

Elderly Abuse – The Need for Social Work Intervention

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Abstract

Elder abuse has devastating consequences. It jeopardizes the health and well-being of seniors and has significant implications for the health and social support. Elderly abuse has been a serious social and public health issue. It undermines a senior's independence, dignity and sense of security. It damages lives and destroys relationships in the process. When there is a need of intervention in problems of aged, Geriatric social work has to play a key role in finding out solutions for problems of senior citizens. This present paper concentrates on finding intensity and forms of elderly abuse in Davangere District of Karnataka. Elderly abuse can take various forms such as physical, psychological, emotional or financial abuse. It can also be the result of intentional or unintentional neglect. In many parts of the world elder abuse occurs with little recognition or response. Until recently, this serious social problem was hidden from the public view and considered mostly a private matter. Even today, elder abuse continues to be a taboo, mostly underestimated and ignored by societies across the world. Evidence is accumulating, however, to indicate that elder abuse is an important public health and societal problem.

Key-words: Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Financial Abuse, Geriatric Social Work, Elderly Care

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INTRODUCTION

All people irrespective of age have the right to live their lives without abuse, neglect, and exploitations. India's life expectancy has increased from 58.5 years in 1990 to 66.4 years in 2013 due to improvement in health sector. Society has to consider, increasing years of living is not only the concern, adding meaningful life upon increased living year is the prime concern towards building healthy and stable society. In the present context India's 8% of the population is constituted by elders. According to a United Nation Organization projections nearly 20% of Indian populations will comprises of people over age 60 in 2050.¹

However, this is not without problems. With this kind of an ageing scenario, there is pressure on all aspects of care for the older persons – be it

financial, health or shelter. As the twenty first century arrives, the growing concern about security of older persons in India is very visible. With older people living longer, the households are getting smaller and congested, causing stress in joint and extended families². Even where they are co residing marginalization, isolation and insecurity is felt among the older persons due to the generation gap and change in life styles. 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 older 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. The financial challenges for health and care of elders are impacting as weight in the middle income generating families. The migration from villages to towns on course of employment are causing lonely homes for aged, caregiver's negligence due to the

various reasons, denial of care for elders and negligence impacting a social break-down in the help needed part of the a human lifecycle.

The scenario is, many families incorrectly continue to view aged as debilitated, frail and demented. The required care and health assistance due to challenges of age is essential for the survival. The care from the children, in-laws are most important but today's world due to many reasons denying the needed care and violating their life in many forms at a helpless age. It is the human right to live and survive in a dignified manner, but denial of needy assistance from caregivers is clearly a violation of Human Right. This mistreatment or denial on aged persons is Elderly abuse. Towards with eye on the future this area is in need of proper intervention³.

With the increasing age arises a situation of losing life partner, increasing health challenges, financial dependency, emotional disequilibrium, social isolation makes aged frustrate and chances of depression⁴. The intervention of social work is much needed in area of elderly care to prevent abuse.

Conceptualizing Elderly abuse

Elder abuse can be 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". Elder abuse can take various forms such as physical, psychological or emotional, sexual and financial abuse. It can also be the result of intentional or unintentional neglect.

Elder abuse, also known as elder mistreatment, generally refers to any knowing, intentional, or negligent act that causes harm or creates a serious risk of harm to an older person by a family member, caregiver, or other person in a trust relationship.

Physical Abuse: The use of physical force that causes pain, discomfort or injury or that is excessive for or inappropriate in, the circumstances, or (b) administering or withholding medication for inappropriate purposes. It includes rough handling, physical assault (shaking pushing, pulling, slapping, hitting), improper health care and over medicating.

Financial Abuse: Any theft or misuse of money or property like household goods, clothes or jewelry. It can also include withholding funds and/ or fraud. *Note:* the most commonly disclosed form of elder abuse is financial abuse. It includes forcing a person to sell possessions, wrongful use of power of

attorney, forcing someone to change his/her will and not spend money on aged.

Emotional Abuse: Any action or behavior that may diminish a senior's sense of well-being, dignity or self-worth. Emotional abuse includes failure to treat a senior as an adult imposed social isolation including shunning or ignoring or lack of acknowledgement, handling without respect and it includes verbal abuse.

Who abuses Elderly?

Family members: Most elder abuse is caused by a family member. This could be a son, daughter, spouse, grandchild, or other relative. This family member is often dependent on the older person for money or a place to live. The abuser might have difficulties, such as chronic unemployment, or psychological or personal problems.

