

Violence Against Old Women: A Case Study of Himachal Pradesh

Abstract

Elderly Women are subjected to violence globally in their sun set years. However violence against them rarely commands the same attention as a violation of human rights and violence against younger or other groups. The present study was conducted in Hamirpur district of Himachal Pradesh in India with the objective to know about physical and psychological violence against elderly women and to find out whether older women are ill treated. It was also endeavored to explore whether behavior of women during old age becomes more aggressive. Necessary information was elicited from 285 elderly women with the help of an interview schedule specially designed for this purpose. It is discernible that majority of older women are aggressive and significant proportion of aged women develop anxiety and depression. Hence it can be deduced that in substantial number of cases among older women and certain mental disorders go hand in hand. It was also unearthed that every third elderly woman is ill treated by the family members.

Keyword: Elderly Women, Violence, Aggressive Behavior

Introduction

Old women constitute an important segment of society. They are repository of knowledge, wisdom and experience. Today, every tenth woman in the world, fifth in the developed countries and twelfth in India has crossed sixty years of age. The second millennium closed with a little more than a quarter billion elderly women on the globe. Their number will double by 2020, i.e. within a short span of twenty years. Even India has started growing old! It is a matter of concern that women are subjected violence globally in their sun set years. But violence against them rarely commands the same attention as a violation of human rights and violence against younger or other groups. What attention there is to elder abuse has been focused mainly on high income countries. Violence against old women in the family occurs in developed and developing countries alike. It has long been considered a private matter by neighbors, the community and government. But such private matters have a tendency to become public tragedies. Violence and abuse against elderly women, the worlds' fastest growing demographic group, range from sexual violence, property grabbing, financial abuse and increasingly, extreme violence against older women. Throughout history, women described as witches have been persecuted, tortured and murdered UN (2014). United Nations Declaration, 1993, states that *violence against women* is "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to a woman, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life".

First decade of third millennium has witnessed emergence of feminist awareness of old age and, in particular, a growing awareness of what has come to be seen as 'violence against old women'. Solemnization of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day itself is indicative of the fact that mankind is aware of the fact that abuse of the elderly persons has emerged as a serious issue which calls for brainstorming and evolve mechanisms to arrest it. Old women, it has been consistently demonstrated, are disadvantaged in a variety of ways in relation to old men. They are poorer, older and sicker and are more likely to experience widowhood and severe disability. Declining participation in activities, shrinkage in old relations, disengagement from earlier roles, utter need but lack of companionship, decline in authority compounded by violence against the elderly women land them in new but strange situations. They are left with option of either to tolerate violence or to oppose it. In any case coping with new situation poses a challenge before the older women

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in their sun set years. Striking a balance in such circumstances without disturbing harmony in intra-familial relations and maintenance of self esteem becomes a rather more delicate issue.

Objectives of Study

This study was conducted with the following objectives;

1. To know about physical and psychological violence against elderly women;
2. To understand association of socio-economic factors and abuse of old women;
3. To find out whether older women are ill treated;
4. To explore whether behavior of women during old age becomes more aggressive;
5. To know about steps by elderly women to make their behavior less irritable.

Methodology

Research Problem

Violence against older women which previously had an essentially been a private and family concern, became a social phenomenon so widespread that it attracted attention of comity of nations, governmental and non-governmental organizations, social workers and researchers anxious to endow this hitherto ignored category with graceful ageing. The gradual abuse, neglect, marginalization, and alienation of the elderly and fast changing role of the family as a traditional social unit that took care of them in their twilight years have brought forth the problems of this segment of society. Today, Indian society is passing through the phase of feminization of ageing. The females are outnumbering males. Majority (54.04) of the elderly females who were ever married are widows. Himachal Pradesh is the only state other than Kerala among all the thirty five states and union territories in India having more than nine percent of women in the old age segment. It has also witnessed feminization of elderly population as proportion of older females in the state is higher than males. However, not even single study was found to have been conducted in the district of Hamirpur which has the distinction of having highest proportion of elderly females (12.44%) and also highest literacy rate (93 %), among all the twelve districts of state of Himachal Pradesh. In this background, it was thought that understanding of violence against older women in a fast transforming society is very vital.

