



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## ELDER ABUSE; A STUDY OF ELDERLY WIDOWS THEIR VULNERABILITY AND COPING MECHANISMS

Amandeep Singh

Research Scholar

Department of Sociology

Panjab University

Chandigarh

### ABSTRACT

*Elderly widows face a variety of challenges such as isolation, a poor financial status, a lack of social acceptability, despair, physical problems, a lack of family support, and others. The position of widows is closely tied to their lack of access to economic resources, such as land ownership, inheritance of property, a strong support system, and inclusion in decision-making. A very few studies have looked at the circumstances of elderly widows. Understanding the degree of abuse, vulnerability and coping mechanisms of elderly widows within the family and in the community is one of the key goals of the present study. The current study makes use of secondary data to achieve the aforementioned goals. The study offers some recommendations that will assist society in general and the elderly widows in particular in creating a better and more livable environment for the elderly widows.*

**KEYWORDS:** Elder Abuse, Elderly Widows, Vulnerability, Coping Mechanism.

### INTRODUCTION

Ageing populations is a global issue. Given that women typically live longer than men, it is anticipated that in the years to come, women will make up the majority of the elderly population. According to the Census (2001) of India, men outnumbered women in the 60+ age group. However, in the 70+ age group, the ratio of women to men is higher, which can be attributed to women having a higher life expectancy at that age. The

prolonged duration of widowhood for many Indian women is one of the main social repercussions of life extension.

The status of women has not significantly changed despite socioeconomic developments in Indian society throughout the years. They live primarily as dependents, even within the family. The sudden change in a woman's status brought on by the loss of her spouse is known as widowhood, and it calls for the development of new networks of support within her family, kinship group, and community. One of the most upsetting stages of existence is described as becoming a widow (Holmes and Rahe, 1967).

In Indian society, women have held a special place. Women were revered as deities and incarnations of Shakti (energy) in pre-Vedic periods. She was respected and given a prominent role at practically all social and religious gatherings. Women had the same privileges as males during the Vedic era and were their equal partners and friends in every way. Women were allowed to remarry and begin new lives during this time. During the Vedic era, "Satidaha" (a widow dying beside her husband) was not popular. Additionally, widows received complete permission to participate in all religious events and had the same rights as widowers.

There was a significant alteration during the Smriti age (about 500 A.D.). Women who attained the pinnacles of understanding and realisation, competed with men in all walks of life and sometimes even outperformed them, enjoyed full freedom and equality with men in terms of self-dependence, self-determination, and self-confidence, were gradually confined to the four walls of the home (Jamuna, 2008). Women's social rituals such as "girl-gifting" in marriage, "Satidahana" or widow-burning, and "Vidhava-pirana" or (widow-baiting) emerged as a result of men viewing marriage as simply a means of procreation (Altekar, 1973).

In India, social classes are established according to their function in social production against a caste-based backdrop. Through the justification of myth and religion, castes magnify social injustice. Due to gender discrimination and widowhood, women who are the target of this exploitation are denied of their rights and mistreated (Halakatti, 1988).

## **PROBLEMS OF ELDERLY WIDOWS**

Not all age groups are equally affected by widowhood. Age, however, also has a significant effect, just like cultural differences. It has been noticed that a younger widow adjusts to life without a spouse more quickly (Green, 1977). She makes new friends more readily and finds creative methods to fit into society than her senior counterpart, for whom widowhood is a difficult circumstance that involves both social and personal disarray. The position of Indian widows is further exacerbated by socioeconomic factors like poverty, a lack of economic independence, and an inheritance system that denies women property rights, which further contributes to their sense of extreme instability and stress (Mehta et al., 2006). Women who are widowed are

more at a disadvantage as they age and are dependant on others for a longer period of time. Due to the combined impacts of old age and widowhood, elderly widows are negatively impacted twice.

