

# SPWI JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL WELFARE

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Dr. D. Suresh



SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC WELFARE AND INITIATIVES

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# SOCIAL NETWORKING STATUS OF OLD AGED WOMEN IN INDIA



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**Abstract:** *Most of the older women live without a spouse and experience a shift in living arrangements in old age. One in ten women over the age of 50 years live alone and this is even more among widowed women with many of them never having contact with their non-co-residing children. In general, living with family, particularly the son, is the most common living arrangement among older women. What is positive is that about 70% of older women have some role in family decision making. Further, many are active in various activities such as prayer, yoga, household chores, taking care of grandchildren etc. Their social networking outside the home is also reasonable, albeit limited to religious activities, visiting family or chatting with neighbours. The paper focused on the social aspect of elderly lives including living arrangements and family relations, participation in decision making in the family, daily activities, social networking and activities outside the home.*

**Keywords:** *Old Aged Women, Living Arrangements, Changes in Old Age, Social Networking, Marital Transition and Related Life Changes, Abuse After Sixty*

## Introduction

Population ageing is often called a silent revolution, a compelling demographic phenomenon with several implications to socio-economic and cultural aspects, all of which influence the quality of life of older persons in general and more particularly of older women. Globally, the older population 60 years and above is expected to increase from about 810 million in 2012 to over 2 billion by 2050, representing an increase from 11.9% to 22% of the total population during that period. The number of people who turn 60 each year is nearly 58 million. By 2050 for the first time, the population of older

persons will be larger than the number of children below 15 years. Japan is currently the only country with more than 30% population in the age group 60 years and above but by 2050 there will be 64 countries with over 30% older people. Bottom heavy family structures with many grandchildren and at best one set of grandparents is giving way to top-heavy family structures with two or even more sets of grandparents from 2-3 generations but a relatively smaller number of grandchildren.

The old-age dependency ratio could more than double in 70 years in some developing countries whereas in much of the developed world this doubling happened over 150-200 years. This rapid pace of ageing in developing countries is not accompanied by an increase in personal incomes as happened in the developed world. Further, the governments of newly ageing countries are much less prepared to address this significant and rapid shift in age structure and are also somewhat lower in recognising and responding to the significant demographic shift and implications to socio-economic and health issues. Added to this is a general apathy to address this issue, including seeing older persons as burdensome. Ageism (the stereotyping of older people and prejudice against them) and age discrimination (treating someone differently because of their age) continue to exist. When ageism is combined with sexism, older women face a double layer of discrimination. Only in recent years is there a gradual recognition that older persons are involved in (a) the substantial transfer of resources within the family and community; (b) providing instrumental support (shopping, cleaning, home maintenance, child care etc.) and (c) providing emotional support for children (advice and validation). In more recent times, older persons have also been recognised as an important group of consumers and a profitable market for health products. The United Nations has made significant contributions in changing this mindset.

Three key demographic changes contribute to population ageing: declining fertility, lower infant mortality, increasing survival at older ages all of which are indicators of success and development. Many challenges faced by an ageing population are generally related to two common features across almost all countries: (i) ageing of the age, resulting in a large increase of population 80 years and above and (ii) feminisation of ageing as women live longer than men. It is estimated that women constitute 55% of all older persons and a majority of them (58%) live in developing countries. By 2025, nearly three-quarters of the world's older women are expected to reside in what is today known as the developing world. Together the two phenomena (ageing of the aged and feminisation of ageing) will result in large numbers of very old women outliving their spouses. Such late-life transition in marital status affects older women's living arrangements as well as economic and emotional wellbeing, especially when they carry a higher burden of ill health and disability. Women dominate the older person population in terms of numbers, but it is hardly a woman's world for older women as strong gender barriers are likely to have influenced the younger years of their life course and continue even in late age becoming more explicit. The level of

vulnerability among older persons often increases when younger people decide to out-migrate for employment. When caught between modernity and tradition, individuals and families develop ambivalence towards the wisdom and experience of older persons in addressing present-day concerns and problems, and the perceived value of older persons in general and older women, in particular, gets diminished.

As women live longer (than men), they experience a longer period of ill health, poverty, financial insecurity, high levels of dependency and gender-based discriminatory practices. Often gender stereotypes lock women into caregiving to other older family members. Further, widowhood is associated with harmful traditional and cultural practices.

While much of the late-life experiences of women seem to be adverse, there is some evidence that aspects of the ageing process are positive for women. Studies have shown that older women feel a greater sense of fulfilment and self-actualization than during their younger years. As women usually feel powerless towards many things in a typically male-dominated society, they feel less depressed in old age than men who are unused to the powerlessness and loss of control that often accompanies old age. The inherent resilience (ability to adapt well to different life situations) among women is known to help them cope with old age problems better than their male counterparts. Although women generally carry a higher morbidity burden, they are also known to have larger and better family support networks in old age. Older persons often become active co-constructors of their reality and adapt coping measures to minimise the effects of ageing.

### **Living Arrangements of Older Women are Worrisome**

Family, more particularly, the male child, has been a strong institution of support in India over the years. However, increasing job-related migration is likely to weaken the co-residential structure of the family with clear implications for the future living arrangements of older persons. Due to the high cost of housing associated with rapid urbanisation, children are often forced to leave ageing parents behind when they move to urban areas. This is not by itself necessarily bad for parents as they do not get uprooted from where they have lived for many years and can age in place and financial assistance and money transfers from non-co-residing children could supplement older person household incomes. In general, however, weakening social security systems are likely to hurt the quality of life of such older persons. Yet some studies show that technology, transportation and communication systems can to some extent counterbalance the perceived negative effects of solitary living in old age.

