

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Elderly Care in Transition: Experiences of Elderly Individuals in Three Nursing Homes in Kosovo

Cuidados de ancianos en transición: experiencias de personas mayores en tres residencias de ancianos de Kosovo

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Abstract

Objective. In Kosovo, a focus on young people has led to the neglect of elderly care in policy. However, as demographics shift, the number of elderly individuals is expected to increase in the coming years. This study aimed to evaluate elderly individuals' perceptions regarding their daily lives and experiences in nursing homes, focusing on aspects that impact their well-being. **Material and Methods.** A qualitative approach was used through individual interviews, employing a modified questionnaire for data collection. In total, three 24-hour nursing homes were included in the study: two in the Municipality of Peja, and one in the Municipality of Gjakova, Kosovo. **Results.** Elderly individuals positively evaluate the quality of care in nursing homes, including the staff, comfort, food, and cleanliness of the environment. However, they face feelings of loneliness, a lack of new social connections, and health limitations. The majority expressed a desire to stay longer in their own homes. The transition to a new living environment was emotionally taxing, leading to a deep sense of longing for their families. **Conclusion.** Elderly individuals perceive nursing home care positively, appreciating attentive staff, a familial atmosphere, comfort, quality food, and cleanliness. However, many elderly individuals also face health limitations and emotional challenges, including feelings of loneliness and a lack of social connections. It is crucial to create home-based support services to postpone the move to nursing homes, implement social and mental health initiatives to address loneliness, and offer specialized health services for managing chronic illnesses.

Keywords: Elderly Care; Nursing Homes; Transition; Long-Term Care; Kosovo

Resumen

Objetivo. en Kosovo, en las políticas de salud, la atención a las y los jóvenes ha llevado a descuidar la de las personas mayores. Sin embargo, a medida que cambia la demografía, se espera que su número aumente en los próximos años. El objetivo de este estudio fue evaluar sus percepciones sobre su vida cotidiana y sus experiencias en residencias de ancianos, centrándose en los aspectos que repercuten en su bienestar. **Material y métodos.** para la recolección de datos se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo mediante entrevistas individuales, empleando un cuestionario modificado. En total, se incluyeron tres residencias de ancianos de 24 horas: dos en el municipio de Peja y una en el e Gjakova, en Kosovo. **Resultados.** las y los ancianos evaluaron positivamente la calidad de la atención en las residencias, incluyendo el personal, la comodidad, la comida y la limpieza. Sin embargo, se enfrentaban a sentimientos de soledad, falta de nuevas conexiones sociales y limitaciones en su salud. La mayoría expresó su deseo de permanecer más tiempo en sus propios hogares, la transición a un nuevo entorno de vida fue emocionalmente agotadora, lo que provocó un profundo sentimiento de añoranza de sus familias. **Conclusiones.** las personas mayores percibieron positivamente los cuidados en las residencias, valorando la atención del personal, el ambiente familiar, el confort, la calidad de la comida y la limpieza. Sin embargo, también se enfrentaron a problemas de salud y emocionales, como la sensación de soledad y la falta de contactos sociales. Es crucial crear servicios de apoyo a domicilio para posponer su traslado a residencias, poner en marcha iniciativas sociales y de salud mental para abordar la soledad y ofrecer servicios sanitarios especializados para gestionar las enfermedades crónicas.

Palabras clave: cuidados de ancianos; residencias de ancianos; transición; cuidados de larga duración; Kosovo



Introduction

By 2050, the global population over the age of 60 is expected to double (2.1 billion), and the population over 80 is projected to triple between 2020 and 2050, reaching 426 million.¹

Worldwide, around 142 million elderly individuals are unable to meet their basic needs without assistance, and two out of three elderly people are likely to require care and support at some point during their lives.²

Although some differences in health status among elderly individuals are genetic, most are influenced by factors such as physical activity,³ health behaviors, and lifestyle, particularly in those with chronic diseases,⁴ or by physical and social environments, such as homes, neighborhoods, and communities, as well as by individual characteristics like gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.¹

Long-term care is becoming increasingly important in many modern welfare states worldwide due to demographic shifts.^{5,6} Long-term care encompasses a wide range of services and support, including personal, social, and medical assistance, to ensure that individuals with loss or risk of loss of intrinsic capacities can maintain functional levels.² In many countries, long-term care has traditionally been, and continues to be, primarily addressed within the healthcare system.⁵