Due to their high level of economic dependence, elderly widows are particularly susceptible to maltreatment from both family and society. Women who lack both financial and social assistance find widowhood unpleasant. Most elderly women in India do not receive an old age pension or any other type of social security, with the exception of financial help from their children or other family members (Shankardass, 2003). In terms of health, older married men are in better shape than older women (Bose and Gangrade, 1988). This is partly because women traditionally serve as the primary caregivers, and because of their lower status, they have less access to financial resources. As a result, the health of older women is neglected, which is made worse by the stigma associated with widowhood. Widows are in a vulnerable position for a variety of sociocultural and economic reasons.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In India, there have been numerous studies on the elderly, but relatively few have attempted to concentrate on old widows. As it is known that individuals who are married fare better in all economic and social aspects than those who remain single. In the context of caring for the elderly, the marital status of the elderly is particularly important.

The lack of access to and control over productive resources like land that affects female elders, especially widows, may be a result of patrilineal and patrilocal social structures that place them at greater risk. Bhat (1992) claimed that the demographic trends in India call for a rapid expansion of governmental support services for the elderly. The social position of elderly women in Bangladesh shifts from being the head of the household sphere to that of the quiet and modest “old widows,” signifying the loss of power and prestige for the majority of widows (Ellickson, 1988).

Martin (1989) noted that older age, declining health, and fewer career options, particularly when a financial loss is involved, may cause major changes in the familial relationships of elderly people. When elderly people are unable to engage in economic activities, including the rising expense of health care, family members and society may be burdened with caring for them. Because of the stigma associated with widowhood, the health of older women is neglected and made worse.

In research on how older people cope with economic problems and civic society’s response, Nasreen (2007) found that the majority of senior people encounter financial difficulties as they age and that most of them choose to limit their spending to their available means. Even the most fundamental demands of existence must be met by their children because they are unable to provide for themselves. In the case of older widows, the situation is even more pitiful because many widows do not work even before becoming widows.

Women live longer than males do elsewhere, which has contributed to a phenomenon known as the “feminization of old life.” Widowhood is a social death for a woman in society. The situation of dependency worsens due to the loss of status following the husband’s death. Given that she has no source of income or property rights and that her relationship with her sons and daughters-in-law determines her status in old age, dependency on males increases as women age. Every stage of widowhood is difficult, tiring, and distressing. In addition, it results in greater social, economic, emotional, and cultural ostracism than widowhood itself (Kumari and Sekher, 2012).

## **ABUSE, VULNERABILITY AND COPING MECHANISMS FOR ELDERLY WIDOWS**

The psychological and social circumstances in which widowhood takes place has significance. The loss of a spouse and being a widow are the two things in life that women fear the most (Jamuna et al., 1996). Due to their socioeconomic status, widows historically have been viewed as a population that is vulnerable and in a variety of positions (Sheykhi, 2006). Those who are unable to defend themselves from mistreatment, exploitation, or neglect by others are considered vulnerable groups (Kim and Geistfield, 2008). In addition to their financial struggles, widows frequently deal with social and cultural issues. Their level of social connection with friends, family, and neighbors can have an impact on their mental health.

According to a study of rural widows, their increased isolation from their neighbors and services makes them more sensitive to feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, it was discovered that loneliness among the elderly is frequently linked to poor health, less physical mobility, lower levels of contentment, and less frequent interactions with family and neighbors (Balkwell, 1981). Thus, social support is a crucial element that may offer defence against the potentially harmful effects of stress.

Numerous studies have found that visits to family members had no impact on an elderly person's loneliness or sense of fulfilment in life (Arling, 1976). There are two explanations for the lack of an association or a bad correlation between family interaction and morale. First off, elderly adults and their offspring frequently do not get along because of their divergent interests. Experiences vary depending on the generation due to socialization variances and lifestyle differences. A person or household can be exposed to hazards, shocks, and stress on the outside, but they can also be defenseless on the inside, which implies they lack the resources to deal with these situations without suffering irreparable harm. The condition of widowhood frequently translates to financial vulnerability for women, in addition to being linked to emotional loss and changes in social standing.

