

# Spotlight: An International Family Caregiver Perspective

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Prologue:

Working for EWA has broadened my perspective on the many vital issues facing at-home care workers, and the LTSS assisted living workforce. I have seen firsthand the effects family caregiving can have on an individual and the hardships and perseverance that my mother, Asma, withstood as an international caregiver to both of her parents. I felt a strong connection to the issues EWA advocates for and learned the similarities and differences between family caregivers within the U.S. and those like my mother, who had to care for aging family members abroad. My mother had to care for her mother, who suffered from a stroke, leaving her paralyzed on the right side of her body until her last days in 2010. And her father suffered from COVID-19 and a terrible fall in the last few years of his life in 2021. I conducted this interview to bring awareness to the struggles that many families in the U.S. face, having to care for family members outside of America. The full recording of the interview with my mother can be found [here](#)

Transcript/ Edited for clarity:

(Anya) Hi! My name is Anya Nasar, and I am EWA's spring 2022 intern, and today I have my mother with me, and she will be sharing her caregiving story as an international family caregiver. So to start. I just like to ask,

**Who did you provide care for? And did they have any underlying conditions when they came into your care?**

Hi, my name is Asma Shaikh, and yes, I provided care for both my parents. My mother had suffered a stroke and was paralyzed on the right side of her body in 2010. When the time was needed, I had to step up and help out with providing her care which meant leaving the U.S and traveling to Pakistan where both of my parents lived. I provided care for my mother for several months in 2010 until she passed. My dad, who we just recently lost a couple of months ago in December, lived a very full, fruitful life, at the age of 89. He was a general physician and surgeon and was very active in his life to the end. However, due to the Covid pandemic, his old age, and a fall that occurred in 2021, he needed some assistance right towards the end of his life for which I had to make myself available.

**At what point in your life did you find being a caregiver within your family was essential?**

Well, my mother, we lost at a pretty young age. The situation came about very suddenly when her uncontrolled blood pressure caused her to have a brain stroke, and an aneurysm in the brain and because of that, my three sisters and I all took turns to help out in providing care for my mother. This took place back in 2010. Me being away from my home, I'm here in the U.S., and the rest of the family and my parents back in Pakistan made providing care quite challenging. So when it was needed I would make myself available to travel back home to help provide care which I was fortunate to be able to afford the airfare. The same went for my dad last year in November. He had a couple of health issues that were building up causing him to not feel well. Because he was getting older and needed my assistance, I flew back to take care of him several times last year. When both of my parents needed assistance in health and care my siblings and I would have to make ourselves available. I was not able to travel when there were illnesses that could easily be treated but when it came to major health concerns I would drop what I was doing and travel back.

**So you mentioned that you are three sisters and that you were the only one abroad, how did it feel being a caregiver from across the world? What were the challenges with having your parents abroad?**

Well, definitely, it's a big challenge being so far away from your loved ones, especially your parents when they need you in their time of need. So I had to do a lot of juggling to do and a lot of sacrificing that needed to be made. I would put things off in my calendar to be available for them. The additional psychological and physical pressure of traveling back and forth and taking care of them on top of having to leave my family in the U.S was extremely stressful. Yes. It's been very challenging.

**Did you receive any help with caregiving for your mother and father? Were you able to have outside of the family paid caregivers to come in to assist?**

My sisters and I were very fortunate that we could hire help outside of the family to care for our parents. In a country like Pakistan where facilities and services such as nursing homes and at-home caregivers are not available unlike in the U.S., it becomes extremely difficult to find well-qualified people to come in to take care of your family. The U.S has trained staff available for home care and agencies that can help you as well as government assistance. Back in my country, it's totally dependent on the family to provide care for the elderly and elder parents, etc. And when the time came we were fortunate enough that we could hire a private nurse for my mother that would stay with her for 12 hours at night. We had staff living in my parent's house who were also paid to help take care of my mother and my father, but they were not qualified or certified in caregiving and originally hired for other home jobs that needed to be attended to. It is very difficult back home, because we don't have any structure where we can find this kind of caregiving help so we have to go on references from friends, and just pray that you get lucky to find someone who is sincere, and who's able to give the attentive care that is needed.

**Would you say that the biggest difference between caregiving in the U.S. compared to caregiving in Pakistan is the resources that are available?**

Having the resources as well as cultural differences make up the major divider between care in the U.S. and in Pakistan. For centuries in Pakistan, the culture has been that the kids of parents would be the primary caregiver to the parents in their time of need. This would have to be the major difference as in the U.S. it is more of a norm for parents to have assisted living communities and nursing homes and in Pakistan, the “nursing home” would consist of the parents moving in with the children, there are not many nursing homes or assisted living communities in Pakistan. If there were it would only be accessible to the elite class.

**Have you seen the norm, and cultural aspects of family caregiving, being changed in Pakistan? Do you see any progress with more paid caregivers coming in rather than the family? Do you see the norm changing, after being a family caregiver for many years?**

Well in America there's a whole industry and the system is very organized around, providing care whether it is assisted living, nursing homes, or aid coming into help at home. The U.S. also has more private companies that can help and even subsidized programs by the government to help aging Americans. Plus, the people that are coming in to provide care are well trained and qualified in providing this kind of care, whereas in my part of the world the main role would be that the children take care of aging family members.