Professional caregivers: Sometimes elderly people are abused by health care and social service providers, either in the community or in long term care homes. Theft and assault can happen in institutions, but most abuse there takes the form of neglect, poor care, and lack of respect for residents.

Elderly abuse, a hidden crime

Elder Abuse is often referred to as the 'hidden crime' that seniors are reluctant to speak about. When elder abuse occurs many older adults have the capacity and ability to communicate their concerns but, for a variety of reasons such as shame, embarrassment, and fear they are reluctant to talk to anyone. Only when they have a voice to tell their story, social and community support available to them, they disclose their concerns.

However, older adults who are capable but do not have a voice or, have difficulties in verbalizing words, creating a barrier for them to disclose abuse are often overlooked. This inability to speak may make health care providers, social service workers and police view the person as being frail, not competent and question their credibility when elder abuse is reported. These circumstances make it very difficult, if not impossible, for older adults to report abuse.¹

Mistreatments of elders in most of the times remain unnoticed and unpredictable. Even the victims themselves aren't likely to speak up as they're being stripped of their independence, resources, health and dignity. The circumstances of family, effects of age and fear of social isolation make victim to hide the sufferings from outer world. So there are some symptoms that can iden-

tify abuse. These symptoms have to be critically analyzed to detect hidden crime. Here are some common red flags.¹

1. Unexplained injuries or behavior
2. Fear of certain people and situations
3. Sudden decline in physical appearance
4. Isolation from family and friends
5. Disappearance of possessions
6. Financial changes, including unexplained large withdrawals, the addition of others on a bankcard and unpaid bills despite adequate income
7. Unsafe living conditions

Methods

The research design used for the study was exploratory in nature. The universe of this study consists of elder persons who were more than 60years of age. Researcher decided to delimit the area with the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The study was conducted in 3 major towns namely Davangere city, Harihar and Honnali in Davangere district of Karnataka using quantitative as well as qualitative approach of data collection and analysis. To supplement the quantitative data and to get deeper insight into the life situations of elderly people and give voices to numbers, in-depth interviews of elder persons were conducted with direct observation and listening.

It was decided to cover a cross-section of the population by using multistage random sampling technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 contains demographic details of the respondents, majority i.e., 40 percent respondents lies in the age group between 60 to 65 years, 32 percent of respondents lies between age group of 65 to 70 years and 27 percent are above 70 years of age. In the matters of gender, 42 percent are female and rests of 58 percent are male.

For the purpose of finding class-wise abuse rate data was classified into four major income groups in which all the classes was given equal preference of 28 respondents from each income group.

As spouse is the prime care-giver at old age study was classified those who are living with spouse and without spouse. 35 percent of respondents have lost their life partners out of which 51 percent are living without their female counterparts. 65 percent are living with spouse.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic details of Respondents

Sl No	Age (in years)	Male	Female	Total
1	60-65	27	18	45
2	65-70	20	16	36
3	Above 70	18	13	31
Gender total		65	47	
Sl No	Annual Income	Class	Total	%
1	Below 10k	Low	28	25%
2	10 k to 1 Lakh	Middle	28	25%
3	1 Lakh to 10 Lakhs	Upper Middle	28	25%
4	More than 10 Lakhs	High	28	25%
Total			112	
Sl No	Living status	Male	Female	Total
1	Without spouse in family	20	19	39
2	With spouse in family	45	28	73

1. Physical Abuse

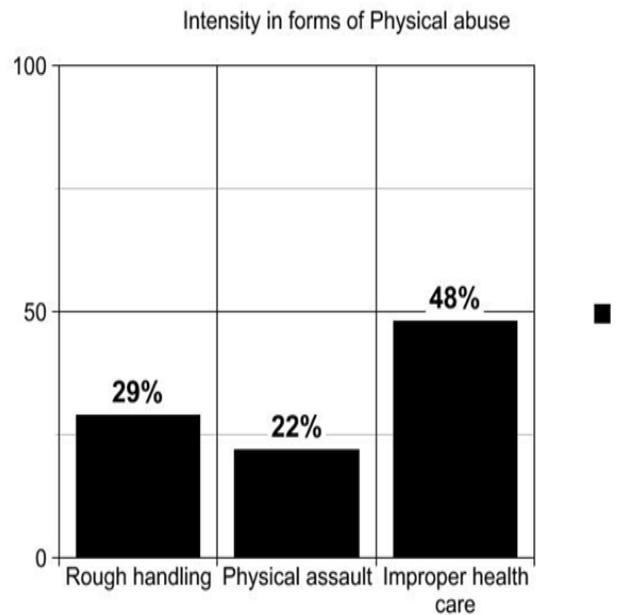


Diagram 1. Intensity in Form of Physical Abuse

As could be seen in the above Diagram 1 a few respondents 22 percent of respondents said they are facing Physical Assault, majorly low income group is suffering from physical assault where 18 out of 28 respondents severely suffering with physical assault, causes for the physical assault here was alcohol addicted children.

