

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Elder Abuse and Neglect: A Hidden Crime

Reshma Anjum

Associate Professor, Vidyasagar School of Social Work
Vidyasagar University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

Elder abuse is the ill-treatment of an older person, usually by a caregiver. The mistreatment may be physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; neglect or abandonment or financial abuse. Elder abuse and neglect have been recognized as a growing problem in India, and this is showing an upward trend. Many elderly adults are abused in their own homes, in relatives' homes, and even in facilities responsible for their care. The personal losses associated with abuse can be devastating and include the loss of independence, homes, life savings, health, dignity, and security.

The abuse of elderly people in India has shot up to 50% from 23% as per a survey 'Elder Abuse in India 2014' report by HelpAge India, a non-governmental organization which fights isolation, poverty and neglect of the elderly.

This study includes real life cases of five elderly victims of abuse. The abused elders include four women and one man. Each case is tracked through time to understand the situations months and years afterwards. These cases though are only a tip of the iceberg. Each case is a story of harassment and torture. Each case reveals violation of HUMAN RIGHTS of the old and the infirm, not by outsiders; but by their own children.

Keywords: Elder Abuse, Neglect, Families of elderly

1. Introduction

Ageing is the terminal stage of ones lifecycle, which affects men & women in different ways, reflecting their roles throughout their lives, leading also to different experiences & needs in old age. A silent revolution has occurred in the last 100 years - unseen, unheard, and yet so close. The biggest achievement of the century is longevity. All over the world life expectancy has risen, leading to a sharp rise in the number of Older Persons. In India, the gray population has doubled in 25 years. While the numbers have gone up, quality of life has gone down. Industrialization, migration, urbanization and westernization have severely affected our value systems. The process of industrialization has eroded long-standing pattern of interdependence between the generations, producing material and emotional hardship for elders. The joint family, which was considered to be the natural support system, has crumbled down. The fast-changing pace of life has added to the woes and worries of the older person. In the world of technical advancement, every person has a well-defined role to play but what about our senior citizens? Their contribution to family and society has become insignificant.

In Indian culture parents were given the place next to God. It was the duty of a son to respect and care for his ageing parents. Then is it that only the strangers commit elder abuse & neglect? It is one of us also who, in the disguise of a relative, friend or a caregiver, are responsible for this behaviour. Many studies have been conducted on population ageing and there is abundance of statistics in this connection but the field of elder abuse in India is still a neglected one. There is complete lack of research, or published data on this burning issue in our country. We can have a glimpse of occasional articles in newspapers and that is all about this field. This is a problem, which is still confined within the four walls of a home. It is grossly underreported and un-discussed as the older people themselves do not want to discuss it and the relatives and neighbours who are aware of this do not want to get involved. It is also true that the older parents themselves try to justify this existing situation and put the blame to the changing scenario and changing value system. It is perhaps the emotional bonding with their children especially their sons, who are the heir of family, which keeps their lips sealed.

1.1. Definition

The World Health Organization (WHO) adopted the definition developed by Action on Elder Abuse (UK) in 1995: "Elder abuse is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person."

1.1.1. Types of Elder Abuse & Neglect

Elder abuse is the infliction of physical, emotional, or psychological harm on an older adult. Elder abuse also can take the form of financial exploitation or intentional or unintentional neglect of an older adult by the caregiver. Elder abuse can take place in their homes, during institutional care or in any other place in our society. The main types are:

- **Physical Abuse** - Physical abuse is inflicting, or threatening to inflict, physical pain or injury on an older person, or depriving them of their basic need. It can range from slapping an elderly person to beatings to excessive forms of physical restraint.
- **Emotional or Psychological Abuse** - Emotional or psychological abuse is the infliction of mental or emotional anguish or distress on an elderly person. It can take the form of verbal or nonverbal acts. It can range from insults and verbal assaults to threats of physical harm. It can also include treating the older person like a child and isolating the person from family, friends, and regular activities-either by force or threats or through manipulation. Emotional abuse is mostly followed by physical abuse
- **Sexual Abuse** – Sexual abuse is not very common form of abuse with elders. Sexual abuse can be regarded as those sexual activities for which the older person does not consent or is incapable of giving consent. The sexual activity can range from exhibitionism to fondling to rape or any unwanted sexualized behavior.
- **Financial or Material Abuse**- Financial or material exploitation is the illegal taking, misuse, misappropriation, and/or exploitation of an older adults material or monetary assets. Financial exploitation includes fraud, taking money under false pretenses, forgery, forced property transfers, denying the older person access to his or her own funds or home. A caregiver who financially exploits an elder might isolate the senior from the outside world, handle all financial matters, withhold food and medicine to weaken the elder, and psychologically abuse the elder so that he or she is afraid of doing anything about the situation.
- **Neglect or Abandonment of elders by caregivers** Neglect is the refusal or failure by those, who are responsible to provide food, shelter, health care, and assistance with the activities of daily living or help with personal or protection for a vulnerable elder. It is intentionally failing to meet the physical, social, or emotional needs of the older person. Neglect consists of confinement, isolation, or denial of essential services. Abandonment, a type of neglect, is when the responsible caregiver deserts the vulnerable senior.
- **Self-neglect by elders** Self-neglect is characterized as those behaviors when an older person fails to meet their own physical, psychological, and/or social needs. The Elders can neglect themselves by not caring about their own health or safety, which can lead to illness or injury. The seniors may deny themselves or ignore the need for food or water, bathing or other personal hygiene, proper clothes, shelter, adequate safety, or clean surroundings and essential medications.

2. Causes of Elder Abuse & Neglect

Elder abuse is a complex problem. There are possibly multiple contributory factors related to elder abuse. These factors include family situations, caregiver issues, and cultural issues.

2.1. Family situation and elder abuse

- Discord in the family created by the older person's presence
- Social isolation or the stresses on one or more family members who care for the older adult
- Lack of knowledge or care giving skills.
- The financial burdens of paying for health care for an aging parent
- Family stress

2.1.1. Caregiver Issues and Elder Abuse

- Caregiver's stress,
- In case of older person who is sick or mentally or physically impaired
- Financial dependency on the older person.
- Lack of proper training in care giving skills

2.1.1.1. Cultural Issues and Elder Abuse

- Devaluation and lack of respect for older adults
- Generation gap
- Religious beliefs

3. Prevention

Elder Abuse mostly gets unreported because either they are not in a position to lodge complaints or they are silent victims and do not want to raise voice against their family members. Abuse can be prevented by educating the masses and especially caregivers about elder abuse. The law enforcement agencies have a vital role to play to prosecute abuse of senior citizens. Mental health professionals, social workers, nurses, and lawyers should always provide interventions.

4. Some Case Studies on the Reality of Elder Abuse Faced by Senior Citizens of Kolkata

Elder abuse and neglect is spreading its wing in our society. We all know that the world is facing the challenge of increased number of gray population.

The agricultural economy, the patriarchal joint family system and traditional values used to bound parents and their children in ancient India. In the patriarchal joint family system, the oldest male member of the joint family was the head of the family. In a joint family, all members of the family live, cook and eat together and share their responsibilities. So elder care at that time; was

not a problem. A series of developments, such as urbanization, industrialization and migration and a growing sense of materialism and individualistic orientations have threatened the culture of yesteryears. Traditionally it is expected that parent care is the duty and obligation of adult children. The elderly, too, expect that their children are their old age security. But, can the children of modern India be considered as their old age security? The answer might not be affirmative.

4.1. Methodology

The study has been conducted in North Kolkata, using Purposive sampling method. The cases that were selected for this study were facing abuse within the family. Thereafter case study method has been applied to find out the nature and consequences of abuse they are facing.

The method of data collection was face to face interview and both participatory and non participatory observation. The cases were observed for a period of one year by the researcher. The unit of observation was respective families and unit of study was the elderly people within those families, who were victims of abuse.

The limitations for this study are as follows;

- The sample size is very small.
- The data collected cannot necessarily be generalized to the wider population..

Case 1. Today Mrs. Banerjee is not alive to see anymore tragedies in her life. She was 80 when she breathed her last. She has spent her course of widowhood for about 40 years. During this span she also lost her son and a grandson. She led a very restricted life as the Bengali Hindu widows would lead. She used to live with her second son and daughter-in-law after her husband's death. But in reality she was an unwanted member of that family. Neither any importance was given to her nor was anyone worried about her daily requirements. She was lonely within the family. She used to do all her household chores herself. After that her pastime was to read books and newspaper sitting in the corridor of the flat. As soon as she sighted any of the neighbours, she used to call them and talk her heart out with them. But this was also not accepted by the family members and they used to shout on her if they find her interacting with others.

