

Abuses and Maltreatment Among Elderly Widows – A Descriptive Study Conducted in a Rural Area of Thrissur District in Kerala

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Abstract

Elder abuse among widows remains a critical yet under-researched social issue, particularly in rural communities where gender and age-related discrimination are prevalent. This study was conducted in a rural area of the Thrissur district with a sample size of 100 widowed elderly women. The primary objectives were to determine the prevalence of abuse and maltreatment among widows using semi-structured interviews and to explore preventive measures to address such abuses. The findings revealed alarming rates of multiple forms of abuse experienced by the participants. Psychological abuse was the most common (48%), followed by care neglect (12.5%), verbal abuse (12%), financial abuse (11%), physical abuse (10%), social abuse (5%), and sexual abuse (2%). Many widows suffered from more than one type of abuse simultaneously such as psychological combined with financial or social abuse. The data indicated that most of these were domestic abuses, with perpetrators predominantly being close family members. Specifically, 55% of the abusers were daughters-in-law, 20% were daughters, 12% sons, 8% sons-in-law, 3% others, and 2% grandchildren. Disturbingly, only 32% of the victims were aware that they were being subjected to abuse. The study highlights the urgent need for multidimensional interventions to prevent elder abuse among widows. Preventive strategies should include stronger legal protections, improved social support mechanisms, increased community awareness, and economic empowerment initiatives. Addressing this issue requires both grassroots-level efforts and systemic policy changes to ensure the dignity, safety, and well-being of elderly widows in vulnerable rural settings.

Keywords: Elder abuse, widows, rural communities, psychological abuse, social support

INTRODUCTION

Elder abuse is a growing yet often overlooked issue today. As global populations age, more seniors face mistreatment in various forms, including physical, emotional, financial, and even neglect. This abuse can occur in private homes, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes, often at the hands of family members, caregivers, or institutions entrusted with their well-being [1, 2]. Despite increased awareness, many cases go unreported due to fear, isolation, or lack of resources. Addressing elder abuse requires a collective effort from individuals, communities, and policymakers to ensure the dignity, safety, and rights of older adults are protected [3, 4]. Elder abuse among widows is a serious yet often overlooked issue, particularly in societies where widows face social and economic discrimination. Losing a spouse not only brings emotional grief but also exposes elderly women to various forms of mistreatment, including neglect, financial exploitation, social isolation, and even physical or emotional abuse [5, 6]. In many cultures, widows are marginalized, denied property rights,

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and left without adequate support systems. This vulnerability increases their risk of being abused by family members, caregivers, or society at large. Addressing elderly widow abuse requires legal protection, financial empowerment, and a shift in societal attitudes to ensure their dignity, security, and well-being [7, 8].

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive study approach was adopted using a non-experimental simple descriptive research design to assess elder abuse among widows in a rural community area of the Thrissur District. The total sample size comprised 100 widowed elderly women.

- *Inclusion Criteria:* Widows who were willing to participate in the study and able to respond to the questions during the interview were included.
- *Sampling Technique:* A purposive sampling method was used. Samples were selected from consecutive houses within a specific rural area, focusing on female widows only (n = 100).
- *Tool and Technique:* Data were collected using a pre-formed, pre-tested, semi-structured interview schedule consisting of 33 questions, divided into two sections:
 - *Section I – Demographic Data:* This section included 8 items related to demographic characteristics such as age, educational qualification, employment status, religion, number of children, living arrangements, general health, and awareness about old age homes.
 - *Section II – Semi-Structured Questionnaire:* This section comprised 25 items designed to detect various forms of elder abuse and maltreatment experienced by widows.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews using the semi-structured questionnaire. Additional descriptions were noted when necessary to capture contextual details. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection to ensure ethical compliance and voluntary participation.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 reveals that Majority of the sample (44%) were in the age group between 61–70 yrs. Maximum sample (81%) had education up to 12th. Among the sample, 67% had up to 3 children, 30% had more than 4 children, and 3% had no children. The findings revealed 56% are staying with their son and 13% with their daughters. Rest 23% are staying alone and 8% stay with others. 52 respondents are healthy. 34 are on regular medication and 14 widows need frequent hospitalization. Among the respondents 77 are aware of old age home.

Table 2 data show that among 100 samples 90 of them revealed about abuses and 10 did not reveal abuses.

Table 3 presents the distribution of widowed participants according to different types of abuse and maltreatment experienced. The findings reveal that psychological abuse was the most prevalent form, affecting 48% of the widows, followed by verbal abuse (12%), neglect (12%), financial abuse (11%), and physical abuse (10%). Additionally, social abuse accounted for 5%, and sexual abuse for 2% of the reported cases. Notably, 10% of the respondents reported experiencing no form of abuse. These results indicate that psychological and emotional distress are the most common forms of elder abuse among widows in rural areas, often overlooked and unreported (Table 3).

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of categories of abusers identified by the victims. The data reveal that daughters-in-law (55%) were the most frequent perpetrators of abuse, followed by daughters (20%), sons (12%), and sons-in-law (8%). Other relatives (3%) and grandchildren (2%) also contributed to instances of abuse, while 10% of the widows reported no abuse. These findings highlight that most abuse occurs within the family, primarily from immediate caregivers, underscoring the domestic nature of elder mistreatment among widows in rural communities (Table 4).

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution of samples according to their demographic variables.