Many elderly individuals prefer to stay in their homes rather than move to care institutions.^{7,8,9} This implies that support for the elderly will vary significantly depending on the historical traditions of different countries. Regarding the experiences of elderly individuals in care institutions, research presents varying perspectives.¹⁰⁻²¹ A study by Evangelista *et al.*²² found that elderly residents in care institutions express conflicting feelings about daily life. Mafluha *et al.*²³ noted that the main factor affecting the quality of life for the elderly is physical health, followed by financial situation and family support. Elderly individuals are at risk of neglect and abuse, which can occur by family members, peers, and caregivers providing direct care.²⁴

According to the Population Forecast Report by the Kosovo Agency of Statistics for the period 2018-2061,²⁵ in 2018 the percentage of the population aged 65 and over in Kosovo was 8.9%, an increase of 2.1% compared to 2011. Based on these statistics, the situation is expected to continue to change.

AGE Platform Europe²⁶ revealed that in Kosovo, long-term care for the elderly is primarily a personal and family responsibility, with limited support from state assistance. In practice, only 7 to 11% of citizens in need of long-term care opt for residential services, one of the lowest percentages in Europe. Most elderly individuals in Kosovo prefer support from family members and avoid institutionalization due to stigma and feelings of loneliness. Family members typically provide assistance with daily activities, and many elderly individuals consider institutional long-term care as a secondary option after family support. Long-term care in Kosovo faces challenges related to limited capacity and the lack of comprehensive standards for social welfare services. Citizens' expectations include greater assistance to combat loneliness and improved conditions for elderly individuals in institutions, rather than solely relying on state-provided institutional support.²⁶

After the Kosovo War in 1999, a large part of the population was forced to emigrate for economic reasons or due to insecurity. This emigration resulted in the physical separation of families and reduced the ability of children to provide daily care for elderly family members who remained in Kosovo. Many young people settled in cities or abroad, leaving the elderly in rural areas or isolated.

Kosovo's population is one of the youngest in Europe, partially explaining why long-term care for the elderly has been a neglected policy area. Assessing the organization of elderly care is a crucial component in analyzing aspects related to care quality. This includes not only the care services and standards provided but also the challenges elderly individuals face daily. Furthermore, this assessment helps identify new and specific needs of the elderly and creates solutions that can enhance their quality of life,

taking into account their physical, emotional, and social well-being. The aim of this study is to evaluate the perceptions of elderly individuals regarding their daily lives and experiences in nursing homes, focusing on aspects that impact their well-being.

Figure 1. Kosovo Refugees: Family Separation in 1999



Source (Demir F. Kosovo Albanian refugees, 1999. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/kosovo-albanian-refugees-1999-photo-by-fehim-demir-epa.jpg>)²⁷

Material and Methods

Study Design and Participants

This cross-sectional study was conducted using a qualitative approach through individual interviews. The study sample included 31 elderly individuals out of a total of 65 residents living in three care homes in Kosovo (two in the Municipality of Peja and one in the Municipality of Gjakova). This represents approximately 47.69% of the total residents, indicating limited participation in the study.

Inclusion criteria: Participants were selected who have lived for at least three months in a nursing home, to ensure they have sufficient experiences to explain their perceptions. Participants were chosen who had normal cognitive function, were able to communicate without limitations, understood the purpose of the study, and were willing to participate.

Exclusion criteria: Participants who had lived in the care home for less than three months, had impaired cognitive function, had communication difficulties, lacked an understanding of the study's

purpose, or refused to participate were not included in the study.

Instruments

This study used a questionnaire, adapted by incorporating several questions from the qualitative questionnaire developed by Cho et al.¹⁰ The questionnaire contains four open-ended questions, each with several sub-questions. The questions focus on describing daily life in the care home, aspects influencing the improvement of the quality of life for elderly individuals, and health status. Additionally, socio-demographic questions were included in the questionnaire.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine at "Fehmi Agani" University, under protocol number 006/264, dated 24/05/2024, as well as the necessary permissions from the management of each Care Home, researchers initiated the recruitment process for study participants.

To identify potentially qualified residents, researchers collaborated closely with the nursing staff at the Care Homes. Once a resident expressed interest in participating, the researcher arranged a one-on-one interview to provide a thorough explanation of the study's objectives, methodologies, and the nature of their involvement. Participants were reassured about the measures taken to uphold their confidentiality and to respect their anonymity throughout the study. The researcher also informed participants that the estimated time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 6-7 minutes. The data collection took place over a designated period from June 15 to July 5, 2024.

