

# **Agewell**

**RESEARCH & ADVOCACY CENTRE**  
*(For Needs & Rights of Older Persons)*

**AGEWELL STUDY ON**  
**HUMAN RIGHTS & STATUS OF**  
**OLDER WOMEN IN INDIA**  
**(July 2011)**



**Agewell Foundation**

M-8A, Lajpat Nagar-II, New Delhi-110024 Ph.: 011-29836486, 29840484  
e-mail : [agewell@bol.net.in](mailto:agewell@bol.net.in) , [agewellfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:agewellfoundation@gmail.com) Website: [agewellfoundation.org](http://agewellfoundation.org)

# **HUMAN RIGHTS & STATUS OF OLDER WOMEN IN INDIA**

## **- A national study**

### **INTRODUCTION**

India has a population of approx. 60 million older women (60+). Traditionally, in India women have had a respectable place among almost all communities, but contemporary ground realities vary from this fact. Even human rights of older women are at stake today.

Today old women have restricted social interaction, limited earning possibilities, several medical complications, emotional isolation (in large number of cases even from their own children), very limited knowledge or awareness of their legal rights and natural reluctance to seek justice.

In many Indian communities women are treated as second class citizens. They have been lagging behind in almost all walks of life for centuries. They have never been financially independent. Due to less social interaction they even don't know about their rights and powers. They are always dependent on male members of the family for their basic needs, even for day-to-day requirements.

Older women have more critical problem than older men. Due to social and traditional family structure they are forced to live with several restrictions. Hence they find themselves marginalized and isolated all the time. As women live longer than men, most of them have to live a life of a widow in their silver years.

Although there are many social organizations and activists working for empowering women through various media and laws have also been made for protection and empowerment of women, older women lead a marginalized life and many of them live a neglected and miserable life.

## OVERVIEW

Till few decades the percentage of older persons was negligible in overall population of India. With population aging and fast changing socio-economic circumstances, status of older persons particularly older women in their respective families / societies has changed. Conditions of older women are getting worse day by day.

Almost all elderly women face more or less the same problems - health, financial, emotional, elder abuse, discrimination and crime. Females in India have been facing serious discrimination with respect to rights and are overburdened with family responsibilities.

In Old Age, elderly women face an emotional void in their life. This is because of their leading a family-centric life since their childhood. Their world revolved around their families; and when they get old they get sidelined by the same family because it no longer requires their services or they are not fit enough to serve family interests.

For the empowerment of women, many programs/schemes have been initiated at governmental level, but they hardly focus on old age issues of old women.

**Research & Advocacy Centre** at Agewell Foundation (*a consortium of over 1500 NGOs and 6500 volunteers spread across 540 districts of India, committed to initiate better interaction between generations and extend a helping hand*) has carried out a nationwide survey to study the status of Older Women including their human rights in India.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Agewell Research & Advocacy Centre has conducted a survey to assess the status of older women in India with the following objectives

- To identify responsible factors of miserable living conditions and violation of human rights of older women in India
- To create awareness among the concerned stakeholder keeping in mind greater challenge ahead
- To suggest or recommend some specific points to policy makers, planners and decision makers so that issues concerning elderly women could be given due importance in future

## METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE DESIGN

Experienced and qualified volunteers were selected as interviewers and they were provided with proper guidelines, directions, training, etc.

Under the survey campaign, comprehensive interviews were undertaken by managing time-bound schedules to collect information /impression/views from selected older persons from across the country

For the survey a **representative sample of 10000 older women** was interviewed spread across **200 districts of 25 states & Union Territories** of India.

Agewell volunteers' network spread across the country worked as interviewers for the survey. The interviews were conducted during the month of **July 2011**.

### Sample Units

The sample units were selected based on random sampling but taken care to incorporate the representative views of the country from six divisions as per following;

<i>Sl</i>	<i>States/UTs</i>	<i>No of sample districts</i>	<i>No of respondents</i>
1.	Region 1 – Delhi & NCR Delhi & NCR (Parts of Haryana & UP)	10	1000
2.	Region 2 – North India Rest Uttar Pradesh, Rest Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Chandigarh & Uttarakhand	40	2000
3.	Region 3 – South India Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala & Karnataka	40	1800
4.	Region 4 – East India West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura & Nagaland	38	1800
5.	Region 5 – West India Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Gujarat & Goa	36	1700
6.	Region 6 – Central India Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand & Chhattisgarh	36	1700
	<b>All India Total</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>10000</b>

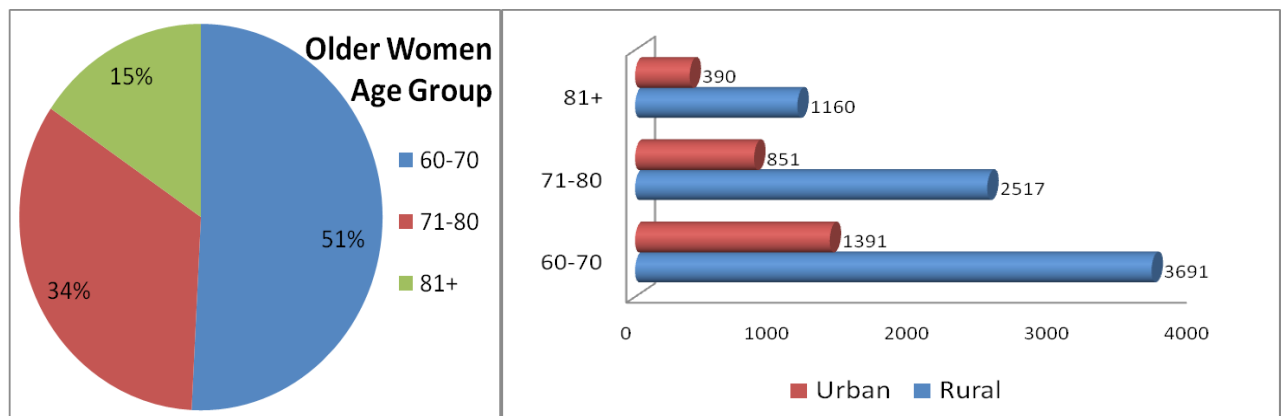
## Age-group & Area wise classification of respondents

Older women have comparatively longer life span. Under the survey older women were divided in three simple age-groups.

Categories	Rural	Urban	Total
60 – 70 Years	3691	1391	5082
71 – 80 Years	2517	851	3368
81+ Years	1160	390	1550
<b>Total</b>	<b>7368</b>	<b>2632</b>	<b>10000</b>

Elderly women in India have different lifestyle in various parts of the country. With objective to assess the status of older women living in various situations and geographical conditions, sample size was randomly selected as per the following;

