

Chapter 9

Are Elderly Widows More Vulnerable to Abuse and Violence? Findings from Jharkhand, India

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Feminization of Ageing in India

The ageing of a population is an outcome of an increase in the proportion of the aged *vis-a-vis* a decrease in the proportion of the young. Improved life expectancy has given rise to an increase in the number of persons aged 60 years and above. In 1950, the proportion of elder persons in the world was around 8% and it has increased to 10% in 2000 and projected to reach 21% by 2050. It is estimated that the elderly population will reach almost 1.2 billion by 2025 and 2 billion by 2050 (United Nations 2002).

The India's aged population is currently the second largest in the world. The share of India's elderly population is projected to climb to 19% by 2050, leading to 323 million old people. This will raise a variety of social, economic and health care challenges. More than 50% of elder women in India live without a spouse as compared to only 15% of elder men. The increasing proportion of elderly women, especially widows is a characteristic feature of India. The proportion of elderly (60 and above years) in India's population is 8.6% and likely to increase significantly in coming decades (Census of India 2011). India's aged population suffers from gradual 'feminization' and serious gender disparities which is evident from the growth pattern of the elderly females (Alam 2006), which is a matter of serious concern. Another important feature in the Indian context is the central role played

Some of the arguments and data used in this chapter are similar to those of a recently published paper by the same authors: Gupta and Sekher (2017).

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Table 9.1 India's aged population by age, sex and marital status, 2011

Aged	Sex	Marital status (proportion)			
		NM	M	W	D/S
60+ years	Males	2.9	82.1	14.6	0.4
	Females	2.0	49.6	47.8	0.5
60–64	Males	2.1	88.8	8.7	0.4
	Females	1.6	63.0	34.7	0.8
65–69	Males	2.8	84.9	11.9	0.4
	Females	2.0	54.4	43.0	0.6
70–79	Males	2.2	78.3	19.1	0.4
	Females	1.6	37.1	60.8	0.4
80+ years	Males	7.5	62.0	30.1	0.4
	Females	4.5	26.1	69.0	0.4

Source Census of India (2011)

NM never married, M married, W widowed, D/S divorced/separated

by the family and the limited role of the state in acting as a safety net for the elderly in terms of various forms of support such as co-residence, economic support and care-giving (Rajan and Balagopal 2017).

The proportion of widows in the female population rises sharply with age, it is 48% among women aged 60 and above, and it reaches to 61% among women aged 70 and above (Table 9.1). There are three reasons for this unusual gender disparity in widowhood in India—the longer life span of women than that of men, the cultural practice of Indian men prefer to marry women considerably younger than themselves, and the higher rate of re-marriage among the widowed men compared to that of widowed women.

In Indian context, widows are the unfortunate victims and for centuries, they have been ill-treated by families and society (Pandya and Priti 2006). Regardless of the increasing education and economic development happening in India, the status of women within the traditional households continues to be the same. Despite improvements in female education and continuing attempts for social reforms, the position of elderly widows are not very encouraging. This is more so in the rural areas. For large number of women, '*Widowhood is more than the loss of a husband—it may mean the loss of a separate identity*' (UNFPA 1998: 42). They are mostly dependents on their family throughout their life. More than half of the elderly were economically dependent on others for their day-to-day requirements, as the widowhood and dependency increases with advancing age, the situation is worse for the elderly females (Kumari and Sekher 2010; Gupta and Sekher 2017).

Social networks and family dynamics are central to the well-being of elderly, with positive and negative aspects (Berkman et al. 2012). Many times, a widow faces difficulty in adjusting to her new status because the social norms and taboos place her in most disadvantaged position and restrict her social interactions. A widow has to perform many rituals. She has to follow lot many restrictions leading to social isolation and social inferiority, resulting in a feeling of dejection

and depression. Widows in all communities suffer from limited freedom to participate in religious and social ceremonies. They carry the stigma of inauspicious and hence have to keep away from social functions. *'A widow is supposed to be disfigured; her ornaments are removed, her heads shaved, and she has to dress white sari. After that she is expected to give up eating 'hot foods, to avoid auspicious occasions because she is considered inauspicious and to remain celibate, devout and loyal to her husband'* (Chen 1998: 26), but no such stigma or restrictions imposed on widowers.

