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Research Article

Kal, Aaj Aur Kal (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow): Reflections on Abuse and Exclusion of Elderly in India

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ABSTRACT

Elderly abuse and exclusion is becoming a critical social concern and problem. However, it went unnoticed from the public view since it was considered mostly a very personal family-related matter. Usually elderly abuse occurs with little recognition or response. Even today, elderly abuse continues to be a taboo, mostly unreported and ignored by societies across the world. However, in past one decade elderly abuse and exclusion has emerged as an important social problem and public health issue.

Elderly abuse can lead to physical injuries – ranging from minor scratches and bruises to broken bones and head injuries leading to lasting disabilities – and serious, sometimes long lasting, psychological consequences, including depression and anxiety. Globally, it is predicted that by the year 2025, the global population of people aged 60 years and older will more than double, from 542 million in 1995 to about 1.2 billion.

The abuse and exclusion of elderly people in India has risen drastically as per a survey conducted by HelpAge India, a non-governmental organisation which fights isolation, poverty and neglect of the elderly. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 has also been enacted to check elderly abuse in India. This paper is based on secondary data and reflects various issues related to elderly abuse and exclusion.

Keywords: Elderly, Abuse, Exclusion, Prevention, Laws, Socio-cultural factors, Prevention

INTRODUCTION

The abuse and exclusion of older people by family members is not a new phenomenon. However, till the advent of initiatives to address child abuse and domestic violence in the last quarter of the 20th century, elderly abuse and exclusion remained a personal family matter, hidden from public view. Initially seen as a social welfare issue and subsequently a problem of ageing, abuse and exclusion of the elderly, like other forms of family violence, has developed into a public health and criminal justice concern. The fields such as public health, social exclusion and criminal justice have therefore brought in to light to a large extent how abuse and exclusion of the elderly is viewed, analysed and is dealt with.

This paper is based on secondary data and review of the literature. Review of the literature is tilted towards the Western literature. In Indian context, the issue of elderly abuse and exclusion in public domain is not older than two decades.

CONCEPT OF ELDERLY ABUSE

Elder abuse was first described in British scientific journals in 1975 under the term 'granny battering' (Baker, 1975; Burston, 1975). In the coming decades, in both developed and developing countries, there will be a dramatic increase in the population in the older age segment – which in French is termed 'le troisie`meaˆge' (the third age).

Elderly abuse in several national and international fora and agencies has been defined as 'a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person'. Elderly abuse in fact is clear violation of human rights and can take various forms such as physical, psychological or emotional, sexual and financial abuse, abandonment, neglect and serious loss of dignity and respect. It can also be the result of intentional or unintentional neglect. (http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/)

Elderly abuse and exclusion is either an act of commission or of omission implying 'neglect' which may be either intentional or unintentional. The abuse may be of a physical nature, it may be psychological (involving emotional or verbal aggression), or it may involve financial or other material maltreatment. Regardless of the type of abuse, it will certainly result in unnecessary suffering, injury or pain, the loss or violation of human rights, and a decreased quality of life for the older person (Hudson, 1991). Whether the behaviour is termed abusive, neglectful or exploitative will probably depend on how frequently the mistreatment occurs, its duration, severity and consequences, and above all, the cultural context. This obviously leads to the exclusion of the elderly.

It is predicted that by the year 2025, the global population of those aged 60 years and older will more than double, from 542 million in 1995 to about 1.2 billion (United Nations Population Division, 2002). The total number of older people living in developing countries will also more than double by 2025, reaching 850 million (Randal and German, 1999) – 12% of the overall population of the developing world – though in some countries, including Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya and Thailand, the increase is expected to be more than fourfold.