Table 2 – Classification of victims according to Socio-economic status

	Low	Middle	Upper middle	High	Total
Rough handling	18	9	5	1	29%
Physical assault	16	7	2	0	22%
Improper health care	20	21	7	6	48%

As shown in Table 2, 29 percent expressed they are the victims of Rough Handling, 21 out of 28 from low income group are denied to have a proper care and needed materials for daily life.

Major respondents 48 percent clearly said their family members or care takers are not providing proper health care. In which 32 percent of people are from middle income families, 31 percent from low income families and 8 percent of respondents from high income generating families.

2. Financial Abuse

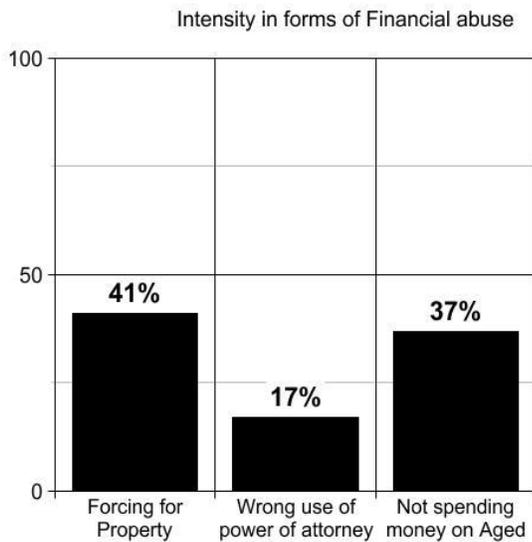


Diagram 2. Intensity in Form of Financial Abuse

As could be seen in the Diagram 2, 41 percent of respondents expressed they have been forced for property or to change power of attorney for property. 17 percent respondents have said that they are subjected to wrong use of power of attorney, after property transformed to children name children uses the property and sell the property without asking their parents. Major respondents 37 percent clearly said their family members or care takers are not spending proper money on aged for daily needs.

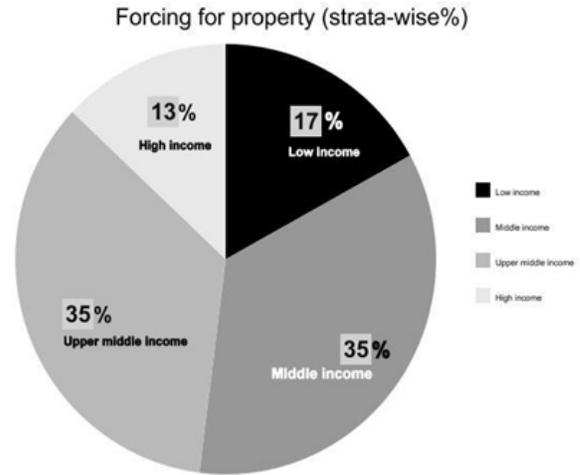


Diagram 2.1- Forcing for Property according to Socio-economic status

Diagram 2.1 indicates, 35 percent of respondents from middle class and higher middle income group are the victims of forcing for property; forcing in forms of verbal abuse and mistreatment. This is the severe form of the abuse according to respondents. It is about 17 percent are victims for forcing property in low-income group.

3. Emotional Abuse

Table 3. Intensity in Form of Emotional Abuse

	Low	Middle	Upper middle	High	Total
Disrespect	14	10	13	9	41%
Verbal abuse	20	16	8	8	46%
Social isolation	6	5	7	3	19%
Denial in decisions	18	17	20	21	68%

For considering emotional abuse, researcher set parameters of disrespect, verbal abuse, social isolation and involvement in decision making.