Indian widow tends to be a highly marginalized person. Beyond the economic difficulty, they often face social and cultural problems. She typically receives very little support from persons other than her own children and even when she lives with her adult sons, she remains highly vulnerable to neglect (Sivagami and Thamirasan 2004; Gupta 2017). Sebastian and Sekher (2011) and Sebastian (2011) found that among Indian families, for a variety of reasons and circumstances, elderly widows are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect than others.

Elderly widows more vulnerable to loneliness because of their greater distance from neighbours and services. Visits to family members make little difference in the older person's feeling of loneliness or life satisfaction (Gerg 1976). Level of interaction with the family members, friends and neighbours can affect their mental health. Further it was observed that poor health, less physical mobility, less satisfaction, and frequency of interaction with family and neighbours are often associated with experiencing loneliness among the elderly (Carolyn 1981). There is no statistics, which indicate the extent and depth of the vulnerability among India's elderly widows (Gupta and Sankar 2002). However, the incidence and prevalence of elder abuse is on the rise and gaining visibility in many new forms (Shankardass 2010).

The National Policy for Older Persons of the Government of India (1999) assures elderly that their concerns are national concerns and they will not live unprotected, ignored or marginalized. However, the needs and requirements of widows have not given priority in the welfare policies. Widowhood is a turning point in a woman's life, involving new social adjustments for the family as well as for her. These women constitute a special group in our population because of the deprivation, vulnerability and low social status. Therefore, the present study try to understand the ill-treatment and neglect experienced by elderly widows within their own households and immediate surroundings.

Methods, Data and Field Work

Both quantitative and qualitative data have been used in this study. In quantitative component, the survey data collected from selected villages during 2010 has been analyzed. The case studies and key informant interviews were used to explore issues related to vulnerability, experience of ill-treatment/abuse, and the extent and nature of deprivation, loneliness, etc.

Selection of Study Areas: For the study purpose, Jharkhand state was purposively selected. East Singhbhum district was selected for the study, since this district was having higher proportion of elderly widows. Two blocks were then randomly selected, from the district. It was targeted to personally interview 300 elderly widows. In total, 12 villages from the two blocks were visited, in order to complete the interviews of 300 elderly widows.

Preliminary visits to the study area before initiating the household survey helped in establishing good rapport with villagers. From the first block, 7 villages were covered in the survey. In the second block, 5 villages were identified to collect information from elderly widows. With the help of *Sarpanch* (village head), *Anganwadi* (ICDS) workers and other functionaries from the villages, the households with eligible respondents were identified and personally interviewed using a structured schedule. Care was taken to ensure privacy as far as possible during interviews/data collection.

Profile of the Surveyed Households and Elderly Widows

Households Characteristics of the Surveyed Population

Eighty percent of surveyed household were Hindus, only 7% were Muslims, 13% belonged to the *Sarna*¹ religion (Table 9.2). 40% of households were scheduled tribes, followed by other backward castes (37%). The average household size was 4.7. 96% of surveyed households had one elderly person and around 3% of households had two elderly persons. More than half of the households were female headed. 55% of the households owned no land. Little less than one-fourth (24%) of the households were having large holdings (land size greater than 3.2 acres). Further, to find out the income from the land, a question was asked—‘*How much average yearly income you get from your land?*’ 23% of the households owning land reported no income from the land. However, 37% of the households reported some income from the land and the average is Rs. 3500 in a year.

¹According to Troisi (2000), *Sarna* is the Munda word for ‘Sacred Grove’ while *Dhorom* is the Oriya word meaning ‘religion’. *Sarna* involves belief in a great spirit called the *Sing Bonga*. Santhal belief holds the world to be inhabited by numerous spiritual beings of different kinds. Santhals consider themselves as living and doing everything in close association with these spirits. Rituals are performed under groves of *Sal* trees called *Jaher* (or sacred grove), where *Bonga* is believed to appear or express himself. Often *Jaher* are found in the forests.

