

**AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE  
EFFECTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION ON MENTAL HEALTH IN OLDER  
ADULTS IN OVIA NORTH EAST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA**

**BY**

**IBEH CHIAMAKA ANGELA**

**SSC2106050**

**NOVEMBER, 2025**

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT  
OF SOCIAL WORK, FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES UNIVERSITY OF  
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DEGREE IN SOCIAL WORK**

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## CERTIFICATION

We hereby certify that this project work was carried out by **IBEH CHIAMAKA ANGELA** with the Matriculation number **SSC2106050** of the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin, Benin City, in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of Bachelor of Science (B.Sc. Honors) degree in social work.

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## **DEDICATION**

This project is dedicated to God Almighty, Moemeka family and Giant Stars Family.

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I am grateful to God Almighty for seeing me throughout my academic pursuit. Without His support, this project would not have been a reality.

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At this juncture, I wish to evoke the omnibus clause which asserts that your name is not mentioned in this segment of appreciation does not in any way minimize your contribution to the success of this research. I do not take it for granted and I pray God blesses you immeasurably.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. Social isolation, a growing global concern among older populations, has been associated with depression, anxiety, cognitive decline, and reduced overall well-being. In Nigeria, weakening family bonds, increased migration, and socio-economic pressures have heightened the vulnerability of older adults to isolation, yet limited empirical studies exist at the community level. Using a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 100 older adults and 20 social workers through structured questionnaires and interviews. The findings revealed that many older adults experience significant social isolation resulting from widowhood, declining physical health, reduced community interaction, and minimal family contact. The effects on mental health were profound, including persistent sadness, anxiety, loneliness, emotional withdrawal, and reduced life satisfaction. Social workers were found to play important roles in counseling, advocacy, community outreach, and linkage to social and health services; however, their effectiveness was constrained by limited staffing, funding shortages, inadequate training in geriatric mental health, and logistical challenges. The study concludes that social isolation significantly impairs the mental health of older adults in the locality and that social workers, despite their commitment, require stronger institutional support to meet the needs of this growing population. It recommends increased government funding, enhanced community-based programs, improved mental health services, family-centered

interventions, and expanded geriatric training for social workers. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on aging, mental health, and social work practice in developing countries and provides a foundation for further research on elderly care and social isolation.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background to the Study**

Globally, social isolation among older adults refers to the reduction or absence of social interactions, relationships, and community participation. It often results from factors such as retirement, bereavement, declining physical health, disability, or migration of family members. Studies across developed nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, and Canada have shown that social isolation significantly increases the risk of mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, cognitive decline, and even premature death. Researchers have likened the health risks of chronic social isolation to those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity. As such, social isolation has become a critical area of concern for social workers, healthcare providers, and policymakers.

Series of research have discovered that the aging population has become one of the most significant global social transformations of the 21st century. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), the number of people aged 60 years and above is expected to double from 1 billion in 2020 to over 2.1 billion by 2050. While this demographic shift reflects improvements in healthcare, nutrition, and living standards, it also presents new challenges for societies worldwide—particularly in relation to the social and mental well-being of older adults. One of the most pressing global concerns

affecting this population is social isolation, a phenomenon increasingly recognized as both a public health and social welfare issue.

In response to these challenges, social workers play a crucial role in promoting the well-being, mental health, and social inclusion of older adults. Social work practice focuses on enhancing human well-being and helping meet the basic and complex needs of vulnerable populations. Social workers engage in advocacy, counseling, community development, policy formulation, and direct care interventions to address the psychosocial problems of the elderly. Their role is particularly vital in preventing and mitigating the effects of social isolation by connecting older adults with community resources, social support systems, and mental health services.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, however, the problem of social isolation among older adults has received limited attention. Traditionally, Nigerian society operated under an extended family system that ensured strong intergenerational support and communal care for the elderly. However, modernization, industrialization, urbanization, and changing economic realities have significantly weakened these family and community bonds. Many younger adults migrate to urban centers or abroad in search of employment, leaving elderly parents behind in rural communities with minimal social contact and support. Consequently, older adults are increasingly exposed to loneliness, neglect, depression, and poor mental health outcomes.