Data analysis

In this study, data analysis began with the transcription of detailed interviews that addressed the objectives and purpose of this research. These transcripts were then read and re-read to familiarize the researcher with the content and to begin identifying potential themes and patterns. During the coding process, the text was divided into smaller units and labeled with codes

representing key themes, such as satisfaction with services, aspects of physical and mental health/challenges faced, social interaction, and the importance of the physical environment. To maintain confidentiality, participants were coded with names such as “Participant 1, Participant 2,” etc., during the presentation of the results. Demographic data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21.

Results

Regarding demographics, a total of 31 elderly individuals participated, with a mean age of 73.48 years (SD = ±7.74), and with a nearly balanced gender distribution (51.6% female, 48.4% male). Most participants resided in rural areas (87.1%), and about half had one or two children, with 16.13% having no children. A majority (64.52%) reported having a chronic disease, and almost all (93.55%) received a pension, which 93.1% managed themselves (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample population

Age in years (Mean±SD)	73.48±7.74
Gender	
F	51.60%
M	48.40%
Residence	
Urban	12.90%
Rural	87.10%
Number of children	
1	9.68%
2	29.03%
3	6.45%
4	6.45%
No children	16.13%
Chronic disease	
Yes	64.52%
No	35.48%
Do you get a pension?	
Yes	93.55%
No	6.45%
Who is responsible for managing the pension funds?	
Myself	93.10%
The legal representative	6.90%

Source: own data.

Perceptions of elderly individuals regarding the quality of care in nursing homes

In this category, the elderly expressed their perceptions regarding the quality of care they receive in nursing homes. Overall, these perceptions were positive (75%). Some participants’ statements include: “The staff here is very attentive and kind. They help us with every need we have.” (Participant 1) and “We receive medical and nursing care whenever needed. The doctor and nurses are always ready to assist us.” (Participant 4).

Participants often emphasized the comfort and sense of security they feel in these care homes. For instance, Participant 13 shared, “I feel safe and protected thanks to their care,” while Participant 2 similarly stated, “I always feel respected and valued by the staff. They treat us like family.”

Regarding the physical environment, participants reported satisfaction with their living spaces: “My room is very comfortable and clean. I have everything I need.” (Participant 5), and Participant 6 shared, “There is plenty of space to spend time and do various activities. I really enjoy the garden here; I spend a lot of time there during spring, summer, and autumn.” (Participant 6)

The participants also expressed satisfaction with the food and diet provided. For example, Participant 3 stated, “The food is tasty and healthy. There is variety, and it’s always fresh. I really like fish, and they serve it for lunch every day. They always ask us what we enjoy.” Meanwhile, Participant 5 noted, “My blood sugar has been stable since I came here. It seems the good and regular meals have helped a lot.”

Another significant aspect is the residents’ perceptions regarding the duration of their stay in care homes. A considerable number (70%) particularly those with family members, indicated a preference for day-time stays rather than 24-hour stays. For example, Participant 7 expressed, “I prefer to spend the day here because I like going home in the evening to be with my family. I want more control over my life and to feel more independent.” Similarly, Participant 9 said, “I feel better when I spend a few hours at home and come

here only for the night. I enjoy being with my family and having the freedom to do what I want, rather than being here all the time.”

Challenges faced by elderly individuals in nursing homes

In this category, the elderly identified several specific challenges they face in nursing homes. These challenges include emotional issues (65%), social interactions (55%), and health concerns (50%). “Sometimes I feel lonely, even though I’m surrounded by people,” stated Participant 22, while Participant 23 expressed, “I miss my family a lot and often feel sad. I especially miss my grandchildren.” Participants also reported initial difficulties when first transitioning to life in the nursing home. For example, Participant 4 emphasized, “The change from my home to the nursing home environment was very difficult for me.”