Table 9.2 Distribution of elderly widows by selected socio-economic and demographic characteristics

Background characteristics	Percent	Number
<i>Age-group</i>		
Young-old (60–69 years)	64.3	193
Old-old (70–79 years)	27.0	81
Oldest-old (80 and above years)	8.7	26
<i>Religion</i>		
Hindu	80.3	241
Muslim	7.0	21
<i>Sarna</i>	12.7	38
<i>Caste</i>		
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	14.3	43
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	40.0	120
Other Backward Castes (OBCs)	37.3	112
Others	8.3	25
<i>Literacy</i>		
Literate	9.7	29
Non-literate	90.3	271
<i>Number of sons</i>		
No son	21.3	64
One son	28.3	85
Two sons	27.0	81
Three or more sons	23.3	70
<i>Number of daughters</i>		
No daughter	21.7	65
One daughter	26.7	80
Two daughters	24.0	72
Three or more daughters	27.6	83
<i>Current work status</i>		
Working	29.7	87
Not working	70.3	213
<i>Occupational status^a</i>		
Non-agricultural labour	47.1	41
Agricultural labour	29.9	26
Self-employed/petty business	20.7	18
Salaried	2.3	2
Total number of elderly widows	100.0	300

^aAmong the respondents working at the time of survey

Housing Characteristics

Majority of households (94%) owned the structure in which they resided. In case of the housing type, it was observed that about three-fifths of households (60%) lived

in *kachcha* houses (constructed from mud or other low quality materials), 16% lived in *semi-pucca* houses and 24% lived in *pucca* houses. 28% of the residential structures consist of single room however, more than half of the residential structures contained 2–3 rooms. Less than half (40%) of the households had separate kitchen for cooking, around one-third of the households cook inside their living rooms and one-third of the households cook in open areas. 89% of all surveyed households were using dry leaf/wood/coal/charcoal/dung cakes as main source of cooking fuel. The use of LPG was very less (around 8%). 70% of the households visited do not have access to basic sanitation (toilet facility). Around one-fourth of households are using kerosene as a main source of lighting. 57% households reported that their main source of drinking water is public piped water/hand pump/covered well. Only 16% of households use own piped water, water from own hand pump or covered well.

Households/Elderly Benefited from Government Schemes

To understand whether the households benefited from government programmes, information was collected. Nearly half of the households were having below poverty line (BPL) cards and using this card, they were receiving food grains and kerosene. 17% of the households were getting wheat under the provision of BPL card. Around half of the elderly interviewed were not receiving any pension. Among those receiving, 74% got widow pension and 19% getting old-age pension. The amount of widow pension and old age pension is Rs. 200 in a month at the time of survey (now increased to Rs. 600). It was observed that all elderly widows were keen to receive pension. When enquired about the reasons for not availing the pension, they cited various reasons—‘we do not know how to apply, officers are not very helpful, we are not eligible, etc.’. Few households benefited from the *Indira Aawas Yojana* (free housing scheme of the government).

In order to examine current economic status of the households, a question was asked—‘*whether the household had borrowed money for any purpose during the last one year? If yes, for what purpose they borrowed and the source of borrowing?*’ 22% of the households had borrowed money during the last year. The most important reasons mentioned were ‘treating for health problems’ (38%), followed by ‘meeting the household consumption’ (23%). 12% of households have borrowed money in order to ‘meet marriage related expenses’. Major source of borrowing was neighbours (39%) and relatives (23%). Only 15% have taken loans from banks and 14% from local money lenders. If they avail loan from relatives and neighbours, they need not to pay interest. Money lenders charge higher interest than banks. 30% of the households have indebtedness of around Rs. 700–Rs. 2000, whereas slightly less than one-fifths of the households have indebtedness of more than Rs. 8500.

Profile of the Elderly Widows Interviewed

Among the respondents, 64% of the elderly widows are in the young-old age group (60–69 years) followed by old-old age group (70–79 years) and oldest-old (80 and above years) age groups (27 and 9% respectively) (Table 9.2). As expected, the literacy rate was very low among the surveyed elderly widows. Around one-third among them were working at the time of survey. Among those working, 30% were engaged in agricultural work and 47% were non-agricultural laborers, 21% were self-employed, and only 2% were salaried employees. More than half of the respondents (67%) were staying in nuclear families. About 13% of elderly widows interviewed in this study were staying alone or forced to live alone.