- I. Rural elderly women
- II. Urban Elderly women



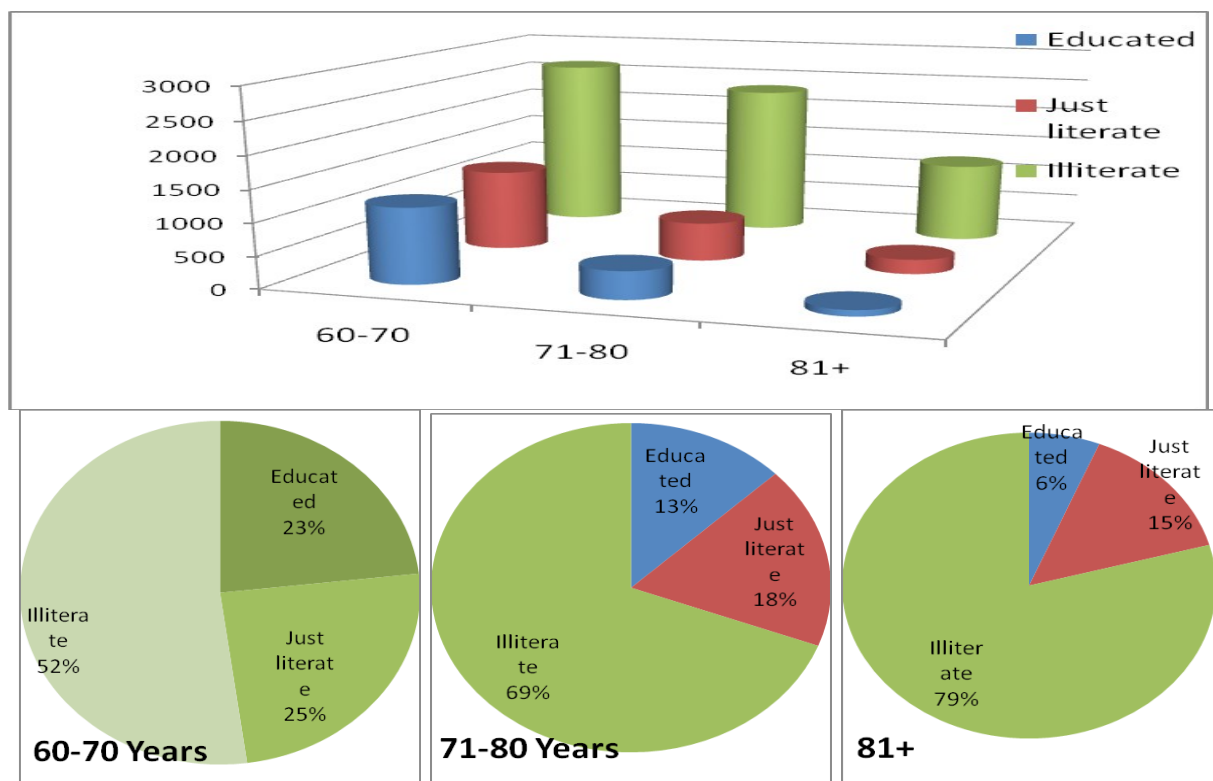
In each group the target was to include every section of the society, specifically

- Housewives (60+)
- Labourers/farmers
- Widows
- Retired older women
- Non-pensioners/self-employed old women
- Literate old women
- Illiterate old women
- Financially secure old women
- Old women from BPL (below poverty line) Families

## MAJOR FINDINGS

- Since education plays an important role in determining of living conditions of any individual, educational abilities of older women were also ascertained under the survey.

- 62.13% older women were found illiterate, 20.79% just literate and only 17.08% older women said that they are educated.
- Obviously, in the age group of 60-70 years highest 23.22% women were found educated in comparison to 12.86% in the age group of 71-80. In the age group of most senior women (81+) only 1 in every 15 older women was educated.
- Out of 10000 older women interviewed 6213 older women were found illiterate.

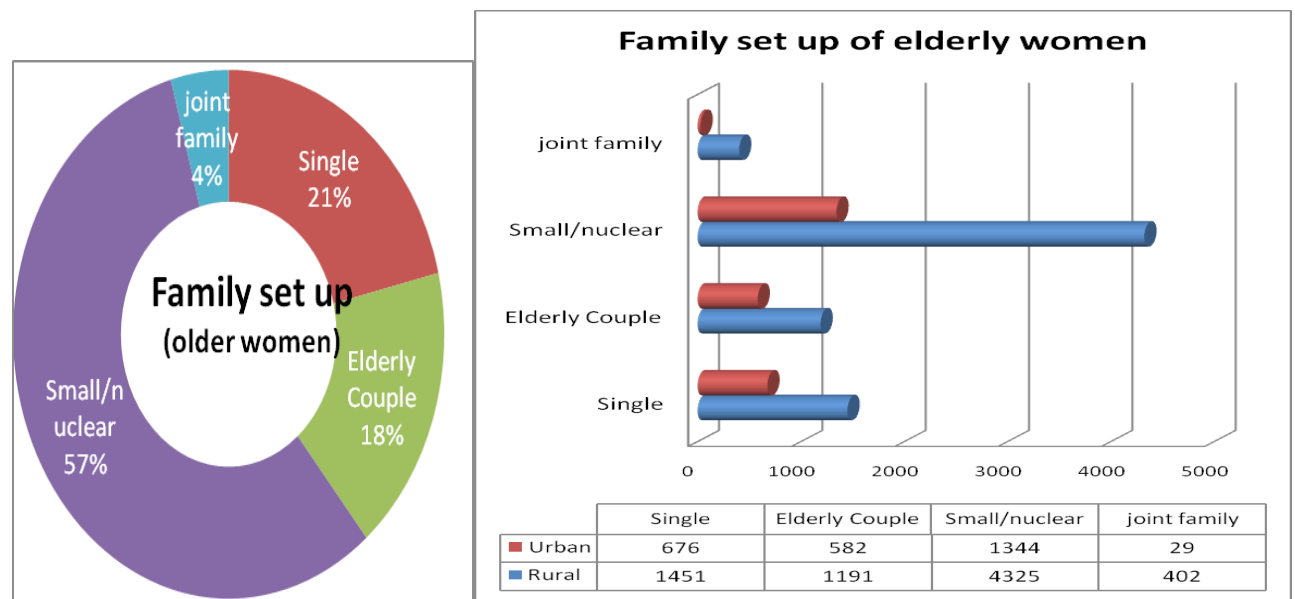


### Interviewers' Observation

*On the study of observations collected by interviewers, it was also noticed that in rural areas status of literacy level among older women was more critical. In several areas even 100% illiteracy was reported among elderly women.*

### Ever-changing family set up of older women

- 21.2% older women were living alone in their houses. Most of them were widow and their children were living at distance places far from them.
- 17.7% older women were found living with their aged husbands only.
- 57% older women were found living in small/nuclear families. In most cases, they were living with their any close relative like son's wife & children, daughter, etc.
- Only 4.3% older women admitted that they belong to traditional Indian joint families.



#### Interviewers' Observation

*Indian traditional joint family system seems to be getting vanished not only from urban areas but even from rural areas.*

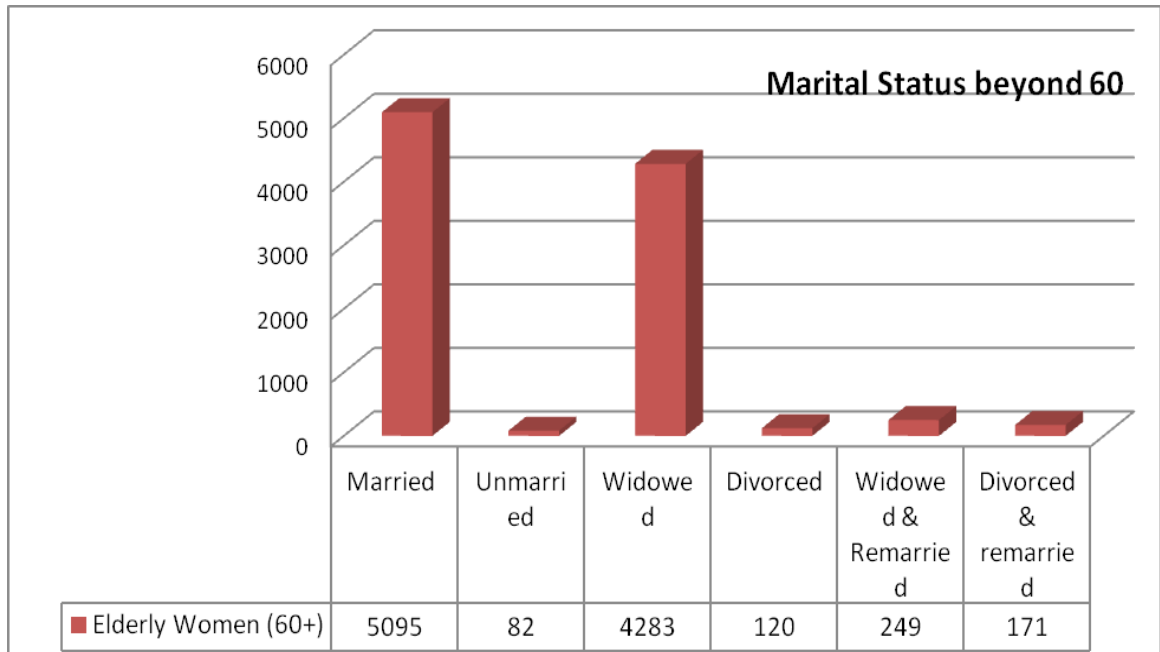
### Marital status in Old Age among elderly women

- Ironically 42.8% of elderly women approached were reportedly widowed.
- Only half of the older women (50.9%) were leading a life of married women.
- Cases of unmarried older women, divorce and remarriage among older women were negligible. Only 2.5% older women had re-married after divorce.