TYPES OF ABUSE

This literature suggests different types of abuses. Although it may not cover every aspect and type of elderly abuse and exclusion, it is exhaustive to the extent of portraying the picture of elderly abuse and exclusion. The types of elderly abuse eventually leading to their exclusion are:

- Physical abuse means the infliction of pain or injury, physical coercion, or physical or drug-induced restraint, beating and physical manhandling.
- Psychological or emotional abuse is the infliction of mental anguish.
- Verbal abuse leads to discrimination on the basis of age, insults and hurtful words, denigration, intimidation, false accusations, psychological pain and distress.
- Financial or material abuse involves the illegal or improper exploitation or use of funds or resources of the older person, extortion and control of pension money, theft of property and exploitation of older people to force them to care for grandchildren
- Sexual abuse is non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with the older person, incest, rape and other types of sexual coercion.
- Neglect of the elderly includes the refusal or failure to fulfil a care giving obligation, loss of respect for elders, withholding of affection and lack of interest in the older person's well-being. This may or may not involve a conscious and intentional attempt to inflict physical or emotional distress on the older person. Neglect has been identified as one of the critical factors of social exclusion of the elderly. If family members fail to fulfil their kinship obligations to provide food and housing, this also constitutes neglect. Additionally it also includes loss of respect for elders, which was equated with neglect; accusations and abuse by systems health centres, bureaucratic bodies, pension offices and apathetic attitude of the institutions etc.

Ecological Model

Although the types of abuses mentioned above are suggestive, massive research has been done to develop a model and one such model is the ecological model,

which was first applied to the study of child abuse, and neglect (Garbarino, 1978) and has been applied more recently to elder abuse (Schiamberg and Gans, 1999; Carp, 2000). The ecological model takes into account the interactions that take place at different levels and systems. The model consists of four levels of the environment: individual, relationship, community and society which are briefly discussed.

Individual Factors

To explain elderly abuse and exclusion at basic level individual personality disturbances are seen as causal agents of family violence. For instance O'Leary (1993) has identified several social and cultural factors like personality disorders and alcohol-related problems than the general population. However, according to community-based prevalence studies such as by Pillemer (1988), and Podnieks (1992) it appears that older men are at risk of abuse by spouses, adult children and other relatives in about the same proportions as women.

Relationship Factors

Several theoretical perspectives showed that the level of stress of caregivers was seen as a risk factor that linked elder abuse and exclusion with care of an elderly relative (Eastman, 1994). While the popular image of abuse depicts a dependent victim and an overstressed caregiver, there is growing evidence that neither of these factors properly accounts for cases of abuse.

It may be that the violence is a result of the interplay of several factors, including stress, the relationship between the carer and the care recipient, the existence of disruptive behaviour and aggression by the care recipient, and depression in the caregiver.

The arrangements at home and living, particularly overcrowded conditions and a lack of privacy have been associated with conflict within families. Although abuse can occur when the abuser and the older person suffering abuse live apart, the older person is more at risk when living with the caregiver. The dependency of the elderly is related with increased risk of abuse. At first, the emphasis focused on the dependency of the victim on the caregiver or abuser, though later case work identified abusers who were dependent on the older person – usually adult children dependent on elderly parents for housing and financial assistance (Pillemer, 1989).

Community and Societal Factors

Several researchers have identified community factor of social isolation and exclusion as a significant one in elder mistreatment (Grafstrom *et al*., 1994).

Isolation of older people can be both a cause and a consequence of abuse. Many older people are excluded and isolated because of physical or mental ailments. Furthermore, loss of friends and family members reduces the opportunities for social interaction.

The following sociocultural factors are also critical in discussing about the social exclusion and abuse of the elderly (Owen, 1996).

- the systems of patrilineal and matrilineal inheritance and land rights, affecting the distribution of power;
- the way societies view the role of women (with specific reference to elderly women abuse);
- the erosion of the close bonds between generations of a family, caused by rural–urban migration and the growth in formal education;
- the loss, through modernisation, of the traditional domestic, ritual and family arbitration;
- roles of elderly.

