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The Importance of Social Inclusion in Promoting Meaningful and Properous Ageing

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of the elderly population underscores the importance of ensuring meaningful and prosperous ageing. Social inclusion plays a central role in realizing this by encouraging equal participation of older people in various aspects of social, economic and cultural life. This research uses a literature review method to explore the concept of social inclusion and its impact on older people's well-being and meaning in life. Results show that inclusive practices such as age-friendly environments and community-based programs significantly improve mental health, reduce social isolation and strengthen social identity. However, structural, cultural and psychosocial barriers such as limited access to services, ageism and low self-confidence hinder older people's active participation in society. The study also highlights the relevance of psychosocial theories such as Activity Theory and Role Sustainability Theory in explaining how social engagement and social role sustainability positively impact older people's life satisfaction. The study concludes with policy recommendations that emphasize the importance of cross-sector collaboration, cultural contextualization, and empowerment strategies to ensure that older people not only receive care, but are also valued and actively involved in social life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Global demographic developments have brought significant changes in the population structure, with higher life expectancy resulting in an increase in the number of older people. Ageing is not just about getting physically older, but also about quality of life, emotional well-being, and active participation in society. In this context, meaningful and prosperous ageing is an urgent need. The concept of social inclusion plays a strategic role in achieving this by ensuring that every individual, including older people, has equal opportunities to participate in various aspects of social, economic and cultural life [1,15].

The aging population phenomenon is an increasingly evident global challenge. According to data from the United Nations (2023), the number of elderly people in the world is expected to reach more than 1.5 billion by 2050. In Indonesia alone, the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) noted that in 2023, around 10.45% of the total population was elderly, and this figure is projected to continue to increase every year. With the increase in the elderly

population, attention to their quality of life becomes very important. Meaningful and prosperous aging is not only related to physical and economic health, but also closely related to social aspects. Social inclusion, the active involvement of individuals in society without discrimination, plays an important role in maintaining mental health, a sense of belonging and purpose in old age [2].

Social inclusion in ageing emphasizes the importance of integrating older people into social activities and structures. Through this approach, older people are not only seen as a group in need of assistance, but also as a resource that has great potential to contribute, both through their life experiences and wisdom. Equitable access to health care, skills training education, and active participation in community settings not only reduces the risk of social isolation, but also improves overall well-being [3].

In Indonesia, the implementation of social inclusion values is also seen in efforts to develop the concept of inclusive villages and empower the elderly. This approach is integrated with cultural and religious values that underlie the spirit of

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mutual cooperation, justice and empathy between people. The Islamic perspective views the concepts of *ukhuwah islamiyah*, *musawah*, and *ihsan* as the foundation for building harmonious and mutually supportive social relationships. These values are very relevant to creating an environment that supports meaningful aging and improves social welfare for all levels of society, especially for the elderly.

Considering the challenges and opportunities that arise due to demographic changes and complex social dynamics, the application of social inclusion is a strategic key in formulating public policies. Through strengthening social networks, empowering communities, and providing access to quality services, older people not only gain an active role in community life, but also, feel valued and recognized for their contributions. This article will outline the various dimensions of social inclusion and its role in promoting meaningful and prosperous aging and provide policy recommendations that can be adapted by stakeholders to create an inclusive environment and support the well-being of older people.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method to analyze the role of social inclusion in supporting meaningful and prosperous old age. The literature study was chosen to explore various theories, concepts and empirical findings that have been published in scientific journals, reports of international organizations, academic books, and national and global policy documents related to older people and social inclusion. This approach enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of social inclusion in the aging process and its implications for older people's quality of life.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Concept and Implementation of Social Inclusion in the Lives of the Elderly

Social inclusion is understood as a process that ensures that every individual, including older people, has equal opportunities to participate fully in all aspects of the social, economic and political life of society (UN DESA, 2023) [4]. In the context of older people, social inclusion includes involvement in social activities, access to public services, and recognition of their social role. Walsh, Scharf and Keating [5], developed a conceptual framework on social exclusion in older people that includes several key dimensions: exclusion from social participation, access to services, social

relationships. living environment. and civil rights. They emphasized that social inclusion is not only about direct engagement in activities, but also about removing systemic barriers that limit such engagement.