Living Arrangements of Elderly Widows

Family is the most important social unit and the major source of care and support to the aged, especially for widows. Living arrangements of the elderly make a significant difference to a variety of factors that may directly or indirectly contribute to the quality of their life and welfare. It also provides certain indications regarding the level of actual support available to the elderly. India is characterized by its traditional ways of living where several generations live together within the same household. However, the traditional ways of the extended family members living together are now gradually breaking down. The elderly have been the worst sufferers of the changing family structure in India. The living arrangements of the elderly have been severely affected by changes in the multigenerational familial co-residence and compelling them to live by themselves or alone, if widowed.

A question was posed to the respondents about their preferences in living arrangements. Among the elderly widows who were currently living alone, 67% prefer to live alone and little less than one-fourth (23%) want to live with their

Table 9.3 % distribution of elderly widows according to their preferred living arrangements and actual living arrangements

Actual living arrangements	Preferred living arrangements				
	Living alone	With unmarried children	With married son/s	With married daughter/s	With other relatives
Living alone	66.7	0.0	23.1	2.6	7.7
Living with unmarried children	9.1	81.8	9.1	0.0	0.0
Living with married son/s	7.8	0.6	91.0	0.6	0.0
Living with married daughter/s	0.0	0.0	5.6	94.4	0.0
Living with other relatives	15.2	0.0	9.1	0.0	75.8

married sons. Among the respondents who are currently residing with their married sons, majority prefers to live with them. However, 8% among them prefer to live alone. Elderly widows who were currently living with their married daughters, 6% prefer to live with their married sons. Among those who were currently living with other relatives, 15% prefer to live alone (Table 9.3).

Perception of Status Among Elderly Widows

Good number of elderly widows (42%) interviewed felt that their status is low in the village. Interestingly, only one-out of-seven really believed that widows have good status in the community. When probed about the reasons attributed for having low status in the village, majority consider poor economic conditions. One-fourth of elderly widows believed that social factors are responsible for the persisting low status. To understand their status within own households, a question was posed to every respondent—*‘In your opinion, what is your status within your own family?’* The response options were—*low, medium, or high*. Nearly half of them (49%) have opined that they consider to have only medium status, whereas around one-third felt that their status is low. However, more than half (59.8%) of the elderly widows were satisfied with their present status and 40% were not satisfied with. Majority (59.7%) felt that their status has changed considerably after they became widow. Nearly half of the interviewed women mentioned that they experienced a lack of respect from own family after widowhood. One-fourth of them opined that they were not consulted at all in any family decision-making. Around 12% of the elderly widows reported that they have to take permission from their household members on important matters, which is not a pleasant experience. What is revealing is the fact that one-in-ten elderly women were not involved in family functions after becoming widow (Table 9.4).

In this study, an attempt was made to examine whether elderly widows are satisfied with their present status in the family. As expected majority of elderly widows, who perceive their status is low, are not satisfied. However those who felt to have better status in the family, around 90% of them expressed satisfaction in the present situation. Another important dimension to be noted here is that around half of the economically dependent widows stated that they are not at all satisfied with their present status in their own families (Table 9.5).

In many instances, the state of widowhood is exacerbated by the conditions of poverty (United Nations 2001). We observed that 81% of elderly widows had faced many problems immediately after becoming widow. More than half of the elderly widows have faced economic difficulties. Around 35% were faced with childcare problems. Around 14% reported to have experienced ‘social stigma’. In the study villages, women were blamed for the death of their husbands. A 65 years old tribal widow revealed—*‘After my husband’s death, people said that I am a ‘witch’ and I only killed my husband’*. She further stated—*‘My neighbour one day warned me - if you want to be alive, then do not show your face to anyone outside’* (Case study-1,

Table 9.4 Elderly widows' self-perception about their status within and outside family

Elderly widows perceived status within and outside their family	Percent	Number
<i>Status of widows in the village</i>		
Low	42.0	126
Medium	51.0	153
High	7.0	21
<i>Factors responsible for the low status of widows</i>		
Economic factors	49.5	149
Social factors	23.7	71
Family factors	21.0	63
Religious factors	5.7	17
<i>Elderly widow's status within own family</i>		
Low	32.3	97
Medium	49.3	148
High	18.3	55
<i>Are you satisfied with your status within your family?</i>		
Yes	59.7	179
No	40.3	121
<i>Whether your status in the family has changed after becoming widow?</i>		
Yes	56.7	170
No	43.3	130
<i>If yes, In which aspects, your status has changed?^a</i>		
Lack of respect	47.1	80
Opinion not sought	25.3	43
Need permission for everything	11.8	20
Not involved in family functions	9.4	16
Other reasons ^b	6.4	11

Source This table is based on the primary survey conducted by authors in the selected villages of East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand

^aAmong those who said their status has changed after becoming a widow ($N = 170$)

^bOther reasons include health related problems, economic problems, loneliness, etc.