In the big cities, the norm of the man going out to work and the wife staying home with the kids is changing to a big degree where both people living in the house need to bring in an income so the family can live a more comfortable life. ( ANYA ) And without being comfortable, you can't have certified nurses coming in to help take care because back home...( ASMA) We don't have any government assistance so everything is privately funded. If you would like to hire someone to help care for a loved one it has to be funded entirely by the family without government assistance. Cities are better when it comes to finding help. My sisters and I have found help, living in a city in Pakistan, but it was not without having to train them ourselves. Including providing them whatever assistance they need from our experience with our family to help provide care for our mother and father. But as far as the rural areas, the villages, and the more remote areas of Pakistan are concerned, the primary caretaker of the family is still the family itself, specifically the children.

**So you mentioned before that when you did hire help to come in to help take care of your mother and father that you would have to train them yourselves so that they would be more understanding of your family. Would you say that although you were bringing in help, it still felt like a burden having to learn yourself and then train another person to your knowledge?**

Yes, I discovered that when I needed to provide care and even in hiring help to provide care, I had to educate myself, and I had to relearn so many different things. When we bought in the help they were not trained which made my job more stressful as they were not properly

educated in the line of providing help. It took a while for the people we hired to understand our parents when they needed at-home assistance when we sisters could not attend.

**How did you educate yourself? Were there any tactics and resources? Did you have any access to tools or technology that helped you with your caregiving?**

The biggest aid was the internet and learning about different care methods in the U.S. These days there isn't much information in Pakistan circulating about at-home caregiving for aging adults and if there is information out there, it is not easily accessible and available in Pakistan for all people to view.

The internet was the biggest advantage that I had at my fingertips. I started reading up and looking for forums where other people came ahead to share their experiences, resources, etc. That was a big big help as well as talking to friends and relatives in the U.S. and back home, who had been in similar situations dealing with an aging parent abroad.

**And as you mentioned before when you were traveling back and forth, how mentally and physically draining it was, how did caregiving besides the traveling aspect mentally and physically affected you?**

I felt I had one leg in America and my other leg in Pakistan. So at any given time if I was back home taking care of my mother or my father I would be worried about my husband and my daughter. I would be very stressed and concerned about what I would be missing in the U.S with my family, if I should've been home to help them if they needed me for something and vice versa when I would be in the U.S I would constantly be worried about my mom and dad in Pakistan. So it was a big tug of war, trying to balance everything and make everything work.

**In the U.S. we have telehealth services that are very useful to the aging population. Is there any telehealth accessibility to the aging population in Pakistan?**

I am unsure if the technology has reached but if it has it would only be available to a very small percentage of the population, maybe just in the city where people have access to computers, electricity, and the internet. But people living outside, the greater population that lives in the village and in the rural areas would not benefit because they don't have access to all technology.

**What have you learned throughout your caregiving story from the beginning to the end?**

Take a stand, being a caregiver requires a lot of sacrifices and a lot of patience. One has to totally rearrange and re-educate themselves about how to deal with people at different stages of life, especially as a family member is aging. I learned from being a caregiver that it is not all about you, you have to think about how the other person who you are caring for is feeling and keep that a priority even when it gets hard. You have to work around certain discomforts to make sure that they are at ease, comfortable, and taken care of as well as yourself.

**Did you learn anything else about yourself or anything that you realize that has changed since becoming a caregiver?**

I always considered myself to be not too short-tempered, and less patient, and I have discovered that I have learned how to understand myself and the environment around me a lot better. I've learned to acknowledge and stand up after every fault that I have made that I thought I might not be able to do.

**You were saying before that because of the cultural aspect that the children are more or less the caregivers correct?**

You are always the caregivers when it comes to your parents and if you don't have children, then there is an extended family that lives with you, or around you, that steps in to help out in our culture.

**Because you are here in the United States and your parents lived on a different continent, where you always prepared to assume your caregiver role? Did you consider bringing your parents over to the U.S. so they could experience better caregiving services?**

Yes, many times I did think that it would be wiser to have both my parents come over and live here. It's very easy to say that I could pick them up and bring them here and have them taken care of. However, it would be plucking them out of their comfortable environment, their home, and making them live in a country where they don't have their friends, relatives, and day-to-day activities that they enjoy that are in Pakistan. Bringing them here and exposing them to a completely different lifestyle and a whole different environment would not bring them happiness, especially at the old age, they were both in when they came into my care.

My father was still practicing medicine by attending clinics every Sunday and my mother was very involved with her other kids back in Pakistan and her grandkids. I would have loved to have them come over and be taken care of but I don't think my parents were too eager about leaving what they love behind. (Anya) It's hard because you have to think about the person too which is very difficult when there could be better sources of care for them in the U.S. But then again, they would feel safer and more at home aging in a place where they're comfortable.

**My last question for you is, do you have any suggestions for those caring for a loved one abroad? Anything that you learned that you would like to share.**

All I can say is that distance places a lot of stress and intention, to begin with. The best way to go about this is if you think you might be in the line of caregiving for an elderly parent or relative expand your circle, you'd be amazed at the number of people that are willing to help out. Reach out for help, and widen your circle and your resources. Ask, and don't be frightened off. There are hundreds of people out there that are willing to help and provide assistance, or even guide you and just pray, hope for the best, and never give up.