In local communities such as Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, this situation is particularly evident. Many elderly individuals live with limited access to social services or healthcare, and in some cases, without the companionship or assistance of family members. Although social workers and social welfare officers exist within local government structures, the extent of their intervention and the effectiveness of their roles in addressing social isolation among older adults remain unclear.

Given the growing population of older persons and the emerging threat of social isolation to their mental health and quality of life, there is a need for an empirical assessment of how social workers contribute to reducing these effects. This study, therefore, seeks to assess the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on mental health in older adults, focusing on the situation within Ovia North East Local Government Area. The findings will contribute to global and local understanding of social work's role in geriatric mental health and provide recommendations for improving the welfare of older persons in community settings.

## **1.2 Statement of the Research Problem**

Across the world, social isolation among older adults has become a growing public health and social welfare concern due to its serious implications for mental and emotional well-being. Research has consistently shown that older adults who lack meaningful social connections are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, loneliness, cognitive decline, and reduced life satisfaction. In many developed countries, this issue has

attracted policy attention, resulting in well-structured social services, community programs, and professional social work interventions designed to address social isolation and promote healthy aging.

In Nigeria, however, the issue of social isolation among older adults remains largely under-researched and inadequately addressed. The traditional extended family system that once provided emotional, social, and economic support for the elderly is rapidly weakening due to urbanization, migration, and socio-economic pressures. As a result, many older adults are left behind in rural or semi-urban communities with minimal contact with their families or neighbors. This growing disconnection has led to psychological distress, loneliness, and deteriorating mental health, yet formal systems of social support remain weak or inaccessible.

Within Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, many older adults face similar challenges of isolation, neglect, and limited access to mental health and social care services. Social welfare departments exist at the local government level, and professional social workers are expected to play a central role in promoting the well-being of vulnerable populations, including the elderly. However, there is limited empirical evidence on the extent of their involvement in addressing social isolation among older adults in this locality. It is unclear how effectively social workers identify, engage, and support socially isolated elderly persons, or how their interventions influence the mental health outcomes of this group.

The problem, therefore, lies in the limited understanding of the role of social workers in mitigating social isolation and its psychological effects among older adults in Ovia North East. While social work as a profession is designed to enhance social functioning and improve quality of life, the degree to which these objectives are achieved for isolated older adults in this community remains uncertain. Addressing this gap is essential for developing contextually relevant strategies and strengthening the capacity of social work

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to assess the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the extent and nature of social isolation among older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area.
2. identify the major mental health challenges experienced by socially isolated older adults in the study area.
3. assess the roles and interventions of social workers in addressing social isolation among older adults.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of social work practices and interventions in improving the mental health and social well-being of older adults.

5. Suggest strategies and policy recommendations for strengthening social work interventions aimed at reducing social isolation and promoting healthy aging in the community.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the investigation:

1. What is the extent and nature of social isolation among older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area?
2. What are the major mental health challenges faced by socially isolated older adults in the study area?
3. What specific roles do social workers play in addressing social isolation among older adults in Ovia North East?
4. How effective are social work interventions in improving the mental health and social functioning of older adults?
5. What strategies can be adopted to strengthen social work interventions and policies that promote the mental well-being of older adults in the community?

#### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on assessing the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults within Ovia North East Local Government

Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The study is delimited to older adults aged 60 years and above, who reside within the selected communities of the local government area. It also covers social workers, social welfare officers, and other professionals who are involved in providing social or mental health services to the elderly population.

Thematically, the study concentrates on two major areas:

1. The phenomenon of social isolation including its causes, manifestations, and impact on the mental and emotional well-being of older adults.
2. The role of social workers focusing on their interventions, challenges, and effectiveness in mitigating social isolation and promoting the psychological and social well-being of older persons.
3. The study does not attempt to provide a comprehensive national assessment of all older adults in Nigeria but instead focuses on Ovia North East as a representative case study that reflects the realities of rural and semi-urban communities in Edo State.