Contrarily, coping mechanisms are a group of resources and connections that enable elderly widows to shield themselves from a “bad finish” or to recover from a disaster. Coping is an automatic reaction to get through challenging circumstances, and coping techniques are actions people do in response to particular types of stress. As a result, coping is an important method or approach that helps elderly widows to evaluate their circumstances, determine the skills they require, and take on challenging individual life responsibilities.

Three coping levels were conceptualized by Carson et al. (2003) to aid in navigating the challenging stages of life:

- 1) Immunological defences and damage healing systems exist on a biological level.
- 2) There are ingrained coping mechanisms, strategies for self-defense, and interpersonal support from loved ones.
- 3) Group resources like religion exist on a sociocultural level.

In addition, social support has been recognized as a crucial coping mechanism. Social support is the availability of people who one can count on and who bring happiness to them. One's social network consists of trustworthy individuals, such as friends, neighbors, family members, and individuals of any sex or age. For elderly widows, the social support system is crucial because it helps them cope with their situation (Sijuwade, 2008).

It has been discovered that various criteria, such as age, religious background, socioeconomic situation, degree of economic dependency, educational achievement, etc., influence the development of practical adjustment techniques. Lieberman and Sherman (1989) found that widows who actively participated in social programmes or self-help groups had good development. According to a number of research on widowhood (Gallagher et al., 1983; Lopata 1996; Momtaz et al., 2009), social networks aid in psychological readjusting after spousal death. The vulnerability of elderly widows, the abuse they face, their coping mechanisms, and their social support are all examined in this study. The social connections they have, and how their status has changed since being widows, how they make decisions, etc. have all been used to gauge how vulnerable elderly widows are.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is necessary to develop welfare measures for the elderly, especially for widows, in light of the study's findings. Numerous mental health issues, including feelings of insecurity, despair, etc., are attributed to loneliness. For widowed women, loneliness frequently causes sadness and isolation. Therefore, a support system should be in place, especially for people who are afflicted with physical or mental illnesses. Physical health issues and a lack of medical care owing to budgetary restrictions are additional age-related issues. Plans are required to protect the elderly widows' health. Governmental health services must be prepared in terms of infrastructure and human training to handle these unique health needs of the aged due to the rising illness burden and disabilities impacting the elderly, as well as their lifestyle choices that further endanger their health.

Indian elderly widows become overly reliant on their families both financially and emotionally. They need to be given more authority and power in order to improve this situation. If the widowed women are prepared to work, they should be given a job to feel relevant to society and support themselves financially at the same time. Older people should have an acceptable and suitable living environment, according to policies and programmes. In order to support suitable housing programmes for elderly widows who live alone either voluntarily or due to circumstances, incentives should be provided. A review of the government's many existing programs is also necessary to see how effective they are for the wellbeing of widows and the elderly.

## CONCLUSION

The present study makes an attempt to look at the elderly widow's vulnerability, coping mechanisms, and sources of support. Age, gender, and widowhood all play a role in the numerous issues that elderly widows face. Here, an effort has been made to describe the different types of abuse and neglect that elderly widows experience as well as how they deal with the issues. According to the survey, elderly widows encounter issues both at home and in the community. Widowhood is a life event that diminishes the extent of the older person's informal social network in addition to removing their closest friend. Even while the majority of elderly widows get along well with their neighbours, not many of them have a close friend with whom they can confide their troubles. Many endure this abuse in silence because they are at a loss for alternatives.

## REFERENCES

- Altekar, A. A. 1973. The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. New Delhi.
- Arling, Greg. T. 1976. The Elderly Widows and Her Family Neighbours and Friends. Journal of Marriage and the Family. Vol.38 (4): 757-768.
- Balkwell, Carolyn. 1981. Transition to Widowhood: A Review of the Literature. Economic and Political Weekly. Vol. 30 (1): 117-127.
- Bhat, P.N. Mari. 1992. Changing Demography of Elderly in India, Current Science. Vol. 63 (8, 25): 440-448.
- Bose, A.B., and K.D.Gangrade. 1988. State of Widowhood and Trends in India. In Godavari D.Patil (ed.) Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation. Gyan Publishing House. New Delhi.
- Carson, R., J. Butcher and S.Mosby. 2003. Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life. Pearson Education Pvt.Ltd.. Bangalore.
- Census of India. 2001. Social and Cultural Tables India, Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India.