#### Interviewers' Observation

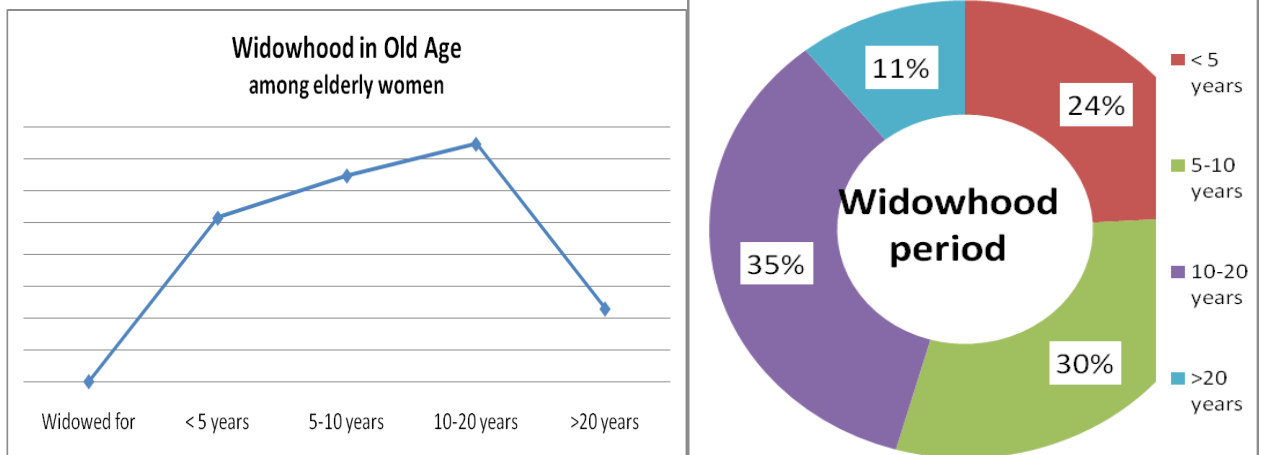
#### Agewell Foundation

*It was observed during the survey that in India for women married life matters most in their life even in old age. Death of their husbands brings sea of sorrows for them. Average Indian woman wanted to die before her husband's death; she wanted to lead a married life throughout her life. A widow is called 'unfortunate' (Abhaagan) in Indian society.*



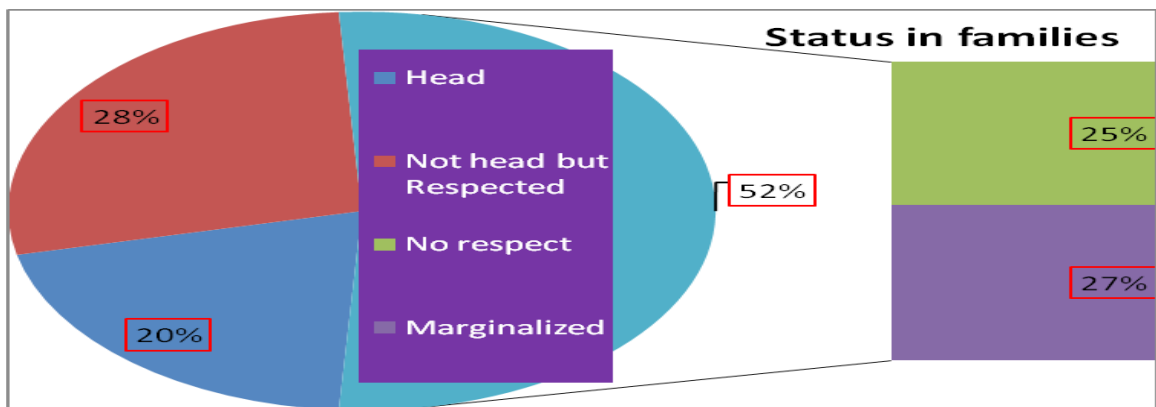
- **Average period of widowhood was found around 11 years among respondents.**
- Out of 4283 elderly widows older women widowed, almost one third (35% elderly widows) said that they have been in their widowhood for 10-20 years. 24% elderly widows lost their husbands within past 5 years and 30.3% elderly widows have been living without their husbands for 5-10 years.
- 10.7% elderly widow women have been widow for more than 20 years.





### Status of older women in Family

- More than a half (52%) older women are being marginalised from their families/societies or not getting proper respect from other people, even from their family members.
- Out of 10000 older women interviewed, 2043 old women said that they are head of their respective families, that's why they were generally respected in their families.
- 27.5% elderly women agreed that they receive due respect and regard from most of their family members.