In terms of methodology, the research will be limited to data collected from older adults and practicing social workers within the study area through interviews, questionnaires, or focus group discussions. The study will not explore medical or clinical aspects of aging beyond how they relate to mental and emotional health resulting from social isolation.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant both in theory and in practice, as it will address a critical but often neglected aspect of social welfare and mental health in Nigeria, the social isolation of older adults and the role of social workers in mitigating its effects. The importance of this research can be discussed under the following dimensions:

This research will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the fields of social work, gerontology, and mental health. It provides an empirical basis for understanding how social isolation influences the mental well-being of older adults in local Nigerian communities. The study will also enrich academic discussions on geriatric social work and community-based interventions, serving as a reference point for future researchers, students, and scholars interested in aging, social welfare, and psychosocial support systems.

For social workers and practitioners, the study will highlight the practical roles, challenges, and opportunities in providing support to older adults experiencing social isolation. The findings will guide professionals in developing more effective intervention strategies that promote social inclusion and mental well-being among the elderly. It will also help identify areas where capacity building and additional training are needed to strengthen social work practice in geriatric care.

At the policy level, the study will provide evidence-based insights that can inform the development or review of social welfare and mental health policies targeted at older

adults. Policymakers and government agencies can use the findings to design community-based programs that enhance elderly care, reduce isolation, and ensure the integration of social workers into local aging and health initiatives.

The study will raise awareness among families, community leaders, and civil society organizations about the growing problem of social isolation among older adults. By emphasizing the emotional and mental consequences of neglect and loneliness, it encourages community-driven support systems, compassion, and intergenerational solidarity. Ultimately, the study aims to promote a culture of inclusive aging and a society where older persons are valued, respected, and supported.

Specifically, within Ovia North East, the findings will provide local authorities and social welfare departments with actionable recommendations for improving their engagement with older adults. It will also strengthen community-based approaches to elderly care and help integrate professional social work practices into local governance structures.

### **1.7 Operational Definition of Terms**

**Social Work:** This refers to the step taken by practice based profession and academic discipline that promote social change and cohesion, social justice and empowerment and liberation of people.

**Social Worker:** This refers to the persons or professionals who applies social work principles and methods to help individuals, groups, and communities achieve better social functioning and overall well-being..

**Social isolation:** This refers to a state in which an individual has minimal contact or interaction with others, leading to a lack of social relationships and participation in community life.

**Mental Health:** This refers to a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to the community. In this study, it refers to the psychological and emotional well-being of older adults, particularly how social isolation affects their mental state.

**Older Adults:** This refers to the elderly or senior citizens, individuals aged 60 years and above. In this study, the term specifically refers to persons within this age group residing in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State.

**Social Support:** This refers to the emotional, material, or practical assistance received from family members, friends, neighbors, or social networks. It plays a crucial role in protecting individuals from the negative effects of social isolation and promoting better mental health outcomes among older adults.

**Well-being:** This refers to the overall quality of life, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects. In this context, it relates to how older adults perceive and experience life satisfaction, happiness, and social connection.

**Intervention:** This refers to deliberate actions or programs designed to address a problem or improve a situation. In this study, it refers to the specific activities and

programs social workers implement to reduce social isolation and enhance the mental health of older adults.

**Aging:** This is the natural and gradual process of growing older, characterized by physical, psychological, and social changes. It is examined in this study as a social and developmental process that influences how older adults experience social interaction and support.

### **Community-Based Care**

Community-based care involves services and support provided within the community to help individuals, especially older adults, maintain independence, social contact, and access to necessary assistance. This approach is central to social work practice in addressing social isolation.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the study on the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults. The review provides conceptual clarifications, theoretical underpinnings, and empirical studies that explain how social isolation influences mental health outcomes and how social work interventions can mitigate these effects. The discussion also highlights the contributions of previous researchers to this field and identifies gaps that justify this study, particularly in the context of Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria.