Table 9.5 Elderly widows' satisfaction and level of economic dependency (in %age)

Perceived status of elderly widows within family	Satisfied with status within family		
	Yes	No	Number
Low	18.6	81.4	97
Average	75.0	25.0	148
High	90.9	9.1	55
<i>Level of economic dependency</i>			
Fully dependent	68.6	31.4	121
Partially dependent	64.2	35.8	53
Not dependent	49.2	50.8	126

Table 9.6 Treatment of elderly widows by husband's family, before and after widowhood

Treatment of elderly widows by husband's family	Before widowhood	After widowhood	Paired <i>t</i> value
Bad	22.3	45.3	8.938*** (0.325–0.508)
Indifferent	28.0	23.7	
Good	49.7	31.0	

Figures in parentheses is 95% confidence interval

Significance level given as *** $P < 0.01$

see Sect. “Annexure”). In many villages of these backward region, widowhood is still a curse for women. They were humiliated and abused by people, including own family members, for no reason.

After the death of only earning member in the family, many widows find it extremely difficult to manage the household all alone. Widowhood is embedded with emotional shocks, a sudden and drastic change in social status, and often an economic crisis for many (Bhatt 2006). The help from community and family members were a great source of support during this difficult and testing times. But, nearly half of the elderly widows interviewed did not get any help immediately after their husband's demise. In this context, it is important to examine the widow's continued relation/contact with her husband's family. A question was asked to the respondents—‘*How is your relationship now with members of your husband's family?*’ One third (30%) of the elderly widows stated that they do not have any contact with their husband's family now. This is a good indication of their gradual isolation from own relatives.

Did elderly widows receive the same kind of respect and care from husband's family before and after widowhood? In order to capture this, a question was posed to respondents—‘*Before and after the death of your husband, were you treated with same respect by your husband's family?*’ More than half of elderly widows stated that husband's family did not treat them with same respect after widowhood (Table 9.6).

There is considerable increase in the percentage of elderly widows who were treated badly by the family members of husband. 22% of the elderly widows were treated badly by their husband's family before widowhood. But after the widowhood, this has gone up to 45%, illustrating the changed attitude and behaviour of husband's family. In the survey, information was gathered about the participation of elderly widows in social and religious activities. Half of the respondents stated that they usually participate in family-get-together. They do participate in social gatherings like marriage, funeral or any other functions. Some of the elderly widows revealed that some people never invite them to social or religious functions.

While interviewing, one elderly widow said—‘*I attend marriages in our village. But when new bride comes to the house, I am not allowed to go there and see her*’. She further mentioned—‘*Even if new bride comes to our house, I cannot welcome her and perform any ritual*’. After widowhood, there is a significant decline in the participation in social activities. This reflected greater isolation and a lack of

community identity for the elderly widows. Paired *t* test infers there is a significant difference among the elderly widows for attending the social activities before and after the widowhood (Table 9.6).

Mistreatment or Abuse Experienced by Elderly Widows

‘Life has become a hell for me. Who will take care of a woman when she is widowed?’ (said a widow, aged 64 years). Many elderly widows are exposed to abuse and mistreatment within their own families. Sebastian and Sekher (2011) and Kumari and Sekher (2012) found that in Indian households, the female elderly, particularly aged widows, are more susceptible to abuse and neglect for obvious reasons.

American Psychological Association (2004) defines elder abuse as—‘It is the infliction of physical, emotional, or psychological harm on an older adult. It also can take the form of financial exploitation or intentional or unintentional neglect of an older adult by the caregiver’. To examine the abuse or mistreatment experienced by the elderly widows, few questions were asked—‘Do you try to avoid some members of this family?’ followed by another question—‘Are you afraid of anybody with whom you are currently staying?’ These questions were canvassed to the respondents by ensuring that no one else was present at the time of interview (Fig. 9.1).

Seven percent of elderly widows interviewed were afraid of someone in their own family. Being widowed and aged, they are more vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Around 5% of elderly widows reported that they were physically harmed by someone in the household.