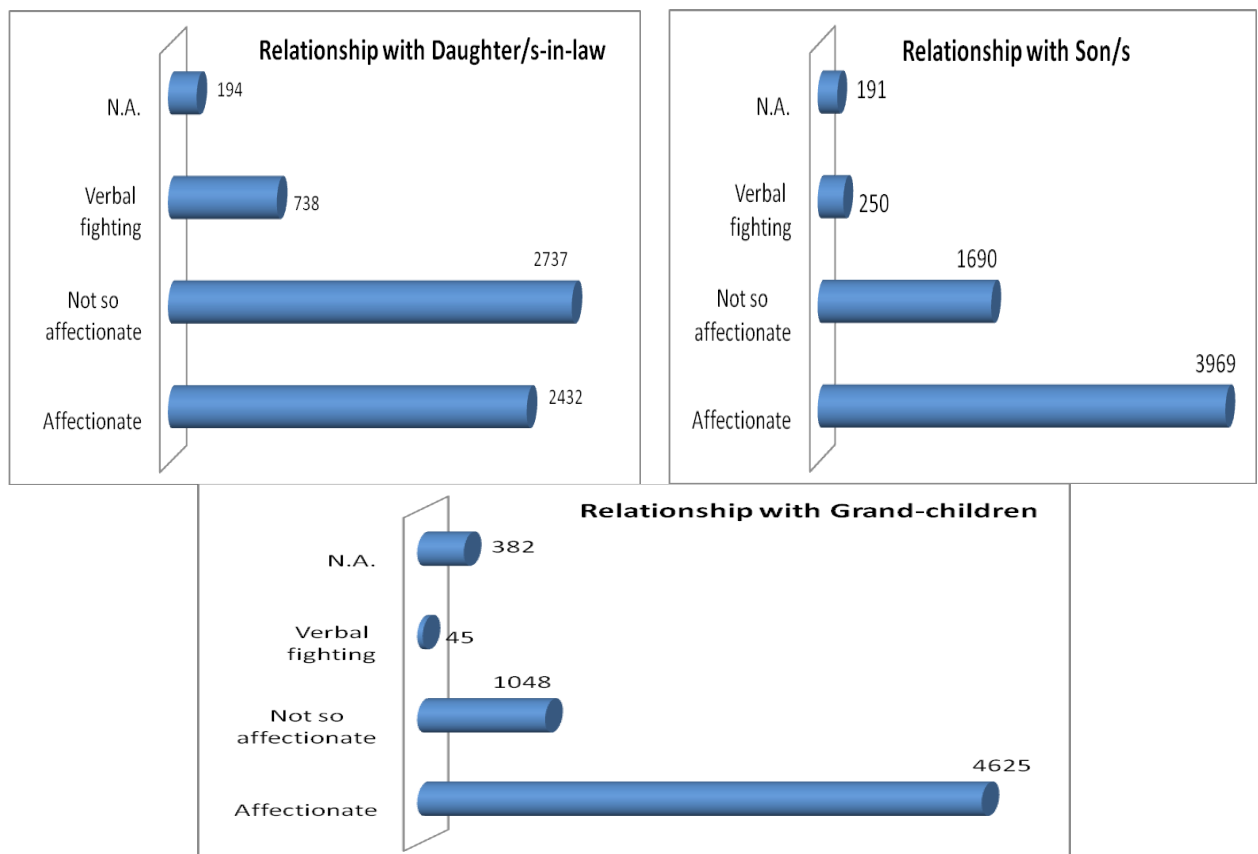
### Interviewers' Observation

*In male dominated Indian society women hardly head their families. However, in their old age many women found themselves as head of their families.*

*Due to longer life span in comparison to older men, old women are senior most in many families, but they always depend upon other members in family matters, as they lack financial intelligence or independence.*

## Relationship of older women with their family members

- Almost 2/3<sup>rd</sup> (65%) Older women living with their son/s said that their relationship with son/s is affectionate. Only 27.7% older women were not happy with their relationship with them.
- 45% of older women admitted that their relationship with their daughter/s-in-law was not so affectionate, 40% were found enjoying good relationship with their daughter/s-in law.
- More than 3/4<sup>th</sup> elderly women living in any kind of family set up, liked their relationship with their grandchildren.

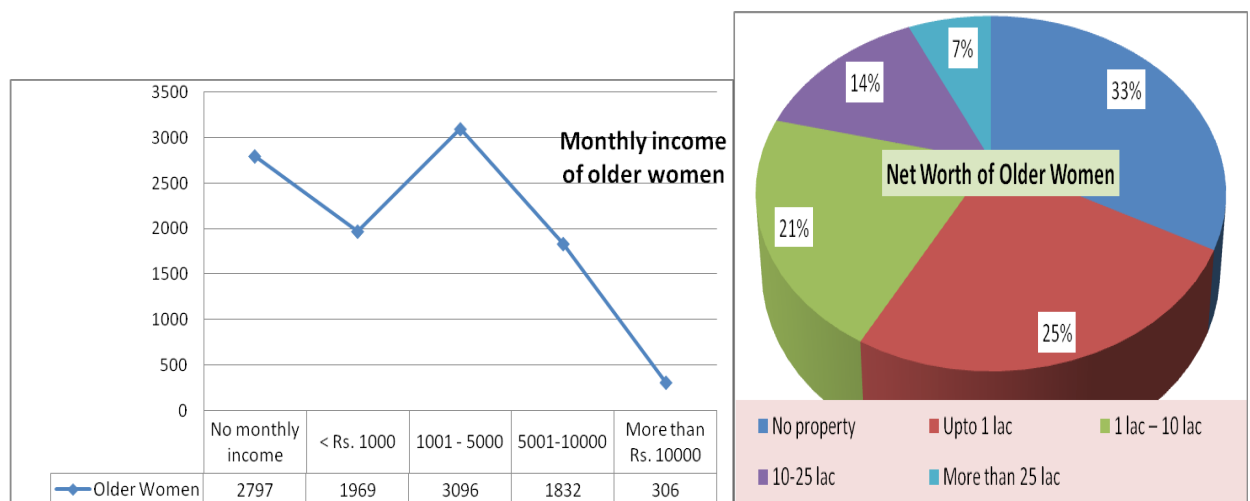


### Interviewers' Observation

*It was observed that elderly women's interpersonal relationship with younger women were not so affectionate in comparison to other family members. Relationship with remote family members were found full of warmth. Older women value their relationship with their remote family friends or relatives instead those family members, who are living with them.*

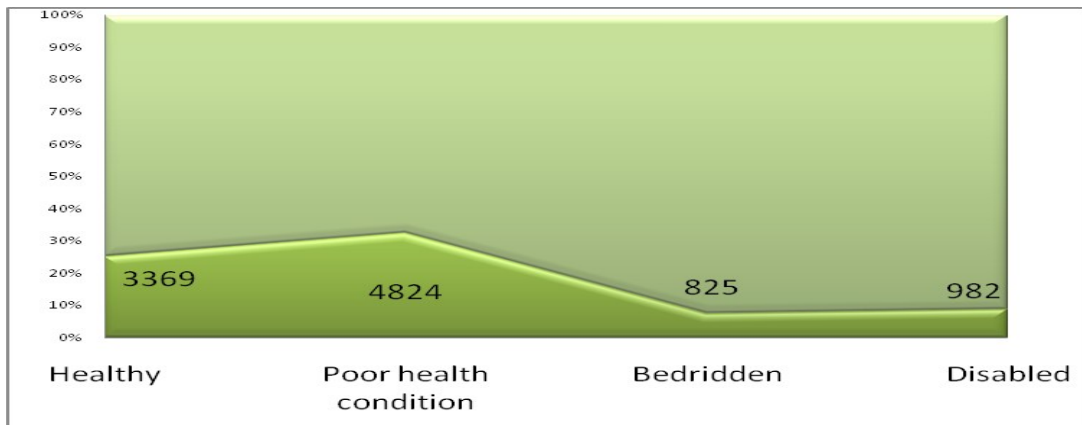
### Financial status of older women

- 28% older women had no source of monthly income. Out of 10000 old women 2797 older women said that they didn't earn money.
- 31% older women were found living in the very moderate monthly income group of Rs.1000–Rs. 5000.
- Only 3% elderly women earn a monthly income of Rs. 10000 or above.
- When net-worth value of older women was assessed, it was found that 1/3<sup>rd</sup> older women had no land/house property titles in their names.
- 1/4<sup>th</sup> older women have net worth value upto Rs. 1 Lac only.
- Only 6.8% older women were found in possession of land/house and other property worth Rs. 25 lakh or above.