Various countries have developed inclusive policies to support older people. In Scandinavian countries, for example, the government provides community services based on the principle of active participation of older people and the sustainability of their social roles. Meanwhile, Japan integrates inter-generational volunteer activities and elderly community centers to maintain social connections in a rapidly aging society. At the global level, the Glond Report on Ageism WHO calls for the reduction of ageism (age discrimination) as an essential prerequisite for social inclusion. WHO emphasizes the need for policy transformation based on human rights and empowerment of older people in decision-making.

One prominent example of a social inclusion program is the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) developed by the WHO. The program aims to create physical and social environments that support the active involvement of older people in society. Cities adopting this model such as Manchester (UK), Seoul (South Korea) and Jakarta (Indonesia) have developed age-friendly infrastructure, transportation and community activities. Another program is social prescribing, developed in the UK. where health workers refer older people to social activities such as reading clubs, art classes or gentle exercise groups. This approach has been shown to reduce loneliness and significantly improve quality of life.

3.2. Barriers to Social Inclusion for the Elderly

Structural barriers refer to systemic constraints that hinder older people's access to social participation, including limitations in infrastructure, public services, and elder-unfriendly regulations. Kehusmaa et al. [6] identified the lack of safe and accessible public transportation as a major barrier for older people to engage in social activities, especially in rural or peri-urban areas. In addition, social policies that are not integrated across sectors such as health, housing and social welfare limit older people's access to services that support social engagement. Low-income older people often experience digital and information access gaps that exacerbate their isolation.

Ageism is one of the most significant cultural barriers that hinder the social inclusion of older people. Ayalon and Tesch-Römer [7] explain that ageism occurs in the form of negative stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion of older people from social and policy decision-making. In a society that

highly values physical productivity and speed, older people are often perceived as irrelevant or a social burden. Patriarchal or hierarchical cultures can also reinforce the marginalization of older people, especially for older women who often experience double discrimination due to both age and gender.

Psychosocially, older adults often face internal barriers stemming from their life experiences, such as the loss of a spouse, retirement or traumatic experiences. Feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and concerns about being a burden to the family are significant barriers to active community engagement (HelpAge International, 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated psychosocial barriers. The elderly are most vulnerable to social isolation due to restrictions of physical and social activities, which has a direct impact on their mental and emotional well-being. Many older adults have experienced increased anxiety, depression and a sense of isolation during the pandemic.

3.3. Impact of Social Inclusion on Meaning and Elderly Wellbeing

Social participation has been shown to have a significant positive impact on the mental health of older adults. Gonzales et al. [8] found that older adults who engaged in productive social activities, such as volunteering or community activities, reported higher levels of mental well-being compared to those who were isolated [8]. Social participation helps reduce feelings of loneliness, increases a sense of belonging, and provides a sense of accomplishment that can improve the overall mental health of older adults. Steptoe et al. in their study also stated that strong social connections are associated with increased subjective happiness, reduced stress, and a better sense of life control in older adults [9]. Meaningful social engagement, where older adults feel valued and contribute, plays a role maintaining their emotional and mental balance.

Meaningful aging is a concept that refers to achieving an adequate quality of life in old age through active engagement in activities that have value to the individual and the community. AshaRani et al. [10] suggested that meaningful aging is closely related to individuals' understanding of their purpose in life and the role they play in society. Meaningful aging is not just about maintaining physical or health, but also about maintaining social contributions and maintaining a sense of control and meaning in life. Research by Gonzales et al. [8] also emphasized that participation in valued social activities such as teaching, sharing experiences, or working as a mentor can provide a deep sense of

meaning for older adults. Social inclusion serves as an important channel for achieving this meaning.

Several psychosocial theories can explain how social inclusion impacts the well-being of older adults. One of them is the Activity Theory, proposed by Havighurst [11], which argues that older people's life satisfaction depends on the level of social activity and the replacement of missing roles (such as work or family roles) with other meaningful activities. Active social participation is believed to improve the self-esteem and psychological well-being of the elderly. In addition, the Role Continuity Theory proposed by Atchley is also relevant in understanding the social inclusion of the elderly. This theory states that the well-being of the elderly is maintained by maintaining the continuity of their social roles, whether through work, family or community activities. Social inclusion that allows older people to maintain or change their social roles can support their long-term well-being.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the literature review, there are various important perspectives that can explain the relationship between social inclusion and elderly well-being. This discussion will examine the main findings from the three aspects that have been discussed: the definition of social inclusion and its application, the barriers faced by older people in the social inclusion process, and its impact on the meaning of life and mental health of older people.