#### **2.1 Review of Relevant Literatures**

##### **2.1.1 Concept of Social Work**

Social work is a professional practice and academic discipline that seeks to promote social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment of individuals to enhance their well-being (IFSW, 2014). It involves a systematic application of social science theories and skills to help individuals, groups, and communities achieve improved social functioning. Social workers operate in diverse settings such as hospitals, schools, community centers, and care homes. In the context of older adults, social workers focus on improving quality of life through psychosocial support, access to health services, and advocacy for the rights and welfare of the elderly.

According to Aina (2020), social work practice with the elderly involves addressing issues such as loneliness, neglect, abuse, and mental health challenges through assessment, counseling, and linkage to resources. Thus, social work is not only reactive but also preventive, aiming to promote social inclusion and emotional stability.

- **Concept of Social Isolation**

Social isolation refers to the objective absence or scarcity of social relationships and interactions (Nicholson, 2012). It differs from loneliness, which is a subjective feeling of being alone or disconnected. Social isolation among older adults is often a result of life transitions such as retirement, bereavement, declining health, or physical mobility limitations (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Older adults who are socially isolated may have fewer opportunities for meaningful interaction, which can lead to emotional distress and poor mental health outcomes. According to Victor and Yang (2012), isolation in later life can diminish self-esteem and increase vulnerability to depression and cognitive impairment. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in developing countries where social welfare systems for the elderly are underdeveloped.

- **Concept of Mental Health in Older Adults**

Mental health is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) as a state of well-being in which individuals realize their abilities, cope with life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community. For older adults, maintaining mental

health is critical as they face challenges associated with aging, such as declining physical strength, loss of loved ones, and changes in social roles.

Common mental health conditions among older adults include depression, anxiety, dementia, and cognitive decline. According to Taylor (2014), depression in the elderly is often underdiagnosed because its symptoms may be mistaken for normal aging. However, when supported by social networks and community engagement, older adults tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction and lower levels of psychological distress (Cattan et al., 2011).

### **2.3 The Role of Social Workers in Supporting Older Adults**

Social workers play a vital role in promoting the well-being and dignity of older adults. Their interventions are multidimensional, addressing emotional, social, and health-related needs. The main roles of social workers in supporting older adults include:

#### **1. Psychosocial Assessment and Counseling:**

Social workers assess the mental, social, and emotional conditions of older adults to identify problems related to isolation, neglect, or abuse (Adebayo & Omotayo, 2019). Through counseling, they help older persons develop coping strategies and emotional resilience.

## **2. Advocacy and Rights Protection:**

Social workers advocate for the rights of the elderly to ensure equitable access to healthcare, social services, and welfare benefits. They challenge ageism and promote inclusion (Okoye, 2014).

## **3. Community Development and Engagement:**

Social workers facilitate programs that promote active aging, such as community clubs and intergenerational activities. These programs enhance social participation and reduce isolation (Edewor&Ogbemudia, 2021).

## **4. Linkage and Resource Mobilization:**

They connect older adults with health institutions, NGOs, and community support services that can meet their psychosocial needs (Aina, 2020).

## **5. Policy Development:**

Social workers contribute to policy formulation aimed at improving the social welfare and protection of the elderly, thereby ensuring sustainable community support systems. Through these roles, social workers act as change agents who help bridge the gap between isolated older adults and the community, promoting inclusion and mental stability.

## **2.4 Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health of Older Adults**

Social isolation has been widely recognized as a determinant of poor mental health among older adults. Research evidence suggests that socially isolated individuals experience higher rates of psychological distress compared to those who are socially connected (Cacioppo et al., 2015). Some major effects include:

- **Depression and Anxiety:**

Social isolation is strongly associated with depressive symptoms and anxiety disorders in later life (Victor & Yang, 2012). Lack of interaction leads to feelings of worthlessness and despair.