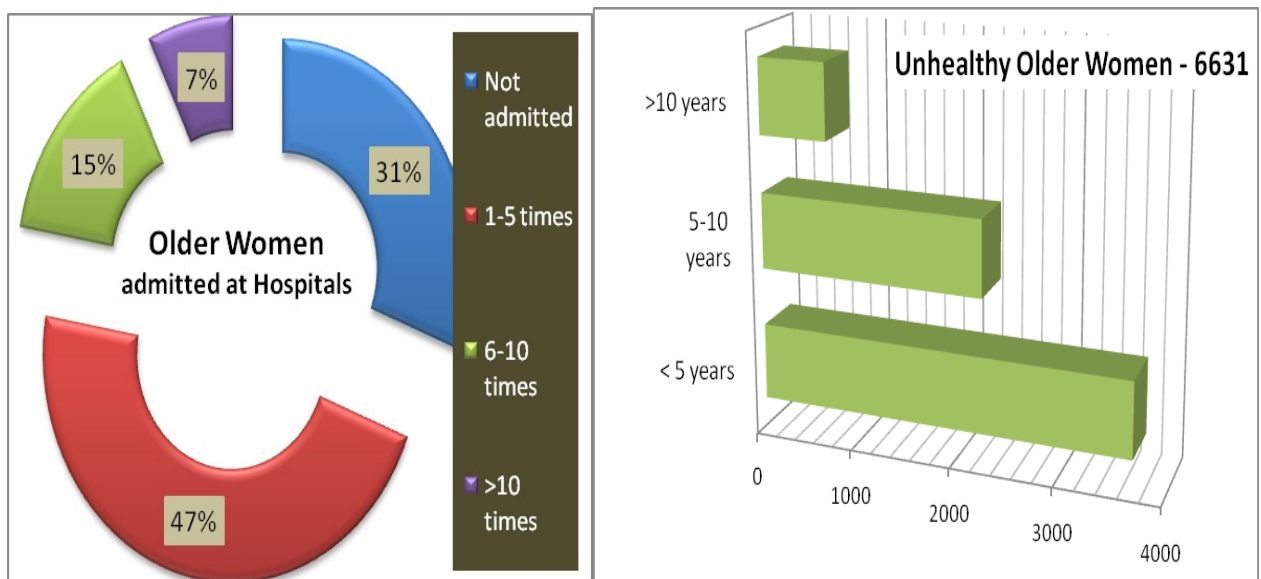


### Physical Status of older women

- 33.7% older women were found in good health even at old age.
- 48.2% older women were suffering from various health related problems.
- It also emerged from the survey that 8.3% older women were in bedridden condition, whereas 9.8% older women were disabled physically/psychologically.



- When data obtained from the survey was analysed, it was found that there were 31% older women who had not been admitted in any hospital for treatment so far in their old age.
- 47% older women got admitted from 1-5 times and 22% old women needed to get admitted more than 6 times out of them 7% older women got admitted at various hospitals for more than 10 times.
- Out of 6631 older women suffering from any / more kinds of health problems, 3691 older women (56%) were ill/unhealthy for less than 5 years.

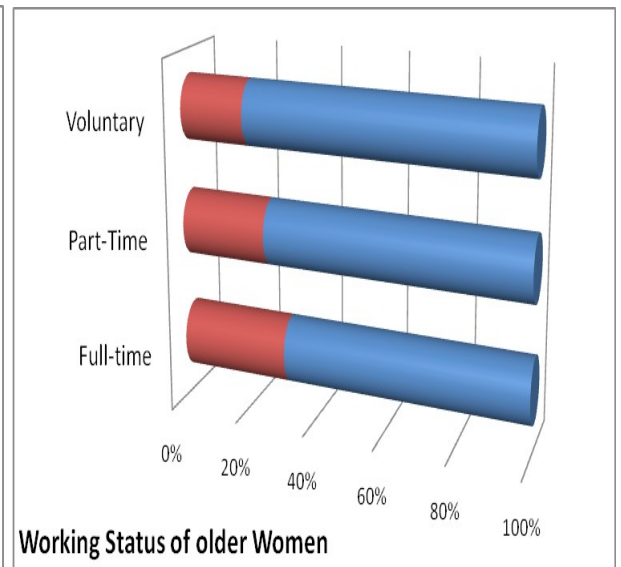
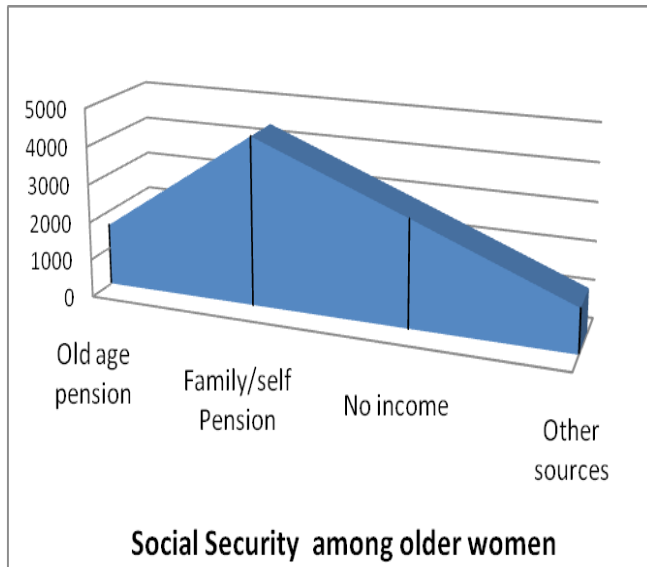


Interviewers' Observation

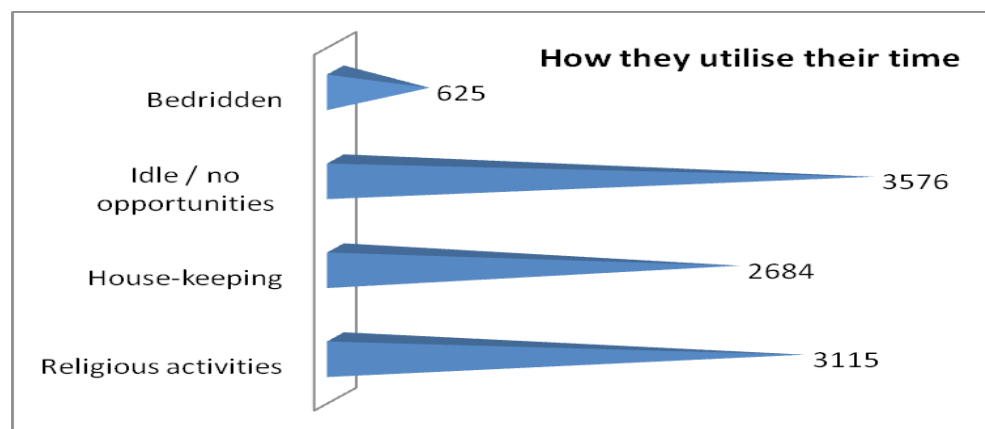
*Since in sample size number of older women in the age group of 60-70 is higher, overall health conditions of older women were found not so critical.*

**Financial Status of older women**

- 44.3% older women depended on pensions of their husbands or their own pension
- 16.3% poor old women were getting old age /widow pension.

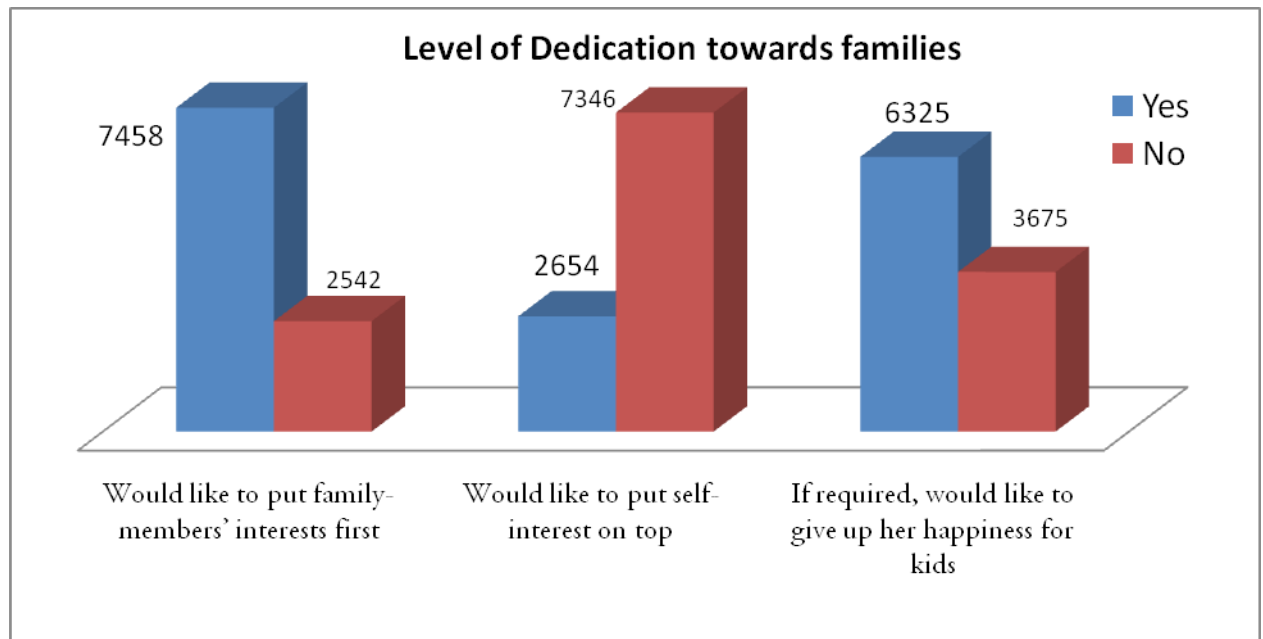


- To meet their expenses 37% older women were found involved in household chores. 17% older women said that they go out for work, most of them worked in their fields.
- 30.84% older women were not found engaged in any kind of work as majority of them were not able to work.
- 35.7% elderly women admitted that they had no work /opportunities to do, hence they sit idle at their home.
- 31.1% older women said that they kept themselves busy with religious activities.



