Post-COVID Social Engagement and Cognitive Function among Chinese Older Adults: Are there Variations by Rural/Urban Residence and Gender?

Purpose: This study investigates the impact of reduced social engagement on cognitive function among older adults in China during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on gender and urban-rural differences.

Methods: Using data from the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study, we analysed changes in cognitive function before and after the pandemic through OLS regression models. Social engagement was measured across various activities, including both physical and cognitively stimulating tasks.

Findings: Significant cognitive declines were observed across all subgroups, with urban females experiencing the largest reductions. Reduced moderate physical activities appeared to have a protective effect, while decreased engagement in cognitively stimulating activities, such as playing games, was associated with greater cognitive decline.

Conclusions: The study underscores the importance of maintaining social engagement, particularly in cognitively stimulating activities, to mitigate cognitive decline among older adults. Notably, the differences in cognitive health outcomes by gender and urban-rural status suggest the need for targeted interventions to support older populations in the post-pandemic context.