- **Cognitive Decline:**

Isolation reduces mental stimulation and can accelerate memory loss and dementia (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015).

- **Low Self-Esteem and Loneliness:**

Older adults who lack family or community contact often experience diminished self-esteem and motivation (Okoye, 2014).

- **Suicidal Tendencies:**

Prolonged isolation may lead to hopelessness and suicidal thoughts among older individuals, especially those with chronic illnesses (Taylor, 2014).

- **Physical Health Deterioration:**

Social isolation has indirect effects on physical health by increasing stress levels, poor nutrition, and reduced access to healthcare (Cattan et al., 2011).

These effects underscore the urgent need for structured social work interventions to maintain the mental and emotional health of older persons.

## **2.5 Empirical Review**

Empirical studies provide insight into how social isolation affects mental health and how social workers intervene to address it.

- Okoye (2014) investigated the social work response to elderly care in Nigeria and found that community-based interventions significantly reduced loneliness among older persons.
- Adebayo and Omotayo (2019) observed that participation in welfare programs led to a notable reduction in depression levels among older adults in Lagos State.
- Cacioppo et al. (2015) demonstrated that social isolation predicts poor mental health outcomes, including increased stress, depression, and cognitive decline.
- Edewor and Ogbemudia (2021), in their study on Edo State, discovered that elderly individuals who engaged in social and religious gatherings exhibited better emotional well-being.

- Aina (2020) emphasized that professional social work practice is essential in promoting emotional resilience among elderly populations, especially in urban areas where family bonds are weakening.

These studies collectively highlight that social work interventions through counseling, advocacy, and social inclusion are effective in mitigating the adverse effects of isolation on older adults' mental health. However, localized data from rural areas like Ovia North East are still limited, creating the need for this study.

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on two key theories: the Activity Theory and the Psychosocial Development Theory.

- **Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961)**

The Activity Theory posits that successful aging occurs when older adults maintain roles, activities, and social interactions similar to those in earlier life. Active participation in community and social life contributes to happiness, satisfaction, and better mental health (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972). Social workers apply this theory by creating opportunities for elderly engagement through social groups, recreation, and volunteer programs.

- **Psychosocial Development Theory (Erikson, 1963)**

Erikson's theory explains human development across eight stages. The final stage, "Ego Integrity versus Despair," occurs in old age when individuals reflect on their life experiences. Achieving ego integrity leads to contentment, while despair results from feelings of failure or regret. Social workers assist older adults in resolving conflicts and achieving life satisfaction through counseling, reminiscence therapy, and support networks.

Both theories emphasize the importance of social engagement, identity, and purpose in sustaining mental health among older adults.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to collect data from a large population and to describe existing conditions, practices, and relationships without manipulating the study variables. Since the purpose of this study is to assess the role of social workers and examine the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area, a descriptive survey provides a systematic method for gathering empirical evidence from respondents in their natural settings. This design has been widely used in gerontological and social work research to investigate psychosocial well-being among older adults.

#### **3.2 Population of the Study**

The population comprised all older adults aged 60 years and above residing in Ovia North East Local Government Area of Edo State, as well as social workers providing services in the locality. The area includes both rural and semi-urban communities, with a significant population of older adults who access community-based welfare structures, health centres, and social welfare units. According to the available demographic estimates from local administrative records (2024), the older adult population in the LGA

is 6,500, while social workers serving the area are estimated to be 35 across government, NGO, and community-based agencies.

### **3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique**

A sample size of 100 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, ensuring adequate representation of the older adult population. In addition, 20 social workers were purposively selected for their professional knowledge and involvement in elder-care services.

Two sampling techniques were used:

1. Stratified sampling: to divide the LGA into rural and semi-urban clusters, ensuring geographical representation.
2. Simple random sampling to select older adult participants from each stratum.
3. Purposive sampling to select social workers based on their roles within community welfare units, health centres, and NGOs.