## Importance of Family members in their life

- 74.9% older women expressed their dedication towards their family and family members.
- Only 26.5% older women admitted that they would like to put their self-interest before others' interests.
- Even 63.3% older women said that if required, they could give up their happiness for sake of their kids, even in old age.



### Interviewers' Observation

*Since almost 99% Indian elderly women lived as housewives throughout their younger age, they learnt values of love, compassion and sacrifice towards their home and children.*

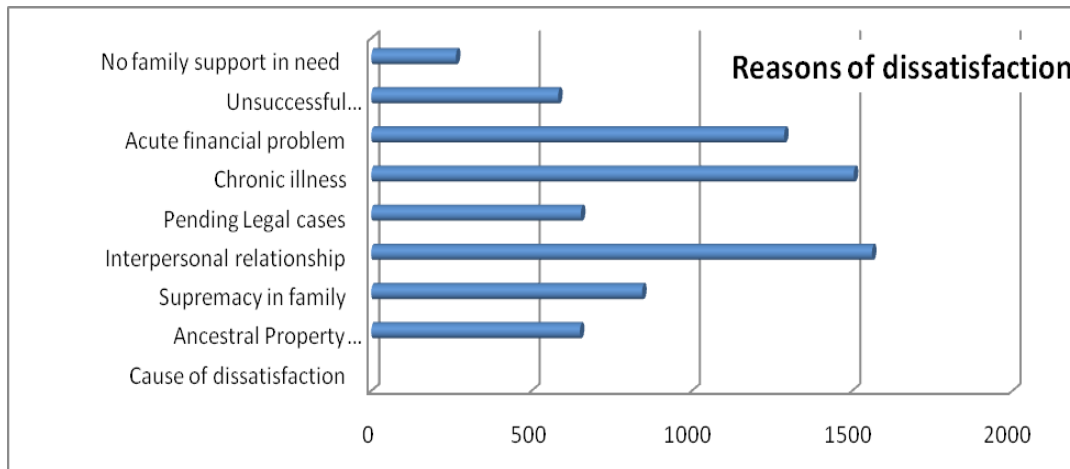
## Life in Old Age

- 73.5% older women opined that in their old age they felt that they were not satisfied with their lives or not satisfied with events that are happening in their old age. Major reasons of their dissatisfaction were found as under
  - Ancestral Property land/building, etc
  - Supremacy in family
  - Interpersonal relationship
  - Pending Legal cases
  - Chronic illness
  - Acute financial problem

**Agewell Foundation**

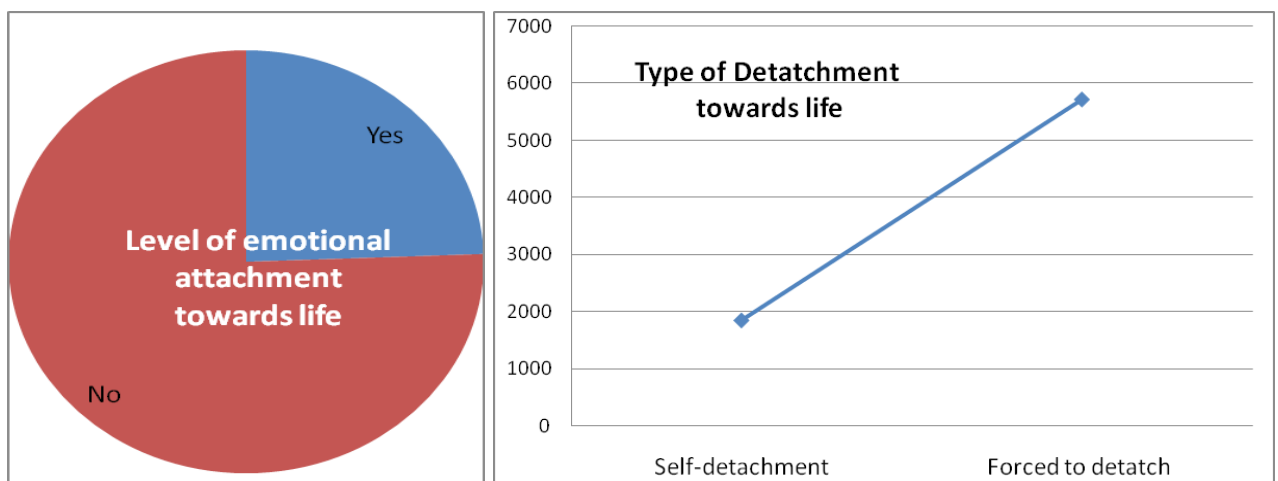
M-8A, Lajpat Nagar-II, New Delhi-110024 Ph.: 011-29836486, 29840484  
e-mail : [agewell@bol.net.in](mailto:agewell@bol.net.in) , [agewellfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:agewellfoundation@gmail.com) Website: [agewellfoundation.org](http://agewellfoundation.org)

- Unsuccessful children/grandchildren
- No family support in need



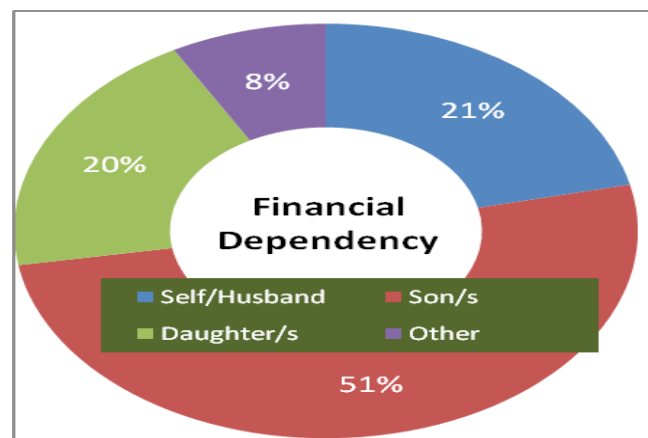
### Emotional Attachments towards life

- Only 3/4<sup>th</sup> older women (76%) were found emotionally detached towards their life. Majority of older women have detached themselves from their household things, which belong to them.
- Out of them 28% older women said that they have left their belongings by their own desire, whereas 72% older women reportedly forced to detach their things and interests by other people or circumstances.



## Financial dependency in old age

- Only 21% older women were found self-dependent or dependent on their husbands only, so far as their financial needs are concerned.
- More than a half (51%) older women said that they are dependent on their son/s for their financial requirements.
- 20% older women were dependent on their daughter/s for financial requirements.