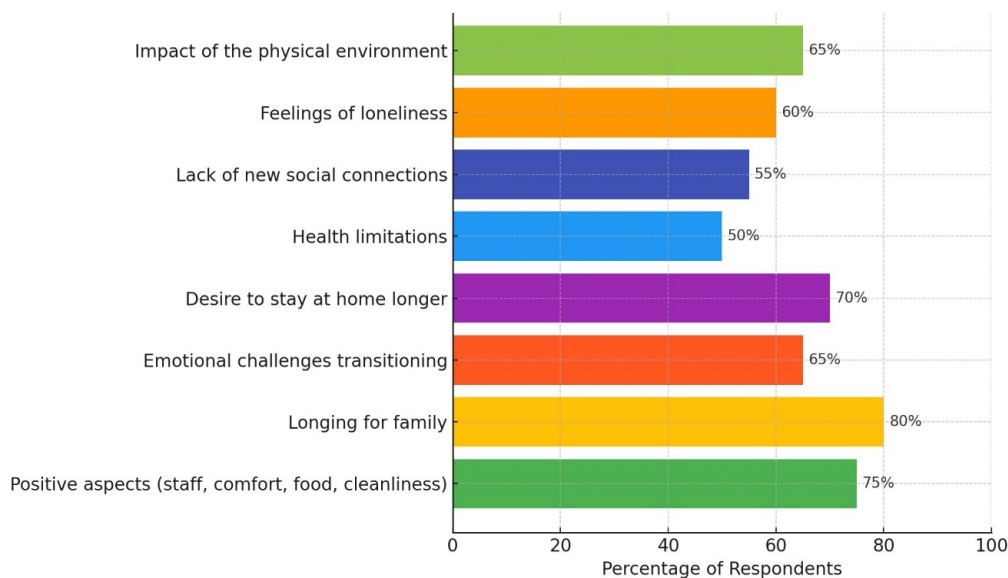
Regarding social interactions, results showed that the elderly participants experienced various social challenges within the nursing homes. For instance, Participant 25 reported, “It’s a bit difficult to make new friends at this age.” Meanwhile, others

pointed out that interacting with other residents isn’t always easy. Participant 7 noted, “Some residents are reserved and don’t want to interact,” while Participant 8 shared, “My roommate often doesn’t listen or show interest in talking to me, and sometimes I feel lonely.”

The elderly often emphasized the need for interaction with family and friends as a key component of their well-being. For instance, Participant 9 mentioned, “More opportunities to communicate and meet with family members would improve our lives,” while Participant 10 said, “More visits from family and friends would make us feel happier.”

Health issues were also a significant challenge for elderly individuals. For example, Participant 28 said, “I struggle with hypertension, and my blood sugar levels are high almost every day. These problems worry me a lot.” Participant 29 mentioned, “I need constant assistance to move, and that’s challenging for me,” while Participant 18 shared, “I often have nosebleeds. I’ve been checked, and they told me it’s not dangerous, but I was advised to avoid the sun, which limits my activities here in the home.”

Figure 2. Perceptions and challenges of elderly individuals in nursing homes: key themes



Source: own data

The impact of the physical environment on the quality of life of elderly individuals

Category 4, of assessing the impact of the physical environment on the quality of life, provides a deep insight into how the physical environment often determines their well-being and daily experiences. Participants noted that clean and well-maintained spaces have a significantly positive effect on their health and overall physical well-being (65%). For instance, Participant 31 emphasized, “Clean environments, especially the restroom and garden, positively influence my health and mood.” Similarly, Participant 28 highlighted, “Comfortable rooms and the garden help us feel better.”

These statements underscore the importance of maintaining a tidy and inviting environment, as it not only contributes to physical health but also enhances emotional well-being. When the living conditions are pleasant and well-kept, elderly individuals tend to report higher levels of satisfaction with their daily lives.

Discussion

In the first category, the elderly expressed positive perceptions regarding the quality of care they receive in nursing homes. They highly value the availability of staff and their attentiveness, considering the experience similar to that of family. Participants emphasized the comfort and coziness of their rooms, as well as the good food and clean environment as positive factors for their lives there. This also includes opportunities to spend time in open areas and engage in various activities. This aligns with the findings of the study by Cho et al.¹⁰ where service users in nursing homes expressed satisfaction with the quality of care.

In the second category, the elderly identified several specific challenges they encounter. Emotional issues such as feelings of loneliness, a lack of new social connections, health problems, and limitations caused by poor health were mentioned as significant concerns. Participants also reported difficulties in adjusting to a new environment and feelings of longing for their families. This indicates that for some, the transition from a private home to a nursing home can be a challenging emotional experience. In line with our study, the research by Evangelista et al.²² shows that residents of nursing homes report various negative feelings regarding their social life and interactions with others.

In many countries, the causes of loneliness among the elderly are complex and multifactorial. Studies show that weak or strained social relationships, poor health conditions and illnesses, as well as socio-economic factors such as low income and unemployment, have a negative effect on their loneliness.²⁸⁻³¹ The results of our study align with a study conducted by Firm³² which aimed to assess social interactions among the elderly in nursing homes in the United States.