As women live longer than men, they live longer without a spouse and consequently experience a shift in their living arrangements in old age from living with a spouse to either living alone or living with adult children, a shift that fewer older men face. About 10% of older women live alone as against 2% of older men. A

significant reason for older women living alone is that their children are away. About 20% of older women have begun living alone after 60 years of age. About a third of all older women living alone are dissatisfied with living alone but perhaps have no better choice, a fact which creates a further worrisome situation. In general, there is a much greater tendency for older women to co-reside with children/grand children (46%) compared to only 12% among older men.

Overall, the survey estimates that about a third of all children co-reside with their parents while the rest live elsewhere. On average there are 2.7 non-co-residing children per older person.

### **Managing with Changes in Old Age**

In both rural and urban areas, a significant majority of older women (and also older men) prefer that children (particularly sons) should support parents in old age. Over 56% of older women perceive that child should support them in old age. About 21% of them (mostly those living alone) felt that the government should support them. There is also a good proportion of older women (23%, particularly in the 60-64 age group) who felt that adults should be independent. Living with a male child is the most common preference across the states with Kerala topping this list with 81%.

In terms of actual and preferred living arrangements, older women show a higher level of resilience and coping ability. For example, 69% of older women who are living alone also prefer to live alone (that is they can cope) while only 35% of older men living alone prefer their current living arrangement.

About 80% of older persons living alone are in contact with their children while about 20% living alone are never contacted by non-co-residing children. Meetings with non-co-residing children are much less in number. Older women in particular face such an emotionally disturbing situation more than older men because they are much less capable than older men of initiating communication with their non-co-residing children due to the inability to handle communication equipment by themselves without assistance from others. Only 45% of older women living independently report receiving some financial assistance from their non-co-residing children. This is yet another cause of increased vulnerability amongst older women.

Does this imply a lower level of "respect and status" for them in the family? Or is it because of their living alone? Is having no role in the family decision making by their own choice because they realised that less involvement leads to healthy detachment and resultant peace? While the BKPAI data are not able to answer these questions, it is clear that lack of involvement in decision making will be perceived as a problem only when they desire to get involved but cannot. This is where some amount of adjustment and coping with changes in social situations would be needed on the part of older persons.

### **Time Use and Social Networking**

The most common activity among older women is spiritual, with 3 out of 4 women saying that they engaged in prayer, yoga or singing bhajans at some time during the day. Cooking, washing and other household chores are the second most popular activity, followed by taking care of grandchildren, visiting relatives and shopping. To a large extent, widowhood does not modify the activity mix significantly among older women, except for a reduction in time spent on more physical activity in older ages after the loss of a spouse. Social networking activities (such as public meetings on community or political affairs, working with the neighbourhood to fix or improve something, participation in religious activities, visiting friends or relatives or routinely spending leisure time with friends) outside the home do not seem to be important in the lives of older women. A very high proportion of even 60-69 women have never participated in most of the activities and even older women have even less participation. However, there are two exceptions to this trend - participation in religious activity and secondly visiting friends and relatives in which nearly 60% of elderly women 60-69 years in rural areas and even older women in urban areas participate. Data also shows that the main reasons for limited participation in social activities outside the home are health and financial problems.

### **Marital Transition and Related Life Changes**

Transition in marital status from being married to becoming a widow or widower is a significant new vulnerability during the ageing process. About 86% of older men are still married while 60% of older women have lost their spouse. Loss of companionship, caregiving and primary source of support increases vulnerability for all elderly. However, the vulnerability is more likely to be psycho-social for men and additionally also financial for older women. Since women traditionally do not own land, housing or other assets such as savings, they become and also feel more dependent. Although men and women who have lost their spouses are older compared to those who are still married, about half of older persons who have lost their spouses are not very old. About 52% of widowed women and 43% of widowed men are in the age group of 60-69 years. A majority of the elderly in each group (married and widowed) live in the rural areas, but a lot more widowed women live in urban areas compared to any other group probably due to migration of children to urban areas, and women moving to the houses of their children after the loss of a spouse. About 70% of widowed women are illiterate, a level higher than that among all other groups. This higher level of illiteracy is likely to be a barrier when accessing health care and social welfare programmes.

Thus, the transition to widowhood raises some issues of vulnerability for men and women. The combination of age and loss of a spouse is associated with poor health, as well as with new economic situations for women wherein they now have to provide for themselves or negotiate financial and care-related support from other relatives. About one in 3 women who have lost their spouse live in a household that has no other relative.



### **Abuse After Sixty**

About 13% of rural older women and 9% of urban older women have reported experiencing some form of abuse after 60 years of age. Verbal abuse is the main form of abuse for women and the least form is physical abuse. The Source of abuse appears to be largely neighbours and sons. Notably, a higher proportion of older women report abuse by daughters-in-law. About a quarter of older women reports health problem resulting from abuse. In any case, it is good to know that nearly 90% of older women have not experienced any abuse.

### **Conclusion**

Experience indicates that older persons often become co-constructors of their reality and collectively adopt different coping measures to mitigate the effects of ageing. Participation in social networks outside the home, meeting friends and sharing experiences are usually common practices of older persons. However, as shown in the report, the social interaction of older women in community activities is very limited, except in some religious activities and visiting family. Following positive results in some Asian countries (China, Thailand), it would be good to set up local level older women clubs with facilities for some entertainment and learning some new skills etc that would help older women in the community spend their time usefully. The Elderly Self-help Groups under the MoRD, Government of India could be used as a platform for setting up such older women clubs for a more organised way of spending their free time.

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