Research Design

Main purpose of this study was to explore about violence against women during old age. Therefore, necessary information pertaining to background variables such as age, structure of family, income, occupation and marital status was collected. Although for understanding of certain aspects of abuse of the elderly women exploratory research design was followed, yet overall orientation of the investigation remained descriptive in nature. For the purpose of analysis, background characteristics of the informants viz. age, marital status, family type, residence and household income were treated as independent variables and abuse of the women as dependent variable.

Universe

Conducting study in all the twelve districts of hill state of Himachal Pradesh spreading into tens thousands of kilometers and interviewing large samples to collect information is a gigantic task to be performed by single researcher owing to limitation of time, money and resources. Difficulties are compounded by tough hill terrains, rocky land mass and dense forested areas. Therefore, Hamirpur district of the state of, nestled in the Western Himalayas was chosen for the study. All the elderly women inhabiting in the district constituted universe of the study.

Sample

A sample of 285 respondents was taken in the study.

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

The data for the present study was elicited from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected from the elderly women inhabiting Hamirpur district with the help of an interview schedule and several Focused Group Discussions. Secondary information was collected from various census reports, journals, magazines, books and also retrieved from different websites.

Abuse of Respondents by Family Members

Use of Abusive Language by Family Members

Use of abusive language is almost part of every culture. The culture of area under study is no exception to it. Various expressions- lingual and symbolic in the presence or at the back of the elderly women can be often heard. 'Burhia' (old woman), 'Pagal aurat' (mad woman), 'Moorkh' (idiot), 'Kutti' (witch), 'Dayan' (wizard) and 'Sanaki' (crazy) etc. are some of the unparliamentary words used to refer to the old women as a measure to express anger, ill-will and to degrade them. It is discernible from the data that abusive language was used for a little more than half (50.53%) of the respondents at one occasion or the other. It was reportedly used usually (15.09%), sometimes (16.84%) and rarely (18.60%) for the informants.

Table 1 Abuse of respondents by family members

Response	Never	Rarely	Some times	Usually	Total
Use of abusive language	141 (49.47%)	53 (18.60%)	48 (16.84%)	43 (15.09%)	285 (100.00%)
Accusations	137 (48.07%)	45 (15.79%)	49 (17.19%)	54 (18.95%)	285 (100.00%)
Physical torture	223 (78.25%)	37 (12.98%)	25 (8.77%)	-	285 (100.00)
Threats of abandonment	215 (80.22%)	14 (5.22%)	15 (5.60%)	24 (8.96%)	268* (100.00%)

* 17 respondents stay alone

It unearths that abusive language is used by their family members for half of the total older women. Out of them abusive language has to be faced sometimes or even always by nearly two third informants. Use of derogatory remarks and unparliamentary language by the members of family members for more than a half of the respondents is likely to reflect bitterness for the elderly women and their degraded position in the family. Observations by Khan (2004) in Delhi partly and Punia & Sharma (1987) in Haryana and CARIE (2015) in Philadelphia,

USA substantially support the findings of this study. One speculation related to the underlying causes of using abusive language is the burden of care giving. Constant long-term care without respite is really stressful. In some cases, cost of maintaining of frail elderly women and upbringing the children might lead to moral conflict due to competing responsibilities. Pressure to support the young and give care to the elderly with limited resources might lead to use abusive language in the domestic situation. Usage of abuse language might be part of the rotten culture of the area under study. The elderly women being kept in high esteem by the family members or co-residents may be main reason of not using abusive language for nearly half of the informants.

Accusations by Family Members

Accusing the elderly women for having done misdeed(s) is a measure to dislodge, degrade and marginalize them. Irrespective of the fact that they might have lived a life of honour, self-respect and dignity, accusation damages the self-esteem of old women. The accusations may be about having broken some utensil, having misbehaved with the family member particularly the children and daughter-in-law, having leaked some information about family secrets, having shown loyalty to non-family members, having done favour to the married daughter and having stolen money and having taken some eatables without consent of or intimation to other family members etc.

It is evident more than half (51.93%) of the informants were subjected to such accusations. More than one sixth of the subjects each were usually (18.95%) or sometimes (17.19 %) accused of having done worth not doing. However, 48.07 per cent informants never faced such accusations. Thus it is evident that majority of the respondents were accused by their family members for doing such thing which they are not supposed to do. Findings of Ushasree & Basa (1999) in Andhra Pradesh fully, those of Khan (2004) Delhi and Mahajan & Madhurima (1995) in Haryana partly agree to our observations. Such accusations may be made due to various reasons. Some of the informants might be genuine culprits. Family members in some cases may fabricate false allegations ostensibly to marginalize the concerned women. Some respondents may be victims of misunderstanding. Going by an old adage that bad name is worse than bad deeds, accusations tarnish image of the respondents. During informal chat it was shared that in some of the cases family members use accusations as weapon to settle score and to let the subjects down.