Whenever the family used to go on short or long vacations, it was made sure that she was not part of that. She was locked within the house so that she can roam within the flat only. One person was assigned duty to check at regular interval to see if anything is really required for her. Her life was hell and every time she expressed the desire to die. This wish was also fulfilled but after forty years of emotional abuse and neglect.

Case 2. Mrs Ghosh was a happy go lucky woman with two children, one son and one daughter, living a retired life with her husband. Her husband used to get pension and they were leading a satisfactory life. Every year she visited her son who was living with his family in America for about 3-4 months and cherished that stay. But this year's visit was a nightmare for her. Her daughter-in-law was pregnant and she was invited to come and stay with them. Her joy knew no bounds that she is going to have another grandchild in the family and was really eager to join them. She planned to stay there for six to seven months so that she can enjoy their company especially of two grand children.

When she joined them she was given the charge of taking care of all household work, her daughter-in-law and one grandchild. No one was kept to assist her in all these work. At the age of 65 it was difficult for her to manage all these. The worst scenario was when her daughter-in-law delivered the baby. Now on her came one more additional and difficult responsibility. She was unable to take rest for a while. Even at night the newborn baby kept her awake. During daytime she has to struggle with all other responsibilities. Her condition started worsening and after three months she just escaped from her children's clutches and came back to India. She was looking frail and exhausted. When asked how her trip to America was, she said "I would have died if I would have stayed more".

Case 3. Razia is a poor widow living in a joint family of two sons and one daughter with their respective spouses and children. The two sons and son-in-law; all three of them earn and spend on their families without giving a single paisa to the poor lady. As she has grown old she is developing health problems but nobody has time to look after her or take her to the doctor. But whenever any other member of the family falls sick, she runs to the doctor without once thinking about her own condition.

Though all the three families live in the house made by her effort, none of them is interested to give her a square meal.

At the age of 63, for her survival she has to work as a domestic help in the flats near her house. But the flat owners are also interested in keeping young domestic help as they are more efficient than old lady. So she is facing hurdle in her life both inside and outside the family. She is earning a nominal amount of money, which also is often taken by her sons.

She is not having a healthy relationship with any of the family members. She has regular fights and being verbally abused by her daughter and daughter-in-laws. She is a continuous victim of emotional and financial abuse as well as neglect.

Case 4. Mrs. Khan has lost her husband at a very young age. Though she was a housewife before, she has to come out and earn for her survival and of course for her two sons. She educated her two sons and they become successful professionals in their respective fields. They are married and well settled in their life. Mrs. Khan has retired from her job ten years back and is getting pension. She had a good amount in her provident fund, which has been distributed among two sons. She had her own house which she sold, gave the money to both children and planned to spend rest of her life alternatively living with them, enjoying the company of her grand children.

The elder son has given her space in his house to live but never finds out time to talk to her or is bothered about any of her requirements. He thinks that giving shelter and food is sufficient for his mother. Though she spends few months in a year there, but she is not happy with the behavior of her son.

The younger son is one step ahead. He has refused to keep her in his house for a single day because he thinks that it is difficult to tolerate her as she is an extra burden in their busy life schedule. His wife cannot tolerate the stay of her mother-in-law and their

meeting ends up in a horrible fight. The younger son is ready to displease his mother, who he thinks was his past than to displease his present and future, his wife.

Now the situation is that the mother who has sacrificed her life for these two sons is looking for a rented flat where she can spend the rest of her life alone.

Case 5. Mr. Chatterjee has worked in a reputed organization and earned a lot for his family. He has two daughters being educated in good schools and colleges, living in a well known area of Kolkata in a multistoried house. The family lives on the second floor and the ground floor of the house is occupied by servants and dogs.

Mr. Chatterjee is now living a retired life. Both the daughters are married but they are unable to settle with their husband or in-in-laws house. They are staying with him and for the last few years Mr. Chatterjee is fulfilling the needs of his daughters, son-in-law and grand children, which are very expensive.