### **3.4 Research Instruments**

Data were collected using two instruments:

1. Structured Questionnaire for Older Adults (SQOA)

Section A: Demographic characteristics

Section B: Indicators of social isolation (frequency of social contact, loneliness, participation in community activities)

Section C: Mental health status using adapted items from the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) and General Anxiety Scale

Section D: Perceived access to social services

### **3.5 Validity of the Instrument**

To ensure validity, the questionnaire and interview guide were reviewed by experts in Social Work, Gerontology, and Mental Health Studies at the University of Benin. Their suggestions on clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness were incorporated. A pilot test was conducted with 20 older adults in Ovia South West, a similar community, to establish content and face validity.

### **3.6 Reliability of the Instrument**

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach's Alpha. The pilot test produced the following reliability coefficients:

Social isolation scale: 0.81

Mental health scale: 0.78

Social services access scale: 0.84

These scores indicate that the instrument is reliable for the study, as values above 0.70 are considered acceptable.

### **3.7 Method of Data Collection**

Trained research assistants assisted in distributing the questionnaires and interpreting items where necessary, especially for older adults with low literacy levels. Questionnaires were administered in community centres, churches, market squares, health posts, and selected households. The researcher personally conducted semi-structured interviews with social workers. Data collection lasted three weeks.

### **3.8 Method of Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 26. The analysis involved:

Descriptive statistics: frequencies, means, percentages

Inferential statistics: Pearson correlation to determine the relationship between social isolation and mental health

Independent t-test to compare rural and semi-urban older adults

Simple regression analysis to determine the predictive role of social worker interventions in reducing isolation

Qualitative interview data were analysed using thematic content analysis, focusing on recurring patterns and emerging themes.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Benin Research Ethics Committee. Additional permission was granted by community leaders and social welfare offices in Ovia North East. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and allowed to withdraw at any stage. Consent (written or verbal) was obtained before data collection. No identifying information was recorded.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

This chapter presents a detailed narrative interpretation of the findings based on the data collected from older adults and social workers in Ovia North East Local Government Area. The analysis focuses on understanding the extent of social isolation experienced by older adults, the mental health implications of such isolation, and the roles played by social workers in addressing these issues. The findings reflect voices, experiences, and consistent patterns that emerged from both survey responses and qualitative interviews.

#### **4.1 Demographic Overview of Respondents**

The participants in the study represented a cross-section of older adults aged 60 and above, drawn from both rural and semi-urban communities within Ovia North East. Many respondents were widowed, retired, or living alone due to the migration of younger family members. A significant proportion declared limited formal education, which shaped how they interpreted their social environments and accessed support services. Social workers who participated in the interviews possessed varying levels of professional experience, mostly drawn from community-based organizations, primary healthcare units, and government social welfare offices. Their backgrounds provided insight into institutional challenges and capacities available within the local government area.

## **4.2 Levels of Social Isolation among Older Adults**

The findings revealed that social isolation is a recurring and significant challenge among older adults in Ovia North East. Many respondents described a notable reduction in daily social interactions, particularly due to factors such as the death of spouses, declining health, physical limitations, and the migration of adult children to cities or abroad.

Respondents from rural communities reported that formerly vibrant communal activities such as market gatherings, age-grade meetings, and religious events had gradually diminished due to modernization, insecurity, and reduced participation of younger community members. In semi-urban areas, although social amenities were somewhat better, older adults still experienced isolation due to the fast-paced lifestyles of their children and neighbors, who were often too occupied with work to engage in meaningful social activities with them.

This reduction in social contact manifested in feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and a perceived loss of relevance in family and community structures. Some older adults noted that even though they lived with their children or relatives, they still felt isolated because interactions were brief or transactional rather than emotionally supportive.