Physical Torture by Family Members

Physical torture is any action or technique, or combination that would result in severe pain. It refers to infliction of severe physical pain as a means of punishment or coercion. Owing to growing age old women undergo sharp decline in their physical strength and are not in a position to withstand physical torture. But they may fall easy prey of the younger members of family. Data reveals that nearly four fifth (78.25%) of the respondents were never tortured physically by their family members. Further 12.98 per cent rarely faced physical torture. But

8.77% respondents were such who were physically tortured by the members of their family. Efforts were made explore the reasons of such occurrence. It was observed that some of the victims were physically assaulted when the family members firmly held the notion- right or wrong that respondents had damaged family's reputation. Sometimes they were subjected to torture to force them to vomit the truth or to make confessions about having committed some blunder.

This observation goes in line with what Shubha Soneja (2014) also found that the major problem here is sharing of the fact that elderly women are being abused. They are afraid that if this complaint reaches their children, they would subject them to further abuse. Intervention is sought by nearly all however, they are scared to take the initiative argued. This study fully supports the findings of Khan & Handa (2006) who conducted study in Delhi and is in substantially agreement with the observations of Jain (2008), in Rajasthan and Kumari (2008) in Andhra Pradesh. It is discernible that overwhelming majority of the informants was never tortured physically by their family members. It is testimony of the fact that physical torture of the women in their sun set years is not a common practice in the area under study. But it should not be construed that this phenomenon is in existence because every twelfth elderly women are subjected to such treatment.

Threats of Abandonment

As the women grow old, presumably sense of insecurity prevails among them that their family members might not abandon them. Such notion gets strength with audience of news viz. an aged woman was abandoned by the members of their family. It has been observed that overwhelming majority of the respondents never (80.22%) or rarely (5.22%) received any threat of abandonment from members of their families. But 8.96 per cent informants usually and 5.60 per cent sometimes faced such threats. It reveals that four-fifth majority of the older women do not receive any threat of abandonment. Non-issuance of threats of abandonment to the respondents indicates that elderly women are considered to be an integral part of family. Occupancy of the only old age home which is in existence for more than a decade in the study area by single elderly woman also points to the realism that practice of abandonment of elderly women is almost non-existent in the study region. But such threats keep coming forth to almost every fifth subject whether usually, sometimes or rarely. Observations of Mallick (2005) in the state of West Bengal and that of Khan (2004) in Delhi and Ogrodnik, L. (2007) in Canada go in line with the findings of the study in hand.

Threats of abandonment are likely to keep the concerned individuals under tremendous pressure and adversely affect 'we feeling' for the family members. Decay in the value of respecting and keeping the elderly women in family, disintegration of joint family, growing individualism, materialism and increasing pressure on the shoulders of care givers who are often sandwiched while providing care to the younger and older generations might be main reasons of such a state of affairs.

Characteristics of Respondents and Abuse by Family Members

In the preceding paragraphs it was discussed as to how the elderly women are abused through use of abusive language, accusations, physical torture and threats of abandonment. The description to follow will unfold whether the characteristics of the respondent viz. age, marital status, family type, residence and household income are associated with such abuse. The data has been compressed in table 1.

Age of Respondents and Abuse by Family Members

The data reveal that lower proportion of respondents in the age group of 60-69 was abused (26.6%) as compared to those 70-79 age segment (44.1%). It unearths the fact that every fourth young old woman is subjected to abuse by the family members. But proportion of elderly women being

abused is significantly higher in the segment of old-old women as compared to the young old. It may be because women in the latter category would be healthier, more assertive and contributing to the household and other activities. The other way round nearly three fourth young old and majority of the old-old are never abused. It might be because women in their sun set years are respected.

Marital Status and Abuse by Family Members

Majority of the widowed informants (50.9%) are abused, though percentage of abused among the married respondents is 21.5. Slightly less than four fifth of the married and about a half the widows are never abused. It unearths that every second widow and every fifth married woman are abused in the family. Its main reason could be that spouse is there as a natural guardian and care giver for the married older women. But absence of spouse is likely to make the situation worse for the widows.

