

Weaving threads of care: Examining extended family support for aging in rural Ghana

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Globally, societies are experiencing a significant increase in the population of older adults, a demographic shift that presents both opportunities and challenges. This transformation is particularly pronounced in developing countries such as Ghana.

In Ghana, the extended family has historically functioned as a primary source of support for older adults, offering financial, material, social, emotional, and spiritual assistance. This tradition, rooted in cultural values such as filial piety and respect for the elderly, fosters a collective sense of duty and belonging. However, modernization is challenging the sustainability of these established support systems. Migration of young people from rural villages to urban centers has reduced the number of available caregivers in rural areas. As a result, many older adults are left with unmet daily needs due to the dispersal of family members. Economic hardship and poverty further exacerbate these challenges, making it increasingly difficult for remaining family members to provide adequate care. Caregivers often prioritize the needs of their immediate families, which can increase the vulnerability of older adults. Modernization and globalization are influencing social values in rural Ghana, with western ideals and individualism becoming more prevalent. The traditional sense of duty to the extended family is diminishing, giving way to a focus on the nuclear household. This shift increases the risk of loneliness, financial hardship, and limited access to essential care and services for many older adults in rural Ghana.

Methodology: This analysis is based on qualitative research and content analysis of scientific literature addressing ageing, family relationships and support systems in rural areas of Ghana. A review of academic studies, government documents, and community reports identified key themes and patterns that influence elder care in these communities. Particular emphasis was placed on studies that highlight the perspectives of older adults and caregivers through interviews, group discussions, and ethnographic observation, providing insight into their daily experiences.

Synthesis of Findings: Current results indicates that rural Ghana is undergoing significant change. Although the extended family continues to play a crucial role in elder care, its capacity is

gradually diminishing. The primary responsibility is increasingly falling on immediate family members, placing considerable strain on families. Economic hardship and limited opportunities hinder the ability to meet basic needs such as healthcare, food, and shelter. The scarcity of formal support systems exacerbates these difficulties. Nevertheless, family and community connections continue to provide essential emotional support and a sense of belonging. Most older adults prefer to age in place with their family, and there is minimal interest in institutional care.

Discussion: These findings highlight the need to strengthen family-based care while addressing the underlying economic challenges in rural Ghana. Effective solutions should be tailored to local contexts, leveraging existing strengths and traditions. Adopting western models of elder care without adaptation is unlikely to succeed, as such approaches may conflict with the values and needs of these communities.

Implications for Practice/Policy: To effectively support older adults, policies and social work initiatives should prioritize family-centered approaches, providing families with the necessary resources and training to deliver high-quality care. This includes financial assistance, affordable healthcare, medical supplies, and caregiver education. Community-driven programs are also essential for maintaining social connections, promoting activity, and supporting elders through social groups, intergenerational activities, and home-based care. Addressing poverty and economic insecurity requires comprehensive strategies, including investments in sustainable agriculture, support for small businesses, expansion of job training programs, and access to microfinance. All support systems should respect local traditions and values, collaborating closely with community leaders, healers, and elders to ensure program relevance.