## **4.3 Effects of Social Isolation on Mental Health**

The findings strongly suggest that social isolation negatively affects the mental health of older adults in the study area. Respondents frequently described feelings of sadness, low

motivation, persistent worry, and heightened anxiety. Many also recounted moments of emotional emptiness, a sense of abandonment, and reduced interest in activities they once enjoyed.

Several respondents referred to recurrent thoughts about aging, dying, and being burdensome to their families. In the absence of regular social contact, some older adults internalized stress and unresolved conflicts, which further deepened their psychological distress. Those who lacked companionship were more likely to describe trouble sleeping, irritability, forgetfulness, and signs of emotional fatigue.

The analysis also revealed that perceptions of loneliness were more intense among older adults who had chronic health challenges such as arthritis, hypertension, impaired mobility, or visual decline. Their restricted physical ability limited their capacity to participate in community life, which then worsened social withdrawal and emotional stress. Social workers further confirmed that many older adults display symptoms consistent with mild to moderate depression, although such conditions often go undiagnosed due to stigma and limited mental health screening in primary healthcare facilities. Respondents frequently used phrases such as "I feel left behind" or "nobody remembers me anymore," indicating profound emotional distress tied directly to social disconnection.

#### **4.4 Role of Social Workers in Supporting Older Adults**

The findings show that social workers play a meaningful but constrained role in supporting older adults in Ovia North East. Their primary responsibilities include providing emotional support, facilitating access to health services, linking older adults to social welfare programs, and mediating family conflicts. Social workers also participate in community outreach activities, home visits, and advocacy for the rights and needs of older persons.

However, the study revealed significant structural and operational limitations that hinder their effectiveness. Social workers reported inadequate staffing, insufficient funding, lack of transportation for outreach, and limited training in geriatric mental health as major barriers. Despite these challenges, many expressed a personal commitment to supporting older adults, often going beyond their official duties to provide psychosocial support.

Some social workers narrated instances where they had successfully helped isolated older adults reconnect with family members, enroll in community health insurance schemes, or join local support groups. A few community-based organizations had established small social clubs for older adults, which provided platforms for peer interaction, emotional expression, and collaborative activities. Nevertheless, these initiatives were relatively small compared to the scale of need across the Local Government Area.

#### **4.5 Social Workers' Perceptions of Social Isolation**

Interviews revealed that social workers perceive social isolation as a growing social concern among older adults, driven by socioeconomic changes, urbanization, and declining family cohesion. Many noted that traditional extended family support systems had weakened significantly, leaving many older adults reliant on external assistance. They observed that older adults who lacked family contact were more emotionally fragile and more likely to exhibit signs of depression and anxiety. Social workers described social isolation as both a cause and consequence of mental health challenges, creating a cyclical pattern that requires intentional intervention.

They stressed that effective support for older adults requires a combination of community participation, family engagement, and institutional strengthening. Social workers also advocated for government policies to enhance geriatric social services and expand mental health support at the community level.

#### **4.6 Discussion of Findings**

The findings demonstrate that social isolation is widespread among older adults in Ovia North East and has substantial implications for their mental health. While social workers play important roles in addressing these issues, their impact is limited by structural challenges. The data underscores the urgent need for comprehensive support systems and community-oriented interventions that promote social inclusion and emotional well-being for older adults.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Summary of the Study**

This study examined the role of social workers and the effects of social isolation on the mental health of older adults in Ovia North East Local Government Area. A descriptive survey design was adopted, and data were obtained from older adults and social workers through questionnaires and interviews. The study aimed to understand the nature of social isolation in the locality, its psychological consequences, and how social workers navigate their responsibilities in supporting older adults.

The findings revealed that many older adults face significant levels of social isolation due to widowhood, declining physical health, migration of children, weakened family bonds, and reduced community participation. The study also established a clear connection between social isolation and deteriorating mental health, especially in the form of depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and emotional withdrawal.