Table 2 Characteristics of Respondents and Abuse by Family Members

Sr. No.	Background Characteristics	Abused by family members		Total	
		Abused	Not abused		
1.	Age groups	60-69	33(26.6%)	91(73.4%)	124(100.0%)
		70-79	52(44.1%)	66(55.9%)	118(100.0%)
		80 & above	21(48.8%)	22(51.2%)	43(100.0%)
		Total	106(37.2%)	179(62.8%)	285(100.0%)
2.	Marital status	Unmarried	1(25%)	3(75%)	4(100.0%)
		Married	28(21.5%)	102(78.5%)	130(100.0%)
		Widowed	77(50.9%)	74(49.1%)	151(100.0%)
		Total	106(37.2%)	179(62.8%)	285(100%)
3.	Family type	Nuclear	35(36.4%)	61(63.6%)	96(100.0%)
		Joint	48(34.4%)	93(65.6%)	141(100.0%)
		Adopted	23(47.9%)	25(52.1%)	48(100.0%)
		Total	106(37.2%)	179(62.8%)	285(100%)

Family Type and Abuse by Family Members

Proportion of elderly women being abused was noticed in ascending order among those staying in joint (34.4%), nuclear (36.4%) and adopted (47.9%) families. However, majority of the women staying in either of these families are not abused. Thus almost every third elderly woman in joint and nuclear families but every second in the adopted family are abused. Lowest proportion of women in their twilight years face abuse in the joint family and its ratio is highest in the adopted family. It could be because there might be a system of checks and balance in such a dwelling unit. On the other hand no such check may be available in the adopted family.

Aggression in Behavior

A person whether young or old, male or female is expected to behave in a decent manner without showing unnecessary aggression in their behaviour. Information was solicited from the subjects to find out whether they have experienced aggression in their behaviour as they grew old. The information so elicited and condensed in table 7.13 reveals that 56.49 per cent of the respondents have witnessed increased aggression in their behaviour. Being aware of the fact that experience or expression of aggression is something bad of them and others such respondents take certain precautionary measures. Getting silent (16.77%), speaking less and that too politely (21.12%), making less demands (30.43%) and avoiding to give unnecessary suggestions (41.61%) were the main steps

respondents took to make their behaviour less irritable. Findings of the study of Sharma & Sidhu (2009) in Uttar Pradesh substantially attest the observations of present study.

Table 3 Aggression in Behavior

Aggression	Frequency	Percentage
It has increased	161	56.49
It has not undergone any change	124	43.51
Total	285	100.00

Table 4 Steps to Make Behavior Less Irritable (N=161)

Steps	Frequency*	Percentage
Make less demands	49	30.43
Speak less and politely	34	21.12
Avoid giving unnecessary suggestions	67	41.61
Get silent	27	16.77

* Multiple responses

It unearths that majority of the older women experience increase of aggression in their behaviour as during old age. But being conscious of such negative change in their behaviour they initiate certain steps to make their behaviour less irritable. Avoiding unnecessary suggestions, making fewer demands, speaking less and that too politely and getting silent are some of the steps taken by the respondents in descending order to make their behaviour less irritable.

III Treatment to Respondents by Family Members

It was endeavoured to know whether respondents are maltreated by family members. The notion behind this enquiry was that the subjects are those persons who might have sacrificed their leisure & pleasure and could have passed sleepless nights to cater to the needs younger members of family. They must have brought up couples of children and could be caring grandchildren. But now as they are growing frail in the evening of their life, are they being reciprocated for the care they would have given, love & affection they must have shown, sacrifices they must have made during yesteryears? The data portrayed in table 5 is indicative of the fact that 40.32 per cent respondents were never harassed, 35.18 per cent were never denied warmth it was never tried to find fault in case of one third informants by their family members. But rests of the subjects were not that fortunate. Almost three fifth (59.69) were always or sometimes subjected to harassment, humiliation and disrespect on one excuse or the other. Significant number of informants regretted to inform that they were made to realize that they were worthless entities, spent force, incapable of doing household activities properly, funds starved, did not deserve to have good food, clothes, medical attendance.

Warmth is binding and uniting force between family members. While having interface of with the informants, they were not shown any love and affection by the family members. Lack of 'we feeling' and concern during illness of respondents on the part members of family would dismay them. Denial of warmth to about two third subjects (64.82%) during the course of interaction would give them a feeling of being alien in own house.

