

AGEING AND DEPRESSION: A CASE STUDY ON THE MARWARI ELDERLY OF KOLKATA, INDIA

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Abstract: The present paper intends to make a comparative study of the male and female members of the Marwari community in terms of the severity of elderly abuse they encounter and the consequential geriatric depression of which they later become sufferers. Old age we know, is a phase of retirement – retirement from an active work-life, an active social-life, and from a host of other amenities. Although such is the impasse most elderly find themselves in, a detailed study of a wide range of Marwari families in South Kolkata confutes this to a certain extent. Marwari men learn the business acumen at a very early age and emerge as competent entrepreneurs, an endowment that persists even in their senescence.

Marwari women on the other hand, mainly remain confined within the four walls of their homes, and enjoy little social intercourse. Social interaction narrows and eventually dies as these women approach their grey years. It is then when problems surface and they are verbally abused, rebuked and ill-treated. Not only are empowerment and freedom denied to them, but cases of maltreatment have been reported when these elderly women ask for a more fitting lifestyle.

A detailed survey-work has been undertaken with some in-depth interviews to represent this field as accurately as possible. A sample size of 120 respondents was considered. 60 elderly females and 60 elderly males of the Marwari ethnicity interviewed from different parts of Kolkata by employing both purposive and snowball sampling techniques.

Keywords: Geriatric depression, Marwari community, senescence, empowerment, engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Life, they say, is a series of changes....some natural, some spontaneous. So is the world we live in. Over the last few years, a host of remarkable changes have grappled the world....some promising us a better and secured life, and others not so reassuring. An anomalous change in this context is that of population ageing, a recent demographic revolution that has affected the entire world. Anomalous it is, because in contrast to most other changes, this change is NOT one-dimensional - it has both the ups and downs. Whereas the positives rest in advancements like lower mortality rates, the downsides surface in the form of inadequate benefits to meet the requirements of this ever-increasing elderly population. Thus, in spite having been blessed with the boon of longevity, the elderly are gradually receding into the dark dungeons of oblivion, finding themselves in an array of adversities needed to combat.

ELDERLY PREDICAMENTS

But, are all elderly in the same precarious plight? Has senility become a sparring match for every retired man, who is now contesting the encumbrances of being an

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“elderly?” Presumably, the answer will be ‘NO’. We know that with senility comes retirement – retirement from an active work-life, an active social-life, and from a host of other amenities. Also, the body deteriorates, health debilitates and financial resources deplete. In contrast to such widespread beliefs about ageing and being old, there are many older people who do not live isolated, functionally impaired lives typified by a number of inabilities, like physical, mental, intellectual and/or financial. Such people believe and are of the opinion that “every second of life is to be treasured and there’s no room for being inert and idle.” Such conjectures are prevalent among many of the world’s communities – particularly among the Marwaris, a very well-known Indian ethnic group.

A GLANCE ON MARWARI COMMUNITY

Throughout history, Marwaris are known to be a spirited and vivacious community. They are renowned for their dexterity in the field of trade and business, and quite totemically speaking, it runs in the family of every Marwari. Marwari men especially, learn the business acumen at a very early age and emerge as competent entrepreneurs, an endowment that persists even in their senescence. Therefore, we can speak of a fair number of elderly Marwari men who are still energetically engaged in business and related affairs and are active bread-earners of their family.

Things are not the same and smooth when it comes to the women of the said community. Marwari women, in contrast, barely set foot in the business quarter. With the exception of a handful of cases, most Marwari women are found confined within the four walls of the house, and are restricted from frequenting out or trespassing family business affairs. Serving husbands, sons, and other in-laws are the only doctrines; they abide by, and are deemed to do so, till death. Their mobility is more often delimited by such male members of the family, and as a consequence, they hardly have an association outside the threshold of the house. No matter how physically and financially sound they remain, the unmet desires of having a world of their own away from home, cripple their hearts. It is regrettable that the same men for whom they remain tied to their aprons throughout the day and provide free labour in their dependent-care role, freeing them to dedicate themselves completely to their careers so that they become and remain the capitalist cogs they were ostensibly born to be, hinders their well-being. In stark contrast to the male contemporaries of their own ethnicity, senility is indeed a curse to these women... a sparring match or torment which they abhor and dread.