An elderly widow (83 years) narrated her experience—‘My daughter-in-law always quarrel with me. My son and daughter-in-law are not taking care of me. My neighbours help me in doing my work’. In her own words—‘Isi din ko dekhane ke liye itana kast karke bete to aadmee banaye, par mujhe kya pata that ki beta aisa ho

Fig. 9.1 Mistreatment experienced by elderly widows within the family (in %age)

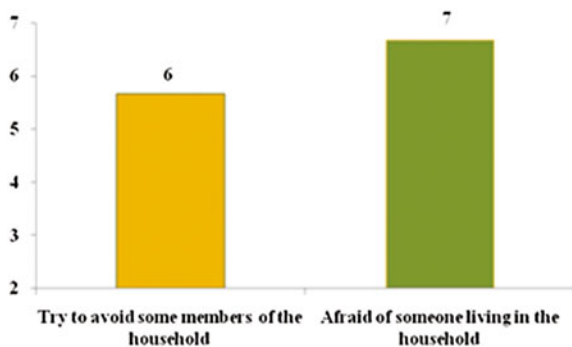


Fig. 9.2 Neglect experienced by elderly widows (in %age)

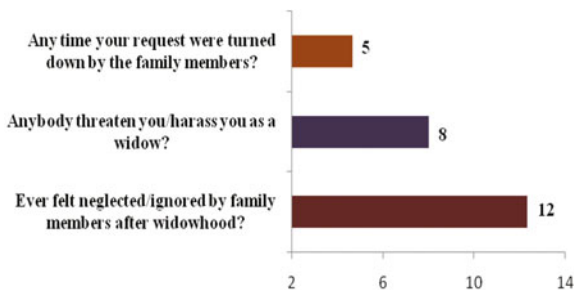


Table 9.7 Depression among elderly widows

Level of depression	Percent	Frequency
No depression	22.3	67
Mild depression	46.7	140
Severe depression	31.0	93
Cronbach's alpha value	0.6516	

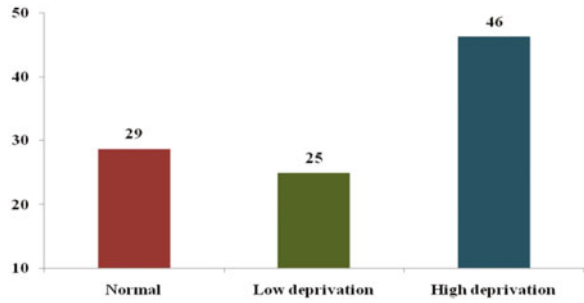
jayega, ('I have taken lots of pain to bring up my son. For all my hard work of all these years, now he treats me like this!').

Many elderly widows are considered as a burden by family members. Young children also do not like elderly interfering in their personal matters. Figure 9.2 shows that 12% of elderly widows from the study villages felt neglected or ignored by their own family members. Around 8% of elderly widows revealed that someone is threatening them and 5% have said that family members mostly ignored their requests for help.

Depression and Loneliness Among Elderly Widows

Loss of a spouse at any age has very significant impact on the psychological status of an individual. To measure the level of depression or psychological condition of elderly widows, Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) was used in this study. GDS consists of 30-item questionnaire in which participants are asked to respond by answering 'yes' or 'no' in reference to how they feel over the past one month. In order to adapt the scale to the local situation, certain questions were excluded from the scale as it may not be relevant in Indian context. Certain questions were modified as per the requirement and the scale was finalized. For the purpose of the present study, 24-items have been considered in the scale. Reliability test has been conducted. One point is given for each positive response to the question and by totaling the points counted for each answer, the score of 0–8 shows 'no depression' or 'normal'; score of 9–17 indicating 'mild depression' and score over 18 shows 'severe depression'. The time frame for this scale is last one month. After checking the reliability, the composite index was computed. The levels of depression, measured based by administering this scale among the elderly widows, is presented in Table 9.7.

Fig. 9.3 Elderly widows feel emotionally deprived by their family (%)



Around 46% of widows were having mild depression. Among the oldest-old widows, around 35% were severely depressed. Chi-square test was performed to show the association between the background variables and level of depression among the elderly widows. Number of sons, current work status, type of family, economic dependency, and receiving pension emerged as significant factors at 10% level of significance. Current health status was significant at 1% level (not shown in the table here).