Social inclusion is a concept that has received increasing attention in the study of ageing and elderly well-being. Theoretically, social inclusion leads to the creation of social spaces that allow older people to actively participate in community life, physically, emotionally and socially. As explained by WHO [12], in the Global Report on Ageism, social inclusion also entails ending ageism discrimination that often leads to the marginalization of older people. Therefore, policies that support the integration of older people in social activities and their empowerment in society are essential for meaningful and prosperous ageing.

The study also identified that while many countries have implemented inclusive programs such as Age-Friendly Cities and social prescribing, the success of these policies is heavily influenced by the local social and cultural context. For example, in developed countries, physical and social facilities are often more age-friendly, while in developing countries, accessibility issues and social inequalities remain major barriers. Therefore, successful social inclusion for older people requires

policy adaptations based on local conditions and the specific needs of older people in each country.

Based on a study conducted by Kehusmaa et al. [13], various structural, cultural and psychosocial barriers prevent older people from fully participating in social life. Structural barriers such as limited access to transportation, lack of elderly-friendly public facilities, and policies that do not support social accessibility can isolate the elderly from society. In addition, cultural factors that create ageism often exacerbate the marginalization of older people. Ayalon and Tesch-Römer [7], suggest that discrimination against older people means they are often seen as unproductive or socially irrelevant, which prevents them from actively contributing to the community.

Psychosocial barriers are also a significant issue. The elderly often experience feelings of low self-esteem and emotional isolation, especially after the loss of a spouse or social role such as employment. HelpAge International [14], reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating these conditions, with older adults more vulnerable to social isolation which in turn increases the risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is important to develop approaches that not only address structural barriers, but also provide psychosocial support to encourage older adults' social participation.

As found in the research of Gonzales et al. [8] and Steptoe et al. [9], meaningful social participation has a strong positive impact on older adults' psychological well-being. Older people who engage in social activities they find valuable, such as volunteering or participating in the community, report higher levels of happiness and feelings of control over their lives. This suggests that social inclusion can serve as a means to improve the quality of life of older people, not only through physical activities but also through giving meaning to their lives.

The concept of meaningful aging, described by AshaRani, et al. [10], suggests that older adults who feel that their lives have purpose and ongoing contributions to society are more likely to feel satisfied with their lives [15]. Through social activities, older adults can maintain an active role in their family, community and even work, which gives them a sense of value and purpose. Psychosocial theories such as Activity Theory and Role Continuity Theory reinforce the importance of maintaining continuity in older people's social roles as a major factor in their well-being. In other words, meaningful ageing can only be realized if older adults can maintain or adapt to relevant roles in their social lives

5. Conclusion

Social inclusion is a key element in realizing meaningful and prosperous aging for older adults. Literature shows that when older adults have access and opportunities to participate in social life, whether through communities, government programs, or interpersonal relationships, they tend to have higher levels of psychological well-being and meaning in life. Meaningful social participation not only provides a sense of purpose, but also strengthens older adults' social identity, reduces the risk of isolation, and prolongs their overall quality of life. Approaches based on psychosocial theories such as Activity Theory and Role Continuity Theory reinforce these findings by emphasizing the importance of social engagement in shaping the holistic well-being of older adults.

Various structural, cultural and psychosocial barriers still prevent many older people from fully benefiting from social inclusion. Lack of access to transportation, public services, as well as age discrimination and insecurity are real challenges that require cross-sectoral responses. Therefore, integrated and contextualized social policies and interventions are needed, with approaches that take into account the diverse experiences of older people. Only through comprehensive and sustainable collective efforts can older people be empowered to live an old age that is not only physically healthy, but also socially and emotionally meaningful.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the authors. In addition, no financial support was received.

Author Contributions

Study Design: PCR, HHA, MAS; Data Collection: PCR, HHA, MAS; Statistical Analysis: PCR; Data Interpretation: PCR, HHA, MAS; Manuscript Preparation: PCR, HHA, MAS; Literature Search: PCR, HHA, MAS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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