The present paper attempts to make a comparative study of the status of elderly men and women of the Marwari community in terms of the empowerment and freedom each of the sexes enjoy. It also aims to study about the degree of emotional and/or physical abuse among each of the two sexes, and the consequent elderly depression that arises from such elderly abuse. It also ventures to establish how far it stands for a fact that older women are more susceptible to elderly abuse than

older men, because the former are burdened with a lifetime of experiences and beliefs which makes them more vulnerable to maltreatment. The responses of the subjects who were interviewed in the course of the study shall be duly considered and subsequently, the reasons behind, the types of, and the effects of abuse on the elderly Marwari women will be investigated.

OVERVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

Elderly is an issue of major concern among theoreticians all over the world. The demographic scenario of the elderly population is indeed bringing a challenge throughout the world. Crampton (2009) has used terms like ‘age quake’ and ‘age tsunami’ to describe the alarming rate of the elderly population challenge. With this alarming rise, old age presents with a set of new and unique challenges which the society has to meet. There has been a drastic progress in the socio economic arena which has affected the life of this venerable population, whose needs and associated problems varies with age, status, health and other background characteristics Raju (2000).

THE ELDERLY CHALLENGE

Demographically there is an increase in the population of the elderly, due to drastic progress in health care sector. Population ageing has brought in a major challenge for the world where there is an increase of non communicable diseases which is responsible for 60% deaths as well as loss of effective and healthy life of the elderly (Bloom et. al., 2011) A long life isn’t worth living if the years spent are not satisfactory, where health often becomes a major obstruction in the path as the ability to resist diseases decreases with age, and at times complete cure is just not possible (Sahu 1998). Physical and mental illness both affect the elderly and this issue can be addressed through sustainable development wherein the elderly populations’ efficiency and their productive skills is to be utilized which may bring a morale boost up as well as improve their health situation in a greater way (WHO, 2015) WHO declared that 20% of the world’s elderly population suffer from mental and neurological disorder. Hilger and Fischer (2002), in their study has stated that mental disorder are most common problems among the elderly, but this problem gets undetected and untreated often. Hence health is a major factor of concern and there is a need to address the geriatric health issue which may provide an answer to various other elderly problems which include vulnerability as well.

As mentioned in the last paragraph, elderly vulnerabilities are often an issue of serious concern since the problem of abuse is often located within this cycle itself. Mistreatment of older people – referred to as ‘‘elder abuse’’ – was first described in British scientific journals in 1975 under the term ‘‘granny battering’’ later on, this was regarded as a problem and addressed properly in USA and later on in various other countries (WHO, 2012) A consensus conference of the National Center on

Elder Abuse (NCEA) and the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS) has standardized definitions as follows Physical abuse: The use of physical force that might result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment. Physical punishments of any kind were examples of physical abuse. Sexual abuse: Nonconsensual sexual contact of any kind with an elderly person (Gorbien & Eisenstein, 2005). Emotional or psychological abuse: The infliction of anguish, pain, or distress Financial or material exploitation: The illegal or improper use of an elder's funds, property, or assets Abandonment: The desertion of an elderly person by an individual who had physical custody or otherwise had assumed responsibility for providing care for an elder or by a person with physical custody of an elder Neglect: The refusal or failure to fulfill any part of a person, obligations, or duties to an elder Self-neglect: The behaviors of an elderly person that threaten his/her own health or safety. The definition of self neglect excludes a situation in which a mentally competent older person who understands the consequences of his/her decisions makes a conscious and voluntary decision to engage in acts that threaten his/her health or safety (Gorbien, et. al., 2005).

Elderly issues are increasing at an alarming rate and is addressed in various readings by theoreticians as well gerontologists specifically. The present study explores the issue of elderly from cultural perspective by targeting a community specifically and analyzing its various aspects.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The study has explored the dimension of community based elderly populace. The present study is trying to delve into the daily routine of elderly Marwari women and compare the same with that of income-earning, elderly men of the same community. The study will also seek to explore the degree of empowerment and freedom of elderly Marwari women, and also the contribution of their male peers in the maintenance of their well-being.

The study also tries to make a comparative analysis of feelings of ignorance, negligence and isolation among the elderly men and women of the said community, and find out which of the two sexes is more prone to abuse and maltreatment when a more fitting lifestyle is demanded.

Finally, the study obtains an understanding of the relation between elderly abuse and elderly or geriatric depression and find out which of the two sexes suffer more from depression stemming from abuse.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

For the present study, a detailed survey was conducted in Ballygunge, Salt Lake and Alipore areas of Kolkata. All of the mentioned areas are known to be very exclusive and posh locales of Kolkata, with land-prices among the highest in the city.