Further to study the emotional deprivation among elderly widows, a set of statements were asked to the respondents. The statements were framed in a simple way that it could be answered either as ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The statements are—*‘The members of this family often go out of their way to help you? Do you think that the members of this family are really interested in you and your problems? The members of this family get along each other as you would like? This family gets together for holiday/festival celebrations? Members of this family respect your rights? You feel loved and cared for by this family? Are you troubled because members of this family differ with you on beliefs and values?’* To capture the extent of emotional deprivation among elderly widows, a composite index was computed using the seven statements canvassed. After checking for the reliability with alpha values (0.8649), the composite index on the level of deprivation has been finalized. The score ranging from 0 to 7 indicates the various levels of emotional deprivation among them. Based on total scores and the mean value obtained, that has been categorized into three—‘normal’, ‘low’ (score ranging from 1 to 2) and ‘high’ deprivation (score 3 and above) (Fig. 9.3).

According to this composite index, 46% of elderly widows believed to face high level of deprivation at emotional level. More than half of the oldest-old widows have high deprivation on emotional level, may be due to reasons such as—forced to stay at home most of the time, nobody there to interact with them, etc. As expected, higher emotional deprivation was observed among the elderly widows who are living alone. Further, it was also observed that the economic dependency and emotional deprivation are significantly co-related. Loneliness is a common problem among widows and is a kind of situation, which emerges due to the setbacks in the family cohesiveness. It also indicates the disorganization in personality, among elderly in particular (Yadava 2011). A question was asked in the survey—*‘How*

frequently do you feel lonely, even when you are with your family?' The responses to this question were in three categories—never, sometimes and often. One-fourth of young-old widows and 35% of oldest-old widows often feel loneliness. According to the type of family, more than three-fifths (64%) of elderly widows who stay alone often experience loneliness. The type of family is found to be significantly associated with loneliness. 34% of elderly widows living with their unmarried children often feel loneliness. Those who are living with married children may be engaged with their grandchildren to some extent.

Conclusions: Myth and Reality

The widowhood places the women in a disadvantaged position, particularly in their old ages. Elderly widows experience several problems like low status within family as well as in the society, loneliness, economic hardships, depression, feeling of insecurity, lack of emotional care from family, etc. Along with poverty and economic constraints, ill-treatment and neglect from own households makes them doubly vulnerable and depressed.

The study clearly illustrates elderly widows are the victims within their own households and also within the community. Although most elderly widows reported to have good relationship with their neighbours, but not many have someone close and intimate enough to share their problems and worries. Traditionally in Indian households, elderly are given a respectable role in the family decision-making on social matters. But what we found in this study is that in issues like financial matters, elderly were seldom consulted. More than half of the respondents felt that their status in the family has considerably lowered after the death of their husbands. For this, the economic constraints were the main factors to a large extent. Loneliness is a common problem among widows. Women feel lonely more than men and the loss of the spouse accentuates these differences. The death of a spouse means an end to daily conversation and also an end to many shared activities in which the spouse was the driving force. Death of husband can affect the relationship between family members. The traditional norms and values of the Indian society always provided respect and care to the aged. The aged members are normally taken care by the family. Few elderly widows in the study area are silent victims of mistreatment or abuse within the family. In recent times, due to the gradual breaking down of joint family system, large number of old parents are not maintained by their children. Consequently, the elders are now exposed to emotional neglect and lack of physical and financial support. Since no option left, these women silently suffer the neglect and humiliation. High level of illiteracy, lack of remunerative occupation, as well as lack of awareness about legal and economic rights makes them more vulnerable to neglect and abuse. Majority blamed their fate for the pathetic condition.

In brief, the present study found that elderly widows face discrimination both at the household and community levels which varies from economic, physical, to emotional needs. Being aged as well as widowed, they do not have intimate persons

with whom they can share their problems. Living in poverty and uncertainties, the mistreatment and neglect by own family members makes their life further miserable. As seen from the qualitative interviews and case studies, most of them silently cope up with this situation. Widowhood is generally stressful for women, not only a loss of long-time companion, but also the weakening of economic power and social networks. It is suggested that massive and intensive campaigns should be done to sensitize people to stop all forms of abuse and discrimination associated with widowhood. The family and multi-generational living arrangements needs to be strengthened as a viable support system for providing love, care, and protection for older persons, particularly to elderly widows.