He is overburdened with it but still struggling for satisfying them. The worst part is that he is now treated only as an ATM machine and otherwise he has no place in the family. He has now been shifted to the ground floor as he is an unwanted person who can share the same floor with his wife and children. He is not even allowed to play with his grandchildren. He is leading a lonely life in a family full of people and has developed some mental health issues. He is deprived of the love, care and respect which he definitely deserves from the family.

5. Conclusion

- **Case 1** reflects that she was victim of constant verbal, emotional abuse and neglect in her son's house, which continued for almost 40 years. The main person responsible in this case was daughter-in-law and the son was mostly a silent spectator. He never took any initiative to improve the situation.
- In **Case 2**, the children thought that the mother will be able to cope up with the situation as she used to do in her earlier life. But they forgot that age is a big factor and she as a human being also requires rest and relaxation. In this case asking more and more from her was a big negligence from the part of her son, which forced her to run back to India to save her life.
- **Case 3** gives us a picture of a poor woman who fights everyday to meet both ends in her life, but is not supported by any of her three children, who are living in the same premises constructed by their mother's effort. Instead she is a continuous victim of verbal, emotional and financial abuse and of course neglect.
- **Case 4** clearly shows that the mother has been financially exploited by her sons and after that she has almost a negligible place in their life. Her wish to spend rest of her life with them creates further problems which results in verbal and emotional abuse.
- **Case 5** shows the condition of a father, whose love for his daughter ha ruined his life. The worst part is that his wife is also enjoying life with daughters and least bothered about her husband's deteriorating condition. He is totally a case of emotional and financial abuse and neglect.

The aforementioned cases of abuse; within the families are only representative cases. It was observed that none of them were interested in reporting these cases, because they consider it as a confidential matter of their family. The victims are of the opinion that the primary reasons underlying their abuse are mostly emotional dependence on the abuser.

6. Recommendation

Old age is a closing period of life span. It is a period when people move away from previous, more desirable, periods or time of "usefulness". As people move away from the earlier period of their lives, they often look back on them, usually regretfully and tend to live in the present ignoring the future as much as possible. Generally old age is considered as a curse being associated with deterioration of all physical and psychological factors and isolation from social, economic and other activities. But it can be changed if there is socialization of seniors in constructive ways with old age planning, positive thinking and for making the best use of these golden years of life. The children should also be sensitized over ageing and aged population.

7. References

1. Bhattacharya, S., & Monimala, M. (2008). Perception of the Elderly. New Delhi, Global Vision Publishing House. 189-240
2. Chakraborti, R. D. (2004). The Greying of India :Population Ageing in the context of Asia. New Delhi, Sage Publications. 303-327
3. Dandekar, K. (1996). The Elderly in India. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 19-56
4. Desai, K. G. (1982). Aging in India. Tata Institute of Social Science, Deonar, Mumbai. 71-106
5. Devi Prasad, B. (2000). "Elder Abuse and Neglect: A review of research and programmes.". In M. a. Desai, Gerontological Social Work in India: Some Issues and Perspectives. New Delhi, R. Publishing Corporation. 219-239
6. Devi, D. S., & Amrita, B. (2006). Ageing in Women- A study in North East India. New Delhi, Mittal Publications. 225-230
7. ELDER ABUSE IN INDIA(2013): A Helpgae India Report. (n.d.). Retrieved April Monday, 2014, from helppageindia.org: <http://www.helppageindia.org/images/pdf/ElderAbuseIndia13.pdf>
8. Jamuna, D. (2005). Issues of Elder Care and Elder Abuse in the Indian Context. In S. I. Phoebe S. Liebig (Ed.), An Aging India Perspectives, Prospects & Policies. Rawat Publications. 125-139

9. Johnson, M. L., Bengston, V. L., & G, C. P. The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing. U.K.: Cambridge University Press. 323-330
10. Richardson, V.E. & Barusch, A.S.. Social Work and Aging Families.: Gerontological Practice for the Twenty-First Century A Social work Perspective New York: Columbia University Press. 214-234
11. Saxena, D.P.(2006) Sociology of Ageing. New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company. 1-12
12. WHO. (n.d.). Elder abuse. Retrieved April Thursday, 2014, from WHO website:
http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/