People in these parts of the city are prepared to pay fancy prices to own a place defying economic logic. Perhaps, that is the reason why most of the city's Marwaris are found to reside here, since Marwaris are recognized as a community with an exuberant lifestyle. The researcher first conducted a pilot-study on 20 elderly Marwari females and an equal number of males from Judges Court Road, Old Ballygunge and Ballygunge Road, and CK block, encompassing Alipore, Ballygunge and Salt Lake areas respectively. The purpose of the pilot study was to determine the effectiveness and problems of the interview schedule that would be used for the study. This provided with the chance of making some practical changes in the questions and then commence with the final interview.

For the final interview, a sample size of 120 respondents was considered. 60 elderly females and 60 elderly males of the Marwari ethnicity were interviewed from Ballygunge Circular Road, Gurusaday Road, Kankulia Road and Dover Lane in the Ballygunge zone, Alipore Road, Burdwan Road and Diamond Harbour Road in the Alipore zone, and lastly from BD block, DN block and FD block which are parts of Salt Lake zone of the city. Both purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed for the survey. Two semi-structured questionnaires, one for the females and the other for the males were used for the purpose of interview. Each of the questionnaires consisted of both open and close ended questions with almost an equal number of both the types.

FINDINGS

In this moiety, the researcher has first interviewed 60 elderly Marwari women, all of whom are residents of Ballygunge, Salt Lake and Alipore areas of Kolkata. Using a semi-structured questionnaire comprising both open and close-ended questions, their way of life, conventions and customs were recorded. 57 of these respondents were home-makers, with husbands still actively involved in business undertakings. The remaining 3, on the other hand, were widows, all of whom ventured into the business domain after the demise of their respective partners. Immediately after, the researcher's focus shifted to interviewing 60 elderly male members of the same community, out of which 57 respondents constituted the husbands of the home-makers from the elderly female group, and the remaining 3 were otherwise. All of the male respondents were found to be associated with business, with the exception of only one, who owing to debilitating health issues, had restricted mobility. Nevertheless, using a separate set of questions, the lifestyle of the elderly Marwari men was noted as well. The findings which were unfolded in the course and at the end of the study have been encapsulated below.

Historically speaking, Marwaris are well-known for their enterprise and consistent commercial success. Over the ages, they have steadfastly built on their strengths and have continued to gain recognition for their achievements in the business arena, leveraging their business acumen to set up global enterprises.

In this context, an interesting observation made by the researcher was that none of the subjects were service-holders or spouses of the same, an attribute which rarely holds true for members of this community. All of them garnered immense profits from respective entrepreneurship and hence, are blessed with an ostentatiously magnificent and luxuriant life, with teeming resources to last for a few generations or more. Despite such expediencies, most Marwaris remain poor in the subject of tranquility and peace of mind. For Marwari women especially, the situation is more grave, more distressing; not to forget the elderly ones whose position is even more precarious.

Speaking of the daily routine of elderly Marwaris, it must be remembered that married Marwari women barely have an identity outside the home and hearth. It has already been stated that out of the 60 female respondents interviewed, 57 were found to be home-makers. In other words, they are mere care-givers looking after the household needs of the male members of the family, a contingency that remains till their last breath. In fact, as these women advance aging, they become more mindful to such duties toward the men as serving them meals on time, looking after their laundry, and so on. This is primarily because they do not want the men (rather their husbands) to face any hitch at home, at the same time ensuring that they can entirely devote themselves to the workplace. Hence, whereas most of the elderly men still remain actively engaged in business affairs outside home, the elderly women can only think of and actually do experience a repetitious, stereotyped routine. This may lead to the onset of depressive symptoms among them, to overcome which they often take recourse to religion. Religion, it has been said, acts as a binding force and a positive guide. Hence, religious organizations, mostly named 'GOSTIS' prove beneficial for such elderly women in venting their shriveled up emotions to other female peers and building ties with them. Through prayers and incantations (precisely, chanting of 'Samayak') some remarkably pleasant time is spent by them. Some admitted that they also go for religious tours, the tickets for which are paid either by the husband or the son(s), but no loose cash is given for personal or developmental purposes. Some others stated that often they are misbehaved with and ill-treated by the male members of the family, as the latter at times possess the view that indulgence in devotional pursuits might keep them from their prescriptive homely duties toward them and others. As Tulsi Sinthia, a 67-year old Marwari woman puts it:

"Saradinpati or bachhon keliye kaam karte rehte hain. Woh toh subah subah naha-dhokar, khana khaa kar nikaljaatehain. Gharmein padhe rehte hain hum...main aur dono bahu. Jab ghar se nikle tab bhi khanabana do, sukhekapdenikaal do, tiffin bana do, bag la do, driver ko gaari nikaalne kaho...isimeinsaarasubahguzarjaatehain. Dopaharko school se teenopotey aa jaatehain, fir unkeliyedobarakaam. ShaamkokabhikabhiGurujikepaasjaatehain, wahakuchghantebitaane

se achhalagtahain. Lekingharwaalezyadajaanenahidete. Kehtehainwahajayengetohgharmeinkaamkaunkarenga! Bahuonkojaanedetehainlekinmujhenahi...kehtehainkamzor ho chukihoon, baaharjaanattikhnahihain. Agar itna hi kamzorhoon, togharkakaamkaisesambhalrahihoon, wohnahisochte."

Not only Tulsi Sinthia, but a host of her contemporaries were found in a similar quandary. Stepping out of a dull, tedious life doesn't come easy, particularly when most aspects of their lives are dictated by the men of the family. The cause behind this can be traced to lack of adequate education and awareness among them. The researcher found out that 47 out of the 60 female respondents had never had any college education. What was worse is 8 of them did not even complete their secondary education at school, and only 5 possessed Bachelors Degree, though in the Pass Course. On the contrary, 56 of the male respondents boasted of a decent educational qualification, precisely a college degree. No level of empowerment can be attained without fair education. Hence, educational deprivation in the earlier years of life had taken a major toll on the lives of these elderly Marwari women, who even today, are dependent on their husbands and other male members of the family in taking decisions pertaining to their personal and family lives. This evinces that they aren't empowered enough to lead life on their own terms. Though none of their material demands remain unfulfilled, with instances of them being gifted more than asked for, a major complaint resides in the fact that their lives are often hemmed within the house, with little freedom to move outside. Since the husbands of a good majority of elderly women have been found to be still the active bread-earners of the family, financial botheration remains foreign.

"Kapdechahthihoontohkharidlaatehain, gehnechahthihoontohkharidlaatehain, ghar ksaamanchahthihoontohbhilaadetehain...zarurat se zyadamangwadetehain; lekin jab Gosti-waalonkesaath Cuttack keYubak Sangha jaanekeliyepaisemaanga, saafinkaarkardiya. Puchhthekaiya kami rakhahainusnemer; puchhto hum bhisaktehainki 42 saal ho gayeshaadikaaurabhitak hum apnemarzikimaalkinbannekiyaadikyunnahimili?"

Perhaps there is no appropriate answer to the question raised by the dewy-eyed sexagenarian, GayatriKanoria.

"Sab kuchtohlaakedetehain, ab isseyadakyachahiye? Padhelikhetohhainnahiauraaj-kalharjagahangrezichaltahain. Kisinekuchpuchhliyatohjawaab de payengi? Mere vagair koi faislakarnahipaati, bade shaukhaney Cuttack jaane!"

Was what Jugal Kanoria, her husband had to say when asked what made him forbear his wife's desire to live independently and act her will out. Not only Mr.Kanoria, but a handful of other male respondents were found to believe that the

only identity for their women should be that of meek *bahus*, and that empowerment and freedom are not their cup of tea, especially because they are not educationally sound. Astonishingly, they also firmly stood by the view that their “well-being is duly taken care of by meeting all of their (material) necessities,” and believed that a person’s well-being consisted only in gratification of material wants and nothing more!

Often, Marwari men, irrespective of age, fail to realize that since the lives of their mothers and wives are constricted within the commorancy, they might experience feelings of ignorance, negligence and isolation. The fact of the matter is such feelings recurrently crop up among them, since most of them have not many people outside the house-threshold to interact with. Though religious gatherings at Gostis act as a passing solace, occasions where these are thought of as “indulgence in worldly pleasures outside home” by the husbands and others, bring a profound dispiriting effect on their minds. As a result, the elderly housewives who have no voice of their own, remain restricted in their social interaction in fear of abusive behavior and maltreatment by the dominant males. Cases of malevolence and physical abuse have been reported among 39 out of the 60 female respondents. Mrs. Sakhshi Tiberewal, a 68 year old who claims that she is “more physically fit and active than her daughters and daughter-in-law, is customarily abused by her husband and her son, whenever she expresses desires of carrying out things (such as, visiting her daughter and son-in-law, or going for religious tours organized by the Guruji, etc.) that are deemed forbidden and are unacceptable to them. Though not physically beaten up, the extremely harsh language directed towards her is enough to wreck her existence at home. The case of Mrs. Gomti Agarwal, a 64 year old widow, is more or less similar, and perhaps even more deplorable. Having lost her husband at the early age of 34, Mrs. Agarwal took over the reins of a flagging business in a conscious effort to look after her two sons and give them all kinds of benefits she could dream of. Her sons, both of whom are now married with a child each, never miss the smallest chance to physically assault their mother if she is seen in the office premises. They fear that she would expropriate them for her personal gains and therefore, strongly detest her presence outside home. A successful entrepreneur who had proved her mettle and unshackled herself from the typical housewife-image, today Mrs. Agarwal is a victim of elderly abuse.

