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Women carers of dependent older adults

Mujeres cuidadores de adultos mayores dependientes

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ABSTRACT

As the ageing process is understood, a complex interplay between the physical and mental alterations that accompany this inevitable journey is revealed. Objective: to analyse the experiences of female caregivers of dependent older adults. Methods: The study population consisted of 40 female caregivers. Results: 92.5% (n=37) of the respondents confessed to currently experiencing role overload, indicating the evident presence of the syndrome in these individuals. Conclusion: The disproportionate burden placed on women, who must balance multiple roles, underscores the urgency of implementing psychosocial support protocols that promote an equitable distribution of family responsibilities.
Descriptors: terminally Ill; caregivers; vulnerable populations. (Source: DeCS).

RESUMEN

A medida que se comprende el proceso de envejecimiento, se devela una compleja interacción entre las alteraciones físicas y mentales que acompañan este inevitable viaje. **Objetivo**: analizar las vivencias de las mujeres cuidadores de adultos mayores dependientes. **Método**: La población del estudio estuvo integrada por 40 cuidadoras. **Resultados**: El 92,5% (n=37) de los encuestados confiesa estar experimentando actualmente sobrecarga por el rol asumido, indicando la presencia evidente del síndrome en estos individuos. **Conclusión**: La carga desproporcionada que recae sobre las mujeres, quienes deben equilibrar múltiples roles, subraya la urgencia de implementar protocolos de apoyo psicosocial que promuevan una distribución equitativa de responsabilidades familiares.
Descriptores: enfermo terminal; cuidadores; poblaciones vulnerables. (Fuente: DeCS).

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INTRODUCTION

As the ageing process is understood, it reveals a complex interplay between the physical and mental alterations that accompany this inevitable journey. In this scenario, some older individuals find themselves at a crossroads where vulnerability becomes so pronounced that their survival depends, to a large extent, on the dedication and care of others. This burden often falls on the shoulders of caregivers, who are immersed in a daily routine full of complex tasks that, due to their intensity, time extension and inherent emotional burden, have a substantial impact on both their physical and psychological well-being. [1 2 3]

This exhaustion and burnout, the defining characteristics of caregiver overload syndrome, manifest a reality where the possibilities of regaining optimal functional status are limited. Lack of time for self-care and reduced social relationships contribute to this picture, often leaving the caregiver in a state of marked emotional and physical exhaustion. The inevitable consequence is the disruption of daily life, with conflicts arising in the family, work and social spheres. [4 5]

These challenges underline the urgency of conducting comprehensive studies that shed light on the reality of the caregiver. Such an approach is not only essential to understand their unique experience, but also to design effective strategies that contribute to improving their quality of life. It is imperative to recognise that social care often tends to neglect the wellbeing of the carer, focusing largely on the person in their care. This imbalance highlights the critical importance of balancing care and consideration for both the carer and the dependent person, providing a more holistic and comprehensive approach to health care. [6 7]

In addition, women's work as caregivers of dependent older adults is a fundamental pillar in the health care structure. This role, often performed with dedication and

sacrifice, encompasses emotional, physical and social dimensions that have a direct impact on the caregivers' quality of life and thus on the overall experience of ageing and dependency.

The intensity of this often underestimated task reveals the complexity of balancing multiple responsibilities and roles, from daughters and wives to professionals and active members of society. This introduction seeks to delve into the lives of women who take on the challenging role of caregivers of dependent older adults, exploring the challenges, rewards and the prevailing need to properly understand and support those who play this essential role in our society.

Based on the above, the aim is to analyse the experiences of women carers of dependent older adults.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive observational approach to immerse itself in the complexities of rural communities in the Ingapirca parish.

The study population encompasses 160 families in these areas, and the sample was carefully selected, comprising 40 caregivers who play crucial roles in the care of dependent older adults.

Meticulously established inclusion criteria required participants to be currently assuming the role of caregiver for dependent older adults and to demonstrate a willingness to participate in the research. These criteria provided a clear and objective framework for sample selection, ensuring the relevance and representativeness of participants.