Fault finding is an act of highlighting drawbacks whether significant or insignificant with the motive to let others down or to make feel that the actions so taken are not up to the mark. Generation gap is likely to be other reason of finding fault by members of younger generation in the elderly women. Such action may ostensibly be taken to humiliate others or as an effort to establish one's superiority. Two third of the respondents (66.46%) reported that their family members sometimes or always keep fault finding in them. Such endeavours are likely irritate the informants and distance psychologically from the members of family whom otherwise they loved the most.

Table 5 III Treatment to Respondents by Family Members (N=253)*

Occurrence	Treatment		
	Harassment	Denial of warmth	Fault finding
Never	102(40.32%)	89(35.18%)	85(33.60%)
Sometimes	112(44.27%)	115(45.45%)	101(39.92%)
Always	39(15.42%)	49(19.37%)	67(26.48%)
Total	253(100.00%)	253(100.00%)	253(100.00%)

Family members of every fourth subject always try to find fault in their deeds. Warmth is denied to every fifth informant and almost every sixth respondent is always subjected to harassment in intra-familial interaction which reflects alienation of elderly women in their own houses. It is indicative of pathetic condition of significant number older women in their twilight years. But one third of the women are never harassed, not

denied warmth and family members do not try to find faults in them in the twilight years of their life. In nutshell two of every three elderly woman is ill treated by the family members. These findings support the observations of studies undertaken by Kumari (2008) in Andhra Pradesh, Devi (2008) in Andhra Pradesh, Khan & Handa (2005) in Delhi, Mallick (2005) in West Bengal and Mahajan & Madhurima (1995) Haryana and Ramamurthy, P.V. (2008).

Main Findings and Conclusion

It is amply clear that on being sick when not attended properly by the family members about two fifth of the older women instead of bothering others prefer to take self help. Every sixth each either requests the family members to take care of them or start cursing them for not them and make their annoyance public. Every fourth old woman however, accepts neglect as something natural with them in the ongoing last phase of life. These results substantially support the observation of Mallick (2005) in West Bengal.

The situation of substantial proportion of those aged women is a matter of concern that has developed a feeling that they are burden on others and twilight years are worst phase of their life.

It unearths that with the increase of age there is gradual ascendance in the proportion of elderly women having feeling of loneliness. Lower the age of the older women lower is the proportion of those has loneliness and vice-versa. Further, almost three fourth oldest old, half the old-old and one third of the young-old feel loneliness. It might be because of lesser activities as the age of the older women advances.

It is discernible that majority of the widowed and unmarried has but majority of the married do not have such feeling. Besides, proportion of widows having feeling of loneliness is higher than the unmarried and married subjects. It might be because expiry of the spouse who happens to be natural companion and life partner to share happiness and grief.

It is discernible that majority of older women are aggressive and significant proportion of aged women develop anxiety and depression. Hence it can be deduced that in substantial number of cases among older women and certain mental disorders go hand in hand. Results of the studies carried out by Komal & Bhat (2008) in Karnataka, Roopa & Devi (2008) in Karnataka, Shilluggu (2008) in Tanzania, Madhumathy & Airani (2008) in Karnataka, Sengupta et al. (2007) in Punjab, Joshi et al. (2006) in Punjab substantially and that of Prakash (2004) in Karnataka and Sandhu & Bakshi (2004) in Punjab partly correspond to the findings of this study.

It unearths that majority of the older women experience increase of aggression in their behaviour as during old age. Findings of the study of Sharma & Sidhu (2009) in Uttar Pradesh substantially attest the observations of present study. Being conscious of such negative change in their behaviour they initiate certain steps to make their behaviour less irritable. Avoiding unnecessary suggestions, making fewer demands, speaking less and that too politely and getting silent are some of the steps taken by the respondents in descending order to make their behaviour less irritable. Observations of Sandhu & Bakshi partly agree to these findings.

In nutshell two of every three elderly woman is ill treated by the family members. These findings support the observations of studies undertaken by Kumari (2008) in Andhra Pradesh, Devi (2008) in Andhra Pradesh, Khan & Handa (2005) in Delhi, Mallick (2005) in West Bengal. Organized efforts by governmental and non-governmental organization like Maitri's (2014), a Delhi based NGO having mission to act as a catalyst to enable access to basic rights to some of the most Marginalized and Vulnerable Populations in India including Destitute and Elderly Women/Widows is realizing positive results with its clear vision of "A world in which each individual lives with Identity, Dignity, and Respect."

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