S.N.	Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1	<i>Age in years</i>		
	a. 50–60	22	22
	b. 61–70	44	44
	c. >70	34	34
2	<i>Educational qualification</i>		
	a. Primary	14	14
	b. Up to 12 th	81	81
	c. Degree	03	03
3	<i>Employment</i>		
	a. Agriculture	20	30
	b. Private/Govt	07	07
	c. Labourer	18	18
4.	<i>Religion</i>		
	a. Hindu	50	50
	b. Muslim	33	33
	c. Christian	17	17
5	<i>No. of children</i>		
	a. Nil	03	03
	b. 3 & below	67	52
	c. 4 & above	30	45
6	<i>Respondent staying</i>		
	a. Alone	23	23
	b. With son	56	56
	c. With daughter	13	13
7	<i>General health</i>		
	a. Healthy	52	52
	b. On regular medication	34	34
	c. Need frequent hospitalization	14	14
8	<i>Awareness about old age home</i>		
	a. Yes	77	77
	b. No	23	23

Note: N = 100.

Table 2. Data showing the frequency percentage of samples revealed/not revealed incidents of any type of abuse.

S.N.	Responses of Samples	Frequency	Percentage %
1	Revealed abuse experience	90	90
2	Not revealed any abuse experience	10	10

Note: N = 100.

Table 3. Data showing the frequency percentage of samples according to different types of abuses and maltreatment of widows.

S.N.	Abuses/Maltreatment	Frequency	Percentage%
1	Psychological	48	48
2	Verbal	12	12
3	Financial	11	11
4	Neglect	12	12
5	Physical	10	10
6	Social	5	5
7	Sexual	2	2
8	No abuses	10	10

Table 4. Data showing the frequency percentage of category of abusers of the victims.

S.N.	Category of Abuser	Frequency	Percentage
1	Daughter in law	55	55
2	Sons	12	12
3	Daughter	20	20
4	Son in law	8	8
5	Others	3	3
6	Grand children	2	2
7	Nil	10	10

Note: $N = 100$.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

- *Demographic data:* Total data collected from 100 widows. Majority of the samples (44%) were in the age group between 61–70 yrs. Maximum samples (81%) had education up to 12th. Among the sample, 67% had up to 2 children, 30% had more than 4 children, and 3% had no children. The findings revealed 56% are staying with their son and 13% with their daughters. Rest 23% are staying alone and 8% stay with others.
- *Data regarding prevalence of elder abuse:* Total data were collected from 100 widows among which 90 persons revealed that they had experience of different types of abuses and maltreatments, 10% did not reveal any abuse incidents. In this study, it was found that majority of the samples 48 (48%) were victims of psychological abuse. 12 (12%) had verbal abuse in the form of shouting very often for silly reasons and quarrelling. Eleven (11%) had financial exploitation in the form of using her money by the home people, forcibly signing the blank cheques, threatening and getting the property shared and neglecting them later. Ten respondents (10%) experienced physical abuse like looking after grandchildren only by self, doing household work without rest, getting physical assaults in the form of pushing down, dragging to bathroom, and locking inside the room. Twelve (12%) experienced care neglect in the form of not assisting in daily activities, not getting medical aid if required, not providing basic requirements properly. Five of them (5%) had social abuse in the form of separating from friends and relatives, keeping away from social activities and not allowing them to accompany family members even to church or temple. Two samples (2%) reported situation of sexual abuse.

The data revealed that most of the abuses are domestic abuses. Among the abusers 55% are daughters-in-law, 12% are sons, 20% are daughters, 8% are sons-in-law, 3% are others, and 2% are grandchildren.

Among the respondents of abuses, only 32% were aware of their abuses. When asked to whom they would like to complain or share the incident, the maximum sample 51% replied religious leaders.

DISCUSSION

According to point of view, most of the abuses are domestic abuses. But our elders are not ready to make any complaints against them. Total data were collected from 100 widows, among whom 90 people revealed that they had experience of different types of abuses and maltreatments, 10% did not reveal any abuse incidents.

The statistics on elder abuse shows that it is low, somewhere between 4% and 6% of the elderly population [2]. However, O'Connor et al. (2009) suggest that the statistics is so low because elders are afraid of reporting abuse and that many do not have the opportunity to report abuse even if they wanted to [8].

The researcher described the prevalence of different types of abuses among widows. Psychological abuse 48%, Verbal abuse 12%, Financial abuse 11%, Care neglect 12.5%, Physical abuse 10%, Social abuse 5%, Sexual abuse 2%. At a time, the samples suffer from different types of abuses. For example, the financial abuse and psychological abuse, psychological and social abuse [9, 10].

Recommendations

- Similar study can be conducted at a large scale in an urban setting.
- Comparative study can be done with rural and urban setting.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, ensuring the safety and dignity of elderly widows requires collective responsibility and a compassionate approach from all sectors of society. Legal reforms must be implemented and strictly enforced to protect their inheritance, property, and pension rights, preventing financial manipulation and dependency. Governments should strengthen welfare programs and introduce schemes that provide regular income, healthcare, and housing support for widows, enabling them to live independently and with dignity. Simultaneously, community awareness campaigns should aim to change societal attitudes that often marginalize widows, fostering empathy, inclusion, and respect. Educational initiatives can help families and communities understand the value of care and emotional support for the elderly. NGOs and civil society organizations should collaborate with government bodies to provide counseling, legal aid, and safe shelters for those facing abuse or neglect. Moreover, social reintegration programs must encourage widows to participate in community life, ensuring they remain active and connected rather than isolated. A society that respects and protects its elderly women not only safeguards their rights but also upholds moral and cultural values of compassion and humanity. By building a strong network of legal, social, and emotional support, we can create an environment where elderly widows are not treated as burdens but as valued members of society who deserve love, protection, and respect in the final years of their lives.

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