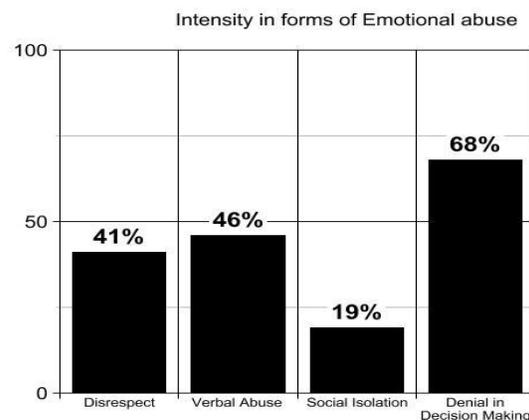


Diagram 3. Intensity in Form of Emotional Abuse

As in the Diagram 3, data reveals that 41 percent are not getting proper respect from family or care givers; disrespect is found high in high-income generating families compared to other families. As 20 out of 28 respondents said they are disrespected. Verbal abuse is another form which almost equally found in all the strata, 53 percent of respondents out of 112 are facing verbal abuse from family. 10 percent of the respondents stated they are socially isolated. Majorly 68 percent of respondents revealed they are not getting involved in decision making process of the family. Comparably low income group families are involving their parents in decision making rather than middle and high.

Findings

After thorough analysis of information gathered through direct interviews, the researcher has been able to outline some of the findings as below.

With respect to demographic details, it was found that 34 percent of the respondents are widow and widower they are spending old age after losing their life partners. It causes in helplessness and increases dependency on children or family. If the family neglects they may feel disturbance in their life.

Physical abuse is analyzed under three parameters, rough handling, physical assault and improper health care towards aged by family. 29 percent of aged reveals they are not getting proper attention from family towards their health. Problem of rough handling majorly found in low-income group. 22 percent of aged facing physical assault by their own children or other family members. The prime reasons behind the physical assault are financial problems and alcohol consumption. 16 out of 28 persons from low income group are threatened from physical assault. The problem of improper care towards health is faced by 48 percent of the aged in the study area. It is the prime abuse found in this category in which most of the victims are from low-income and middle income families.

Financial abuse was bifurcated by three parameters, Forcing for property, wrong use of power of attorney and not spending money on aged. By the study 41 percent of the elders are the victims of forcing of property. In which most of them from middle and upper middle groups, where 16 out of 28 in each group facing the aggression of family members for changing power of attorney or to write will on their authority.

After the forcing abuse 17 percent of aged facing wrong usage of power of attorney by their own children, here major group facing the abuse is upper middle income groups. In which so many are in the situation of do not object the children in the abuse and become victims by thoughts of prestige and incapable of facing children due to health dependency on them.

Almost 37.5 percent of the families are not spending proper amount of money for the health purpose of the aged in their family. Most of the times these persons are depended on government health facilities. In case of specialized medical facility is required the elderly are incapable of availing those facilities as neglected from the family.

Emotional abuse is divided by the four parameters, disrespect, verbal abuse, social isolation and denial in decision making within the family. 41 percent of the elders are not respecting by the family in which almost all the income-group people are facing the abuse of disrespect.

In the studies 46 percent of the elders become the victims of the verbal abuse in the area. 20 out of 28 from low-income group and 16 out of 28 from middle income group are facing verbal abuse from the family members.

19 percent of the elderly in the study are socially isolated and 68 percent of the families are not considering the elders in making decisions about family.

Study revealed that physical abuse is majorly practicing in lower strata of the society compared to middle and high income generation sections. But in case of emotional abuse it is found in middle income group and majorly in upper-middle group. Financial abuse is found majorly in almost all income groups.

Suggestions

As India is moving in a good pace to establish stable society. it is important to construct a healthy society by considering all parts of society. A stable society will be achieved only when each and every person of society gets proper and equal quality of life. Old age as normal process of human life cycle created some extent of dependency. It is everyone's responsibility to make final stage of human lifespan worthy, affectionate and meaningful. The evil practices to deny the required help and support at old age and violence against weaker section should not be tolerated towards building healthy environment. The family violence and abuse in India is a growing concern.⁵ Hence geriatric social work will emerge as the tool for the problems facing by elders.

The skills, techniques and strategies of geriatric social work focused towards finding solution to problems of elderly people. With that The policy maker has to provide proper attention to strengthen the life of elders with proper framework.

CONCLUSION

Thus geriatric social worker play a vital roles in aiding elderly population to lead better and worthy life in all respect in society. At presently in India 90 million populations is at old age and it is estimated that by 2050 the total density of elderly population will be about 315 million and this data indicates the significance of Geriatric social worker in the years to come. Now a day's concern on health at old age gradually increasing in elderly population in rural and urban areas this attitude of people on health pave the way for emerging of geriatric social worker in the world.

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