### Interviewers' Observation

*With changed socio-economic scenario, breaking up joint family system and ever-increasing life span in old age, financial needs of older women have increased dramatically. In absence of all-inclusive social security schemes, older women are facing severe financial crisis in old age.*

## Most common problem/s of older women

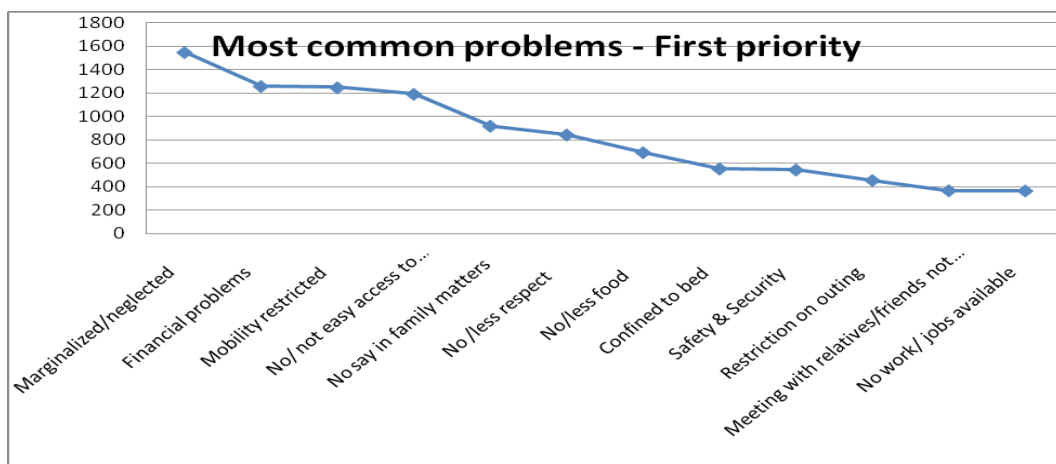
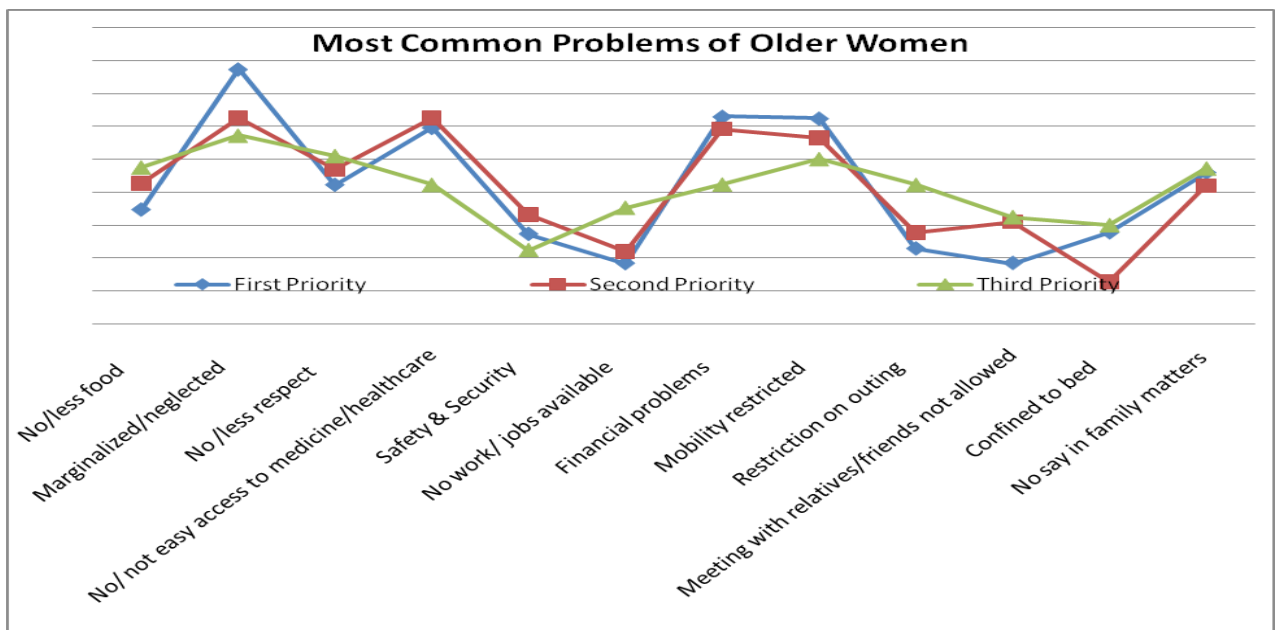
When asked about most common problems, they have been facing in old age, older women illustrated the followign as their major problems;

1. Marginalization/neglect
2. Financial problems
3. Mobility restricted
4. No/ not easy access to medicine/healthcare
5. No say in family matters
6. No /less respect
7. No/less food
8. Confined to bed
9. Safety & Security



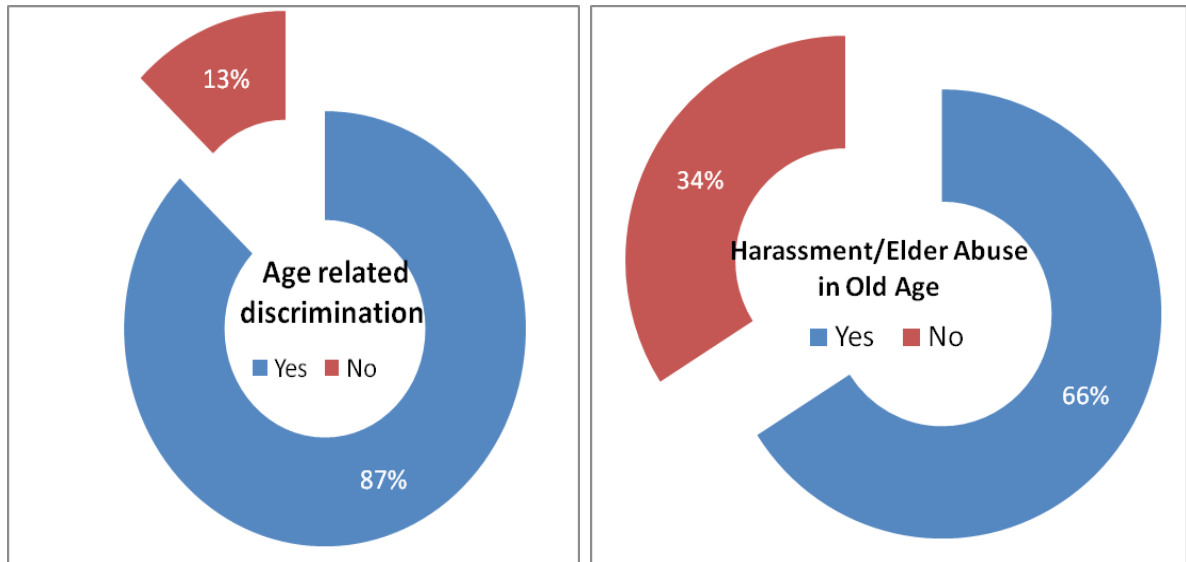
10. No work/ jobs available

- 1548 older women gave first priority to their problem related to marginalisation/isolation in old age. 1259 older women mentioned financial problems in old age as their first priority. 1248 older women said that their restricted mobility due to old age/disability is their No. 1 problem.
- When second priority given by older women were analysed it was found that most of the elderly women (1248) mentioned their medical problems as their second most critical problem.