“Bachhonkeliye din raat mehnatkar ke paisa kamayi, aur aajunhi bachhonkolagta haiunki Maa aunkunke haq dene se inka arkadengi? Office kaka amkartekarte aadat padhchukihain; achhalagta hai, sukoon milta hai, unko (her husband’s) mehsoos karte hai office mein. Bachhe log tohsamjhtenahi. Poteykesaamnemujhemaarte hai. Bas yehi din dekhnabaakithha.”

... weeps the old lady as she shows the bruises on different parts of her body.

In regards to the question of elderly abuse among the Marwaris, the researcher made an interesting revelation. In contrast to the female respondents, none of the 60 males were found to be physically attacked by the family members. However, a very meager number of 11 of them spoke of instances when they were addressed and talked to indecently. A prime reason behind this disparity can be attributed to the fact that elderly Marwari men still enjoy financial independence and hence are competent enough to take care of most of their needs. As opposed to the lifestyle of their female peers, the elderly men in fact, enjoy a more suitable life and hence, the question of depending on others for fulfillment of their desires and possibilities of abuse which show up with rising demands become less conspicuous.

Any discussion on elderly abuse remains incomplete without one on elderly or geriatric depression, regardless of the community to which the subjects appertain to. In the present paper, the researcher's final objective aimed at examining depression as a risk factor for elder abuse and neglect among the elderly Marwaris. The afore-stated evaluations suggest that instances of elderly abuse, in general, are more prevalent among the elderly Marwari women; and as the researcher had hypothesized, the dilemma of depression was too, more common among the women than that of the dominant men. It was found out that among 34 of the 60 female respondents, symptoms of depression had stepped in, which were independently associated with abuse and neglect. General slowing down or restlessness, inability to find pleasure in any activity, feelings of worthlessness, emptiness and guilt, loss of appetite, unexplained headache, backache, bodily pain or similar complaints are some of the indications reported by the female respondents, which expound the onset of depression among them. However, denotations of depression are not entirely uncommon among the elderly Marwari men, but the signs vary. Indecisiveness, loss of self-esteem, excessive concerns about financial situation, perceived change of status within the family, moodiness and irritability, explain the dawn of depression among the latter category of subjects. Notwithstanding, the number of depression-afflicted males found in this study is 17 out of the 60 interviewed, that is, veritably less in comparison to that of the female group.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite recent proclamations that the two sexes of our society have taken many steps towards egalitarianism, the status of women can never be tantamount to that of the dominant sex. What holds true for them in youth remains so in later age and perhaps that is the reason why older women are more vulnerable to abuse than older men – a veritable nature of almost all societies. In the present paper, the case of elderly Marwaris have been considered, and thereby the contingencies of differences in male-female status demonstrated from the findings derived based on a set of objectives. The paper brings to light the fact that though pecuniary benefits are important and are savored by the Marwaris, it is not a sufficing factor in bringing

mental peace and happiness for many of the people belonging to this community. Maltreatment and abuse, both physical and emotional, are commonplace among them, especially among the elderly Marwari women, who, for ages, have been denied of empowerment, freedom and a befitting life. Consequently, depression emanates from such cramped lifestyle, which intensifies the situation even more. The researcher, however, apperceived during the course of interview that prevalence of abuse and subsequent depression were often disagreed by the respondents, mostly by the female subjects, presumably owing to fear of despising one's own family. Instances of elderly abuse and depression among the male respondents, cannot, as has been elicited from the findings, be completely ruled out, but the advantages they enjoy in terms of empowerment, engagement, and freedom indubitably place them in a more desirable position than the elderly Marwari women.

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