Annexure

Case Study 1

Mrs. X. is a 65 years old widow belonging to a tribal family. Five years ago, her husband expired as he was suffering from Tuberculosis. She has one son and three daughters. All her children are married. She earns little money by working as a maid in nearby homes. Her husband was unemployed. He used to take away her money for drinking alcohol.

After husband's death, her neighbours started calling her a 'witch' ('Daayan'). Her neighbours do not like her and not even talk to her. She is considered as 'inauspicious'. Villagers believe that seeing her is a bad omen. They are also scared that she can do 'black magic' and hurt people. They want to get rid of her from the village. *'If you want to be alive, then do not show your face to anyone and stay at home'*. No one is ready to listen to her, for them she is a 'witch' in their vicinity. Everyone started blaming her for her husband's death. Because of people's attitude, she could not work outside. She is completely helpless and frustrated. *She asked—'Am I look like Daayan?' In her own words—'agar kisi ka pati kam umar main mar gaya to kya wo aurat dayan hoti hai?' ('If the husband die at a very young age, how the wife becomes a witch?')*.

During the fieldwork in that village, some women warned me—*'you have to be careful here as some of the widows are witches. They know black magic and can harm you'*. I just asked them—*'if she does something bad to me, then what I can do?'* They replied—*'In our village we have one tantric, who can help to get rid of black magic. However, it is better for you to avoid meeting those women'*.

When I went to the house for interviewing her, she was courteous. While talking to me, she opened up her feelings. *'Everyone in this village think that I am a witch'*. She started crying. I asked her—*'why do people think that you are a witch?'* She replied—*'I became a widow before my hair became white, so people believe that I am a witch'*.

'I am really scared to live here. Any day I may be beaten to death. No one in the village ready to help me'. Worrying about all these, she is not able to sleep peacefully. Her health has deteriorated and she shows all symptoms of severe depression.

Mrs. X. was considered as a 'witch' by upper caste families of the village. People do not want see them. They are not allowed to attend auspicious ceremonies. In all respects, they are socially and economically 'out-casted'. It is a pity that even educated persons in the village believe in this 'inhuman' practice of branding and treating old widows belonging to lower castes as witches.

Case Study 2

Mrs. C is a widow aged 76 years. She got married when she was 14. At the age of 34, she became a widow. She has one son and three daughters. When her husband died, her younger daughter was only 2 years old. She got 85 *Bighas* of land from her father at the time of marriage. Her husband was managing a petty shop in the village, and cultivating their land. She sold the land for meeting the treatment cost of her husband.

After his death, her condition became very pathetic. Somehow, she managed for few years. Her three daughters and son got married. After 2 years of her son's marriage, daughter-in-law started quarreling with her. She never gives her enough food. She deliberately wants to pick up quarrel with her mother-in-law. She slowly started humiliating her mother-in-law in public. Mrs. C was forced to work as a sweeper for 10 years. Her two daughters were staying in the nearby villages and one was in the same village. One day her son and daughter-in-law ordered her to leave their house. This was a shock to Mrs. C. After that, she started living with her daughter who lives in the same village.

She said—*'If you have money, then people will ask about you. But if you have nothing, then nobody will even come to see you'.* She continued—*'every parent hope that their sons will take care of them in old age. It is better to have a daughter rather than a son. If I do not have a daughter, then I will be begging somewhere now'.*

After the sudden death of her husband, she suffered a lot. She said about her son—*'For whom I was working so hard, threw me out when I really needed his help'.* She still expects love and care from her son. *'What I am expecting from my son may happen only in my next birth'.* Her son and daughter-in-law stay in the same village but they never come to see her even when she was sick. Mrs. C. had no option but to stay with her daughter, though it is not common in villages to live with son-in-law. *'When I was young, I never thought that one day I will be living in my son-in-law's house. What can I do? 'Every day I pray to God that I do not want to live long. How long one can suffer all these insults?'*

The frustration and helplessness in a widow's life is visible very much. All her hopes were shattered when her son and daughter-in-law started abusing her. Since

then, she never had happiness and peace of mind. ‘Well, we expect many good things in life, but ultimately we experience many bad things’—at the fag end of her life, this widow has become philosophical.

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