- Ellickson, J. 1988. Never the Twain Shall Meet: Ageing Men and Women in Bangladesh. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*. Vol. 3:53-56.
- Gallagher, D. E., Breckenridge J. N., Thompson L. W., Peterson J. A. 1983. Effects of Bereavement on Indicators of Mental Health in Elderly Widows and Widowers. *Journal of Gerontology*. Vol.38 (5):565-571.
- Green, E.J. 1977. *Marriage and Family- A Basic Self Instruction*. McGraw Hill Book Co., New York.
- Halakatti, Meera. 1988. Widowhood: Perspectives and Issues. In H.V.Nagesh, P.S.Nair, and A.P.Katti (eds.). *Widowhood in India*, Janata Shikshana Samiti, Dharwad.
- Holmes, J.H and R.H.Rahe. 1967. The Social Re-adjustments Scale, *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*. Vol 11: 213-228.
- Jamuna, D. 2008. Elderly Women in India: Roles and Status, In Joseph Troisi and Ann lencyk Pawliczko (eds.), *The Elderly Women in Asia: Her Roles and Positions*, International Institute on Ageing, United Nations. Malta.
- Jamuna, D., P.V Ramamurthy, and N.N. Sudha Rani. 1996. Psychosocial Aspects of Elderly Widows. In Vinod Kumar (ed.), *Ageing: Indian Perspective and Global Scenario*, Proceedings of the International Symposium on Gerontology and Seventh Conference of the Association of Gerontology (India). New Delhi: 303-306.
- Kim, Eun-jin, and Loren Geistfeld. 2008. What Makes Older Adults Vulnerable to Exploitation or Abuse? The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues. Vol. 13(1): on-line: <http://ncsu.edu/ffci/publications/2008/v13nl-2008> .
- Kumari, S., and T.V.Sekher. 2012. Status of Elderly Widows in India, *BOLD*. Vol. 22(2): 6-13.
- Lieberman, M.A. and V.L.Sherman. 1989. The Impact of Self-help Groups on the Mental Health of Widows and Widowers, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*. Vol.56(3):435-449.
- Lopata, H. Z. 1996. *Current Widowhood: Myths and Realities*. Sage. Thousand Oaks. CA.
- Martin, L.G. 1989. Living Arrangements of the Elderly in Fiji, Korea, Malaysia and Philippines, *Demography*, Vol. 26(4): 627-643.
- Mehta, Manju, Usha Kulshreshta and Rashmi Chowdhry. 2006. *Indian Widows: Coping Styles, Mental Health and Personal Adjustment*, Pointer Publishers, Jaipur, India.
- Momtaaz, Yadollah Abolfathi, Tengku Aizan Hamid, Nurizan Yahaya and Rahimah Ibrahim. 2009. Widowhood and Psychological Well-being among Older Malaysians Mediating Effect of Social Network, *Indian Journal of Social Work*. Vol. 70 (3): 375-390.

Nasreen, Asiya. 2007. Coping with Economic Problems in Old Age and Civil Society's Response, Indian Journal of Gerontology. Vol.21 (3): 324-335.

Shankardass, Mala Kapur. 2003. Concern for Ageing Women in India, Bold. Vol. 13(3): 19-24.

Sijuwade, O.Philip. 2008. Coping with Economic problems in Old Age and Civil Society's Response, Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences. Vol. 5 (7): 691-695.

Sheykhi, Mohammad Taghi. 2006. A Sociological Review of the Reflections and Dimensions of Quality of Life of the Widows in Tehran. Social Indicators Research. Vol. 78 (2): 251-270.

