.9	225
Female	75.2	24.8		0.4	0.4	2.9	96.3	322
Age								
60-74	88.7	11.3	<0.001	0.6	2.9	35.3	61.2	382
75+	36.4	63.6		0.0	3.3	31.1	65.6	165
Caste/ethnicity								
Hill caste	44.9	55.1	<0.001	0.0	2.7	35.1	62.2	37
Hill janajati	100.0	0.0		0.0	16.7	50.0	33.3	6
Tharu	76.8	23.2		0.6	2.9	34.1	62.4	314
Hill Dalit	81.5	18.5		0.0	2.3	36.4	61.4	44
Total	72.9	27.1		0.5	3.0	34.7	61.8	547

Working Status

Less than one third (30.2%) of male respondents and one quarter (24.8%) of female respondents were found to be not working at the time of survey due to health problems or other causes. The status of current work was found the highest on 'self-employed' category for males (83.5%); while most females responded with 'household work' (Table 5).

The data on caste/ethnic group of the respondents suggested that all respondents of Hill Janajati group, majority of Hill Dalit group (81.5%) and most of the respondents of Tharu ethnic group (76.8%) were currently working; while the corresponding figure for of the Hill Caste group was less than half (44.9%).

Land holding

About half of the respondents (48.4%) owned some land. The percentage of landholding was significantly higher for male respondents (94.2%) when compared to female respondents (16.5%). The land holding percentage was found higher for 75 years and above age groups (52.7%) compared to below 75 years (46.6%) age group (Table 6).

The data on age group of the respondents reflect that there was no significant difference in terms of land holding ownership according to caste/ethnic group. Percentage of land holding was higher for Hill Dalit respondents (59.3%) followed by Hill Caste group (52.6%).

Demographic variables	Ownership of land holding			P
	Yes	No	N	
Sex				
Male	94.2	5.8	225	<0.001
Female	16.5	83.5	322	
Age				
60-74	46.6	53.4	382	0.18
75+	52.7	47.3	165	
Caste/ethnicity				
Hill caste	52.6	47.4	78	0.27
Hill janajati	50.0	50.0	6	
Tharu	46.2	53.8	409	
Hill Dalit	59.3	40.7	54	
Total	48.4	51.6	547	

Social security scheme

In the household survey, all respondents were asked whether they have received any senior citizen or single women allowance or Dalit allowance during the last one-year. Table 7 shows the receiving status of social security allowance according to background variables.

About two thirds (66.9%) of respondents were found to be receiving the old age social security allowance. Of them, 73.6% were females and 57.3% were males. The low percentage of males compared to females is due to the fact that single women aged 60 and over also includes in

the figure of females while for males it is only 70 years and above plus 60 years and above for Dalit caste group (Table 7).

An overwhelming percentage of Hill Dalit group (94.4%), most of the respondents of Hill Caste group (75.6%), majority of the respondents of Tharu ethnic group (62.3%) and less than one fifth of respondents of Hill Janajati group (16.7%) reported that they have received social security allowance during the last one-year (Table 7). The receiving status of old age social security allowance was observed as statically significant according to sex of the respondents. It was also significant according to caste/ethnic group.

Table 7: Proportions of elderly receiving old age or single women or Dalit allowances

Demographic variables	Received any allowance of senior citizen or retired pension			
	Yes	No	N	P
Sex				
Male	57.3	42.7	225	<0.001
Female	73.6	26.4	322	
Caste/ethnicity				
Hill caste	75.6	24.4	78	<0.001
Hill janajati	16.7	83.3	6	
Tharu	62.3	37.7	409	
Hill Dalit	94.4	5.6	54	
Total	66.9	33.1	547	

Discussions

This study is focused on socio-economic status of elderly people in rural areas of Nepal. There are very few studies carried out on the issues of the elderly in Nepal. Earlier studies only focus on some different aspects of elderly people.^{4,8,9,10,11} This study found majority of elderly (85.2%) were residing with their son/daughter-in-law and less than three percent (2.7%) elderly people were residing alone. The literacy rate of elderly people was 24.1%. Slightly less than half of the elderly people (48.4%) had land ownership; more males had land ownership (94.2%) compared with females (16.5%). The majority of elderly (66.9%) reported that they received old age social security allowance and most of the elderly (72.9%) reported that they were currently working. Similar type of study was also carried by Central Department of Population Studies, Tribhuvan University (CDPS/ TU) with financial support of UNFPA in six VDCs of Pharping area of Kathmandu district in Nepal in 2012 and found that majority of elderly people (66.5%) were residing with their son/daughter-in-law and three percent elderly were residing alone. The literacy rate of elderly people was 40%. Majority of elderly people (71.8%) owned land/property. Gender difference in terms of land/ property ownership was found to be higher for male elderly people (89.1%) compared to female elderly people (53.4%). Majority of elderly people (80.0%)

reported that they were receiving old age social security allowances and majority of respondents (70.3%) reported that they were currently working.¹² The findings of both studies show that there are some similarities and suggest that elderly socio-economic status must be seen from a gender perspective.

A similar type of study was carried out in Mumbai, India in 2014 found that over half of the elderly women (53.6%) were literate which was observed higher than the result of this study and only about one quarter of elderly women (25.3%) are currently working which is a comparatively low rate of participation rate in relation to the results of this study (75.2%). The study in Mumbai shows that majority of respondents (88.4%) never attended any public meetings in the previous year which was observed higher than the result of this study (55.9%).¹³

This study shows that the decision-making role of the elderly people has changed over time. Over half of the respondents (52.3%) reported that their decision-making role declined as they grew older and less than half of the respondents (45.3%) placed in the 'remained the same' category. In this regard, a study in rural Maharashtra in 2011 reported that the decision-making power of majority (66.6%) of older persons had decreased over the time.¹⁴

Limitations of the study

This study was conducted on selected households of rural area of Kailali district; so the generalizability is limited. The cross-sectional nature of the study cannot explain any causal relationship. The study has used the responses of elderly people themselves to understand their socio-economic status; without any specific measure. Urban settlements have not been included in this study.

Conclusions

This study found that the overwhelming majority of elderly people (85.2%) were residing with their son/daughter-in-law. A small proportion of females (3.1%) and males (2.2%) were residing alone. Further, this study showed that the literacy rate of elderly people was found to be very low. The majority of male respondents (60.9%) and female respondents (86.3%) have no education at all. Most of the elderly people were working. The percentage of land holding was found to be significantly higher for males, compared with females. The majority of elderly people reported that they receive old age security allowance. The findings of the study revealed that females are at a greater disadvantage than males in all aspects studied such as literacy, living alone, ownership of property, involvement in decision-making in the family, involvement in social activities, receiving status of old age security allowance and current work status.

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