Much of the abuse – and particularly domestic violence – occurred as a result of breakdown of joint family system. This is especially true in Indian context

Moreover, dysfunctional family life, lack of money for essentials and lack of education, outward expression of the aggression and job opportunities have all contributed to a life of crime, drug peddling and prostitution by young people. In this society, elderly are viewed as targets for abuse and exploitation, their vulnerability being a result of isolation, exclusion, lack of pension support and job opportunities, poor hygiene, disease and malnutrition.

Primary research on the issue of elder abuse and neglect in India is limited due to tremendous reluctance to discuss intergenerational conflicts. Nevertheless, researchers are beginning to identify collective voices of perceptions of abuse and neglect that are more rampant than individuals may directly admit. In a study of senior residents living in India's 'pay and stay' homes, 150 individuals were interviewed in order to understand their relocation experience. Results suggest that challenges in interpersonal family relationships, conflicts in values and perceptions, particularly with regard to neglect and abandonment, are evident in descriptions of the relocation experience (Jyotsna *et al.*, 2013).

In Chinese societies several reasons have been suggested by Kwan (1995) for the mistreatment of older people, including:

- a lack of respect by the younger generation;
- tension between traditional and new family structures;
- restructuring of the basic support networks for the elderly;

- migration of young couples to new towns;
- leaving elderly parents in deteriorating residential areas within town centres. Similar reasons are also true for Indian societies.

Soneja in her report (Country report on Elder Abuse in India, World Health Organization) says it is causing stress in joint and extended families with older people living longer and the households getting smaller and congested. Even where they are co-residing marginalisation, isolation, exclusion and insecurity is felt among the older persons due to the generation gap and change in lifestyles. Increase in lifespan also results in chronic functional disabilities creating a need for assistance required by the older person to manage chores as simple as the activities of daily living. With the traditional system of the lady of the house looking after the elderly family members at home is slowly getting changed as the women at home are also participating in activities outside home and have their own career ambitions.

In this background, the coping capacities of the younger and older family members are now being challenged leading to unwanted, harsh behaviour by the younger family members towards the elderly.

An extensive research by HelpAge was carried out on Elderly Abuse and Crime in India in 2014. The study aimed at identifying the nature and extent of elder abuse and finding out its existence and reasons for the same. The study covered the elderly in the age group of 60+ years across nine cities, namely Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Bhopal, Chennai, Patna, Hyderabad and Bangalore with a sample size of 100 per city. The main findings of the report are as follows.

In 2014, the percentage of elders abused went up drastically from 23% in the previous year to 50%. Verbal abuse (41%), disrespect (33%) and neglect (29%) are ranked as the most common types of abuse experienced by the elderly. These three types of abuse are also the same as cited in previous years and also are in consonance with the general perception among elderly. Elders across cities were asked about the abusers within their family. The daughter-in-law (61%) and son (59%) emerged as the topmost perpetrators. The elder victims cite that the primary reasons underlying their abuse are: 'emotional dependence on the abuser' (46%), 'economic dependence on the abuser' (45%) and 'changing ethos' (38%). Forty-six per cent reported facing abuse for 3–5 years, while 25% reported 1–2 years. Sadly, 4% of the elderly reported to be facing abuse for more than 15 years. While abuse has gone up, unfortunately still 41% of those abused did not report the matter to anyone. *Maintaining confidentiality of the family matter* is cited to be the major reason behind not reporting abuse (59%). An interesting observation about the reasons for not reporting abuse is that in metro cities there is marked

'lack of confidence in any person or agency to deal with the problem' and also there seems to be a general feeling of 'did not know how to deal with the abuse'.

Nationally, the effective mechanisms perceived by all elderly to deal with Elder Abuse include 'increasing economic independence of the abused (30%)', 'sensitising children and strengthening inter-generational bonding (21%)' and 'developing Self-Help-Groups of Older Persons to provide assistance and intervention (14%)'. However, many victims both in Tier I & Tier II cities pointed out 'Developing an effective legal reporting and redressal system' is an important step for effectively dealing with Elder Abuse (HelpAge India, 2014).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ELDER ABUSE

The possible physical and psychosocial consequences of elder abuse are numerous and varied. Few studies by National Research Council (2003) and Wolf *et al*. (2002) have examined the consequences of elder abuse and distinguished them from those linked to normal aging.

