

A model elderly home for the senior citizens of Pakistan

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Taking care of our elders is an Islamic obligation and also an integral cultural norm in Pakistan. As I grew up in a traditional family, I am a strong supporter of the rights of older people. I have made it my mission to spread awareness about our responsibilities towards ensuring the rights of older people, especially for the young generation who, I am afraid, I believe are losing the traditional caring attitudes towards our elders.

After my Masters in Journalism, I completed a diploma in human rights which included a dissertation focusing on health rights for older people. In 2003 when even the word ‘gerontology’ was unknown to many here, I surveyed different areas of Peshawar city (where I live and which has a population of over 4 million) to investigate if the concept of an ‘elderly home’ was acceptable to the elderly population. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data from those aged 60 years and above and was drawn from varying socio-economic groups. Most of the elders liked the idea. They thought that it would be a very good facility for those who were facing problems with their own children and relatives. This finding was contrary to my expectations. Our society is conservative and people in general may not endorse the concept of specialist accommodation for older people when they have blood relatives are alive who, according to cultural norms, should have taken care of them and where use of care centers or specialist homes is stigmatizing for both the family and the older people.

I was very fortunate to win the Charles Wallace fellowship in social sciences and had the chance to visit care homes in the UK. This gave me useful ideas as to how to establish an elderly care facility that could provide health, emotional and social care for older people in Peshawar. I now intend to use what I learnt there and activate my ideas by establishing a care centre that fits with the cultural norms of Peshawar. There have been some experiments with care homes in the bigger cities of Karachi and Lahore, but the question whether the society of Peshawar was ready to take up this challenge remains open. Another of my priorities is to impart awareness to the family members who have the responsibility of providing care to their elders and I developed an awareness campaign in the schools of Peshawar through photography and drawing competitions on the theme “How does the new generation see their grandparents”? This photograph is illustrative of the response to this campaign.

I also started to teach on the first ever Masters-level course in gerontology in our province and I found out that we don’t have any old homes for our MSc Students to visit and carry out some research with. My desire to establish a much needed facility for older people was therefore intensified.

I am personally involved in helping elderly people in the community using my own income and my family’s Zakat (Islamic charity). I have been able to provide a comprehensive and integrated level of care to six relatives (sequentially) over the last four years because I think and believe that “charity begins at home”. All of these individuals were very near and dear to me and needed palliative care as, unfortunately, they all had terminal illnesses. I devoted two rooms at my home

exclusively for this purpose: one could be converted any time into a full-scale care facility whilst the second was used for counseling elderly people from the community. I have also created a small network of health care professionals and social workers from within my family and friends. However, once again, budgetary constraints didn't allow me to expand the scale of my work to higher institutional levels. Moreover, as I live in a quite affluent area, I strongly felt that this location was a barrier to use in terms of access. An elderly care facility needs to be in an appropriate location to maximize accessibility and benefit.

Fortunately, in the last year I inherited an old family house situated in a very busy and populous area of Peshawar city. I intend to convert this into an care facility for older people. Once, over 70 years back, this house used to be a general merchandise superstore exclusively for women customers and the owners and employees mostly elderly women. I wish to name the elderly home after one of my great grandmother who was practically their leader! In this regard, I would appreciate any useful suggestions from the international academic community, BSG members, and all readers on how to run this facility, how to ensure the participation of older people, how to generate funding for their support services etc.