To assess symptoms of caregiver strain, the recognised Zarit test was used. This tool, structured in a survey format with 22 questions aligned with the research objectives, was administered face-to-face during home visits. This approach allowed

for a deeper immersion into the experiences of caregivers, capturing data in an authentic and enriching way.

Field research proved to be the vital mechanism that allowed for a thorough understanding of the target population. By streamlining the data collection process through direct visits, a more authentic connection with caregivers was facilitated, adding a human and contextual component to the research. Overall, this methodological design provides a solid foundation for exploring and understanding the experiences of caregivers in rural communities in Ingapirca parish.

RESULTS

In the exploration of the results, a high degree of psychological stress emerges strongly, impacting 90% of the participants (n=36). This emotional burden is manifested with frequencies ranging from "sometimes" to "always", and it is particularly alarming that 30% (n=12) of the caregivers report experiencing this dysfunctional psychological state on a constant basis.

A revealing pattern emerges when observing that 67.5% (n=28) of the cases experience a significant reduction in time spent with themselves, being more evident in the categories "almost always" and "sometimes". In two cases, this personal sacrifice is manifested permanently, correlating with the degree of severe dependency of the dependant.

Social loneliness stands out as another crucial element, affecting 87.5% of carers (n=35). Of this group, 60% (24) report that this distancing is a constant in their lives, "almost always" and "always". These findings underline the urgency of addressing the need to balance time and space in family dynamics.

On an even more worrying note, 92.5% (n=37) of the respondents confess to currently experiencing role overload, indicating the evident presence of the syndrome in these individuals. Furthermore, most of them exhibit multiple associated

symptoms, adding an additional layer of complexity to the situation. These findings highlight the pressing need for interventions and strategies that address the physical and emotional dimensions of caregiving, providing a holistic approach to improving caregivers' well-being.

DISCUSSION

Work overload among caregivers is a phenomenon of great relevance, generating significant transformations in the family, work and social environment. These transformations not only have a negative impact on the family economy, but also leave a considerable mark on the physical and psychological health of all members of the family, especially the caregiver. [8] The daily routine, marked by exhausting, unattractive and repetitive tasks, often engenders adverse attitudes and feelings towards the dependent person, in this case, the older adult. The physical and psychological ailments of the caregiver often go unnoticed or take a back seat to the overwhelming responsibility of caregiving. [9]

The results obtained make it clear that caregiver overload manifests itself in virtually all participants in the sample. Predominant symptoms among caregivers include the experience of role overload, a marked reduction in time spent with themselves, psychological tensions and social distancing. It is evident that in situations where experiences are more unfavourable, the caregiving role is assumed directly and not shared with other family members. Single women are in the majority in these roles, and in cases where they are not, there are conflicts and misunderstandings on the part of spouses or children. Caregivers with strong blood ties to the older adult, especially children, predominate. [10] [11]

The predominance of women assuming the role of caregivers, as evidenced in this and other research, reflects a sociocultural role assigned by society. The ingrained belief that women, being socially assigned to care for children, possess a superior aptitude for assuming the role of caregiver of the elderly reveals gender stereotypes

and social mandates entrenched in many developing societies. This leads to a disproportionate burden on women, who must balance the additional roles of mother, daughter, wife and worker, intensifying the experience of role overload considerably. [12] [13]

Consequently, there is a strong need to design and implement care and psychosocial support protocols for caregivers in the community. These protocols should emphasise the importance of an equitable distribution of tasks and responsibilities related to the care of the dependent person, actively involving all family members. This holistic approach is essential to address the complex challenges faced by caregivers and to foster a more sustainable and equitable care environment. [14] [15]

CONCLUSION

The results underline the universality of overburden, showing symptoms such as role overload, reduced personal time, psychological tensions and social distancing. In unfavourable situations, the caregiving role is assumed individually, often by single women, perpetuating entrenched gender stereotypes. The disproportionate burden on women, who must balance multiple roles, underscores the urgency of implementing psychosocial support protocols that promote an equitable distribution of family responsibilities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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