Physical Effects

The most immediate probable physical effects include:

- welts, wounds and injuries (e.g., bruises, lacerations, dental problems, head injuries, broken bones, pressure sores);
- persistent physical pain and soreness;
- nutrition and hydration issues;
- sleep disturbances;
- increased susceptibility to new illnesses (including sexually transmitted diseases);
- exacerbation of pre-existing health conditions;
- Increased risks for premature death.

Psychological Effects

Established psychological effects of elder abuse include higher levels of distress and depression. Other potential psychological consequences that need further scientific study are:

- increased risks for developing fear or anxiety reactions,
- learned helplessness, and
- post-traumatic stress syndrome.

PREVENTING ELDERLY ABUSE

As the World Health Organization in its various reports on elderly abuse clearly asserts that although abuse of the elderly by family members, caregivers and others

is better understood today than it was 25 years ago, a firmer base of knowledge is needed for policy, planning and programming purposes. Many aspects of the problem remain unknown, including its causes and consequences and even the extent to which it occurs. Research on the effectiveness of interventions has to date yielded almost no useful or reliable results. As long as older people are devalued and marginalised by society, they will suffer from loss of self-identity and remain highly susceptible to discrimination and all forms of abuse. There is a serious need for greater knowledge about the problem; stronger laws and policies and most significantly effective prevention strategies.

The human rights of older people must be guaranteed worldwide. Governments should introduce new laws specifically to protect older people. For instance in India we have Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 a legislation enacted in 2007, initiated by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India to provide more effective provision for maintenance and welfare of parents and senior citizens. This act makes it a legal obligation for children and heirs to provide maintenance to senior citizens and parents, by monthly allowance. This act also provides simple, speedy and inexpensive mechanism for the protection of life and property of the older persons. Some states have already implemented the act and other states are taking steps for implementing this act.

There is also a need to strengthen advocacy groups, consisting of older people as well as younger people, at local, provincial and national levels to campaign for change. There are several NGOs already working in this direction.

Governmental health and welfare programmes should actively seek to mitigate the negative impact that many modernisation processes and the consequent changes in family structure have on older people. Pension system and schemes have to be made more effective.

Prevention starts with awareness. One important way to raise awareness – both among the public and concerned professionals – is through education and training. Those providing health care and social services at all levels, both in the community and in institutional settings, should receive basic training on the detection of elder abuse. The media is also a powerful tool for raising awareness of the problem and its possible solutions, among the general public as well as the authorities.

Programmes, in which older people themselves play a leading role, for preventing abuse of the elderly in their homes has been suggested in various World Health Organization reports (2002; 2008). Some of them are listed as follows:

- recruiting and training older people to serve as visitors or companions to other older people who are isolated;

- creating support groups for victims of elder abuse;
- setting up community programmes to stimulate social interaction and participation among the elderly;
- building social networks of older people in villages, neighbourhoods or housing units;
- working with older people to create 'self-help' programmes that enable them to be productive.

Preventing elder abuse by helping abusers, particularly adult children, to resolve their own problems is a difficult task. Measures that may be useful include:

- offering services for the treatment of mental health problems and substance abuse;
- making jobs and education available;
- finding new ways of resolving conflict, especially where the traditional role of older people in conflict resolution has been eroded.

Though social changes brought several changes in the family system and structure, there is a serious need to revive the joint family system which was an important mechanism to provide social security, inclusion to not only the elderly but also children

CONCLUSION

The problem of elder abuse can be solved by providing essential needs of older people like food, shelter, security and access to health care. There is a need to create an environment in which ageing is accepted as a natural part of the life cycle, where we as community discourage the anti-ageing attitudes, where the human rights of the elderly are recognised and they get the right to live in dignity – free of abuse, exclusion and exploitation – and are given opportunities to participate fully in socio-economic, political and cultural activities.

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