Another very important aspect is the residents' perception of the duration of their stay in care homes. Many of them, especially those with family members, have expressed a preference for staying during the day in care homes rather than 24 hours a day. This is because they wish to spend more time with their families, feel more independent, and have more control over their daily lives.

Culturally, Kosovo has a strong tradition of family values and intergenerational living. Elders often feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to stay within the family unit, as it is customary for younger generations to care for their aging relatives. This cultural norm can lead to a preference for aging in place, as elderly individuals may feel more comfortable and secure in familiar surroundings surrounded by loved ones. Socially, the support network provided by family and friends plays a crucial role in the well-being of elderly individuals. Many elderly people in Kosovo have close-knit relationships with their families and communities, which can deter them from seeking care in nursing homes. The emotional connection to their homes and the desire to maintain social ties often outweigh the perceived benefits of moving to a care facility. Economically, the availability of resources and financial support also affects the choice to remain at home. In some cases, families may prioritize keeping their elders at home, believing it to be more cost-effective and accessible. This can further encourage elderly individuals to stay in their own homes while receiving the necessary support.

Unfortunately, in Kosovo, despite recent efforts, the complex needs of elderly individuals are often neglected. Socio-economic conditions further exacerbate the situation, with nearly half of the elderly population perceiving themselves as poor, especially among women and those living in urban areas.³³

The third category of the current study focuses on the impact of the physical environment on the quality of life of elderly individuals. The role of the physical

environment's impact on health has been extensively studied in scientific research, particularly in animal studies. In his pioneering intervention studies, neuropsychologist Hebb argues that environmental enrichment improved cognitive abilities in mice. Furthermore, this intervention demonstrated neurobiological effects, including enhancements in functional capacity, neuronal connections, and reductions in anxiety.¹³ Participants in our study value a clean and well-maintained environment. Safety and comfort in their suitable rooms and green spaces are essential. This suggests that a good physical environment supports tranquility, aiding in the maintenance of a calm and stable life. This finding aligns with the results of other studies, such as those by Quehenberger³⁴, where pleasant and comfortable environments contribute to the overall well-being of residents.

It is important to conduct future studies in Kosovo with larger samples and a detailed assessment of mental health. Furthermore, offering the option for elderly individuals to stay for a few hours rather than 24 hours is an important measure to enhance their quality of life in nursing homes. This flexibility allows elderly individuals to spend more time with their families while maintaining some level of independence and control over their daily routines.

Study Limitations

This study addresses a research gap in Kosovo, where studies on elderly care in nursing homes are limited. The qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, offering rich contextual data often overlooked by quantitative methods. However, the study has limitations. The sample size of 31 participants (47.69% of total residents) limits generalizability to other nursing homes in Kosovo. Selection bias is possible, as nursing staff facilitated recruitment, potentially favoring socially active residents. The participants' emotional states and mental health were not assessed. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point, missing the evolution of experiences over time.

Conclusions

In conclusion, elderly individuals express positive perceptions regarding the quality of care they receive in nursing homes. They appreciate the availability of staff and the familial atmosphere created by the caregivers. The comfort of their living spaces, the quality of food, and the cleanliness of the environment significantly contribute to their overall

satisfaction. However, it is essential to acknowledge that many elderly individuals also face emotional challenges, including feelings of loneliness and a lack of social connections. The transition to a new living environment can be emotionally taxing, often resulting in a sense of longing for their families. Addressing these emotional aspects is crucial for enhancing the overall well-being of elderly individuals in these settings. It is crucial to create home-based support services to postpone the move to nursing homes, implement social and mental health initiatives to address loneliness, and offer specialized health services for managing chronic illnesses.

Ethics and Consent

The study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine at "Fehmi Agani" University, under protocol number 006/264, dated 24/05/2024. Participants were provided with comprehensive explanations about the study both verbally and in writing, and consent was obtained. }

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Authorship Contributions

"Conceptualization, Hoti. H and Terziqi. H; methodology, Ukëhaxhaj. A; validation, Hoti. F, Hoxha. F, and Goçaj. L.; formal analysis, Pelaj. B; investigation, Kabashi. D.; resources, Hoti. F; data curation, Terziqi. H; writing—original draft preparation, Hoti. F; writing—review and editing, Hoti, and Ukëhaxhaj. A; visualization, Hoxha. F; supervision, Terziqi. H; project administration, Ukëhaxhaj. A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript

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