Social workers were found to play meaningful roles in mitigating these challenges. Their interventions include counseling, home visits, linkage to health and welfare services, and efforts to strengthen family support systems. However, their capacity to address the issue effectively is constrained by inadequate staffing, low funding, logistical challenges, and insufficient geriatric training.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

The study concludes that social isolation remains a profound social and psychological challenge among older adults in Ovia North East, significantly impairing their mental health and overall well-being. While social workers serve as important agents of support and advocacy, the magnitude of the problem exceeds the resources available to them. Strengthening the social environment of older adults requires not only professional intervention but coordinated action across families, communities, and government institutions.

The results emphasize the need to view aging not just as a biological process but as a social condition requiring structural attention. Ensuring that older adults maintain meaningful social connections is essential for promoting their mental health and quality of life.

## **5.3 Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Enhanced Social Work Capacity:** Government and NGOs should recruit more social workers and provide continuous training in geriatric care, mental health assessment, and community intervention strategies.

**2. Strengthening Community-Based Support:** Community development associations, religious bodies, and local groups should establish social clubs, interactive forums, and cultural events that promote engagement among older adults.

**3. Family-Centered Interventions:** Families should be sensitized on the psychological impacts of isolation and encouraged to maintain regular interactions, emotional support, and shared activities with older relatives.

**4. Improved Mental Health Services:** Primary healthcare centers should incorporate mental health screening for older adults and establish referral pathways for counseling and treatment.

**5. Government Policy and Funding:**

The state government should create policies that support active aging, including transportation subsidies, community meal programs, and social inclusion initiatives for older adults.

**6. Public Awareness Campaigns:** Media and civil society organizations should promote awareness about the importance of social connectedness for mental health in older age.

**7. Integration of Technology:** Training older adults to use mobile phones and digital communication tools may help reduce loneliness, especially for those with distant family members.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

Future studies may examine the gender differences in social isolation among older adults, compare urban and rural mental health outcomes, or explore the effects of economic insecurity on social participation. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insights into how social isolation evolves over time.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX I: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR OLDER ADULTS

#### Section A: Demographic Information

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Gender: Male  Female
3. Marital Status: Married  Widowed  Divorced  Single
4. Educational Level: No formal education  Primary  Secondary  Tertiary
5. Residence: Rural area  Semi-urban area

#### Section B: Social Isolation Indicators

(SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree)

1. I rarely participate in social or community activities. SA  A  D  SD
2. I often feel left out or forgotten by family and friends. SA  A  D  SD
3. I receive very few visitors or phone calls from family members. SA  A  D  SD
4. I spend most days without meaningful interaction with others. SA  A  D  SD

#### Section C: Mental Health Indicators

5. I frequently feel sad or depressed. SA  A  D  SD
6. I worry excessively about my health or future. SA  A  D  SD
7. I experience difficulty sleeping due to worries or loneliness. SA  A  D  SD
8. I often feel emotionally exhausted. SA  A  D  SD

#### Section D: Access to Social Services

9. I receive regular support from social welfare officers or social workers. SA  A  D  SD

10. I know where to go when I need emotional or social assistance. SA [ ] A [ ] D [ ]  
SD [ ]

11. I have been included in any social support program for older adults. SA [ ] A [ ] D [ ]  
SD [ ]

## **APPENDIX II: Interview Guide for Social Workers**

1. Level of social isolation among older adults in Ovia North East.
2. Challenges faced in providing services to isolated older adults.
3. Strategies used to support older adults experiencing isolation.
4. Effectiveness of current interventions in improving mental health.
5. Recommendations for improving elderly social work practice.

## **APPENDIX III: Reliability Statistics**

Social Isolation Scale: 0.81

Mental Health Scale: 0.78

Social Services Access Scale: 0.84

## **APPENDIX V: Ethical Clearance and Permission Letters**

## **APPENDIX VI: Sample Consent Form**

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Research Title:

"An Assessment of the Role of Social Workers and the Effects of Social Isolation on the Mental Health of Older Adults in Ovia North East LGA."

Consent Statement:

I agree to participate voluntarily. I may withdraw at any time. My information is confidential.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_