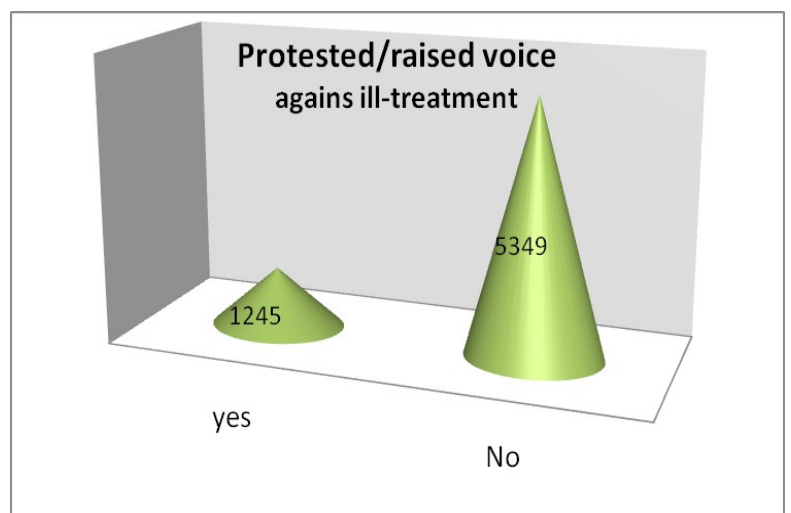
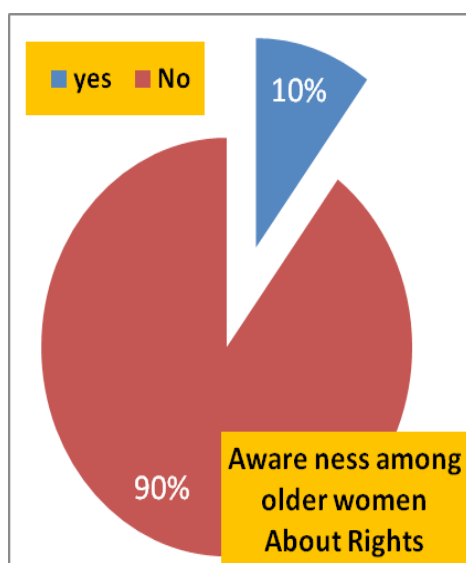


## Human Rights of Older Women

- 87.2% older women reportedly have faced age related discrimination in their life.



- When questions were asked about harrassment/elder abuse and mistreatment with older women, every 2 in 3 older women (66%) agreed that they were harrassed/ abused or were being harrassed/ abused in old age.
- Ironically, 61.7% of elder abuse cases were due to their own family members.
- 90% older women have virtually no knowledge of women rights, due to illiteracy or lack of exposure to outer world.



- 81% older women, who had to face harrassment/elder abuse in old age, never reported their complaint or raised voice against elder abuse/harrassement.

---

Interviewers' Observation

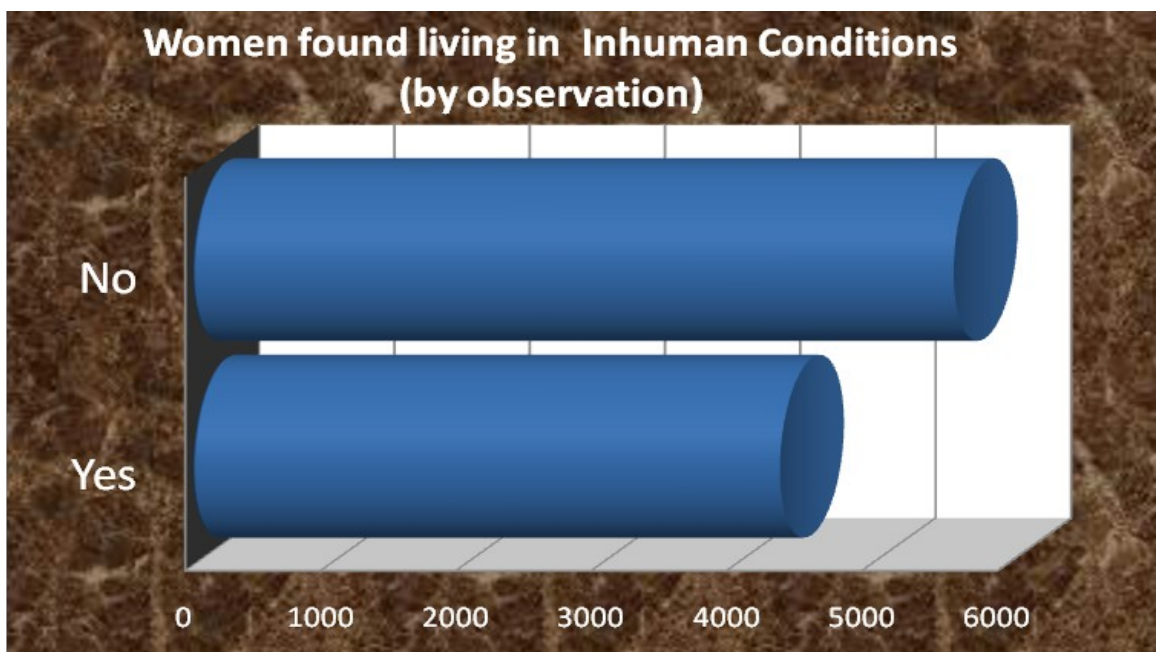
*Indian women have always been introvert by nature, that's why they are vulnerable and soft target of wrong doers. It has been observed that for sake of peace of their home and stability in their life they hardly complain for anything.*

*Due to Illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness about their rights, less exposure to mainstream of society and their social/family background their rights, even basic human rights are violated from time to time.*

---

- As per observations collected by survey teammembers, it was found that 43.9% older women were living in inhuman conditions currently.

*(During the survey, interviewers were also directed to observe living conditions of respondents. To determine the living conditions of older women their clothes, living place, surroundings, food, health condition, behaviour with interviwer, other people's attitude towards her, etc. were observed or informal questios pertaining to these things were also asked.)*



**Majority of cases of Human Rights violation were observed due to poverty of older women.**

Core poverty due to deprivation of

- Proper/Nutritional food
- Clean potable water
- Shelter
- Sanitation
- Clothing
- Health/medical care

Relative poverty due to deprivation of

- Literacy – Information
- Equal livelihood -
- Leisure/recreation – family/society
- Access to rights – individual/ community
- Savings – personal/ family
- Dignity – Respect in family/Society

## Representative statements from older persons

*“My son & daughter-in-law, both are working. I have to look after my grown-up grandchildren all the time. My son & his wife don’t allow me to go out of home, even when they are at home. After death of my husband I am being marginalized in my own house. Sometimes it seems that I am not the owner of the house, but a care-taker. ”.*

Premwati Verma, 75-year-old widow, Kanpur,

*“My sons work in factories at Jaipur. They hardly visit us. They always express their inability to meet our expenses. We get old age pension but I have to work in nearby fields to keep me and my ailing husband alive. We are living in abject poverty for years due to our limited income.*

Bhura Devi, 66, Kishangarh, Rajasthan

*I have been fed up of mistreatment by my daughter-in-law with me. She treats me like with a servant and abuses me verbally. I left my home for many occasions but every time I returned for my sons and grandchildren. I suffer a lot in old age only for sake of my sons & grandchildren.*

Noor Bano Begum, 77, Ahmadnager, Maharashtra

*“I have been left alone by my sons due to house property made up by my husband. They wanted me to distribute my property among them equally. In old age my only my house in only source of my income as my husband was not in government job. I fear if I distribute my house among my sons, they could throw me out of my own house. In that condition, no one can help me.”*

Pushpa Kapoor, 65, Amritsar, Punjab

## **STUDY OBSERVATIONS**

- Marginalization/isolation or alienation in old age is among the most common issues that are affecting older women constantly. Older women, who are still living with their sons/daughters and grand-children are also suffering from emotional alienation.
- Older women, who live in cities, are prone to social alienation/marginalization in comparison to older women of villages. Joint family system is still alive in rural areas. Older women, who live in semi urban situations/industrial townships also find it difficult to cope with old age, particularly after their children have grown up and husbands retire.
- With increased life span of older women in old age, their financial needs are emerging as major concerns in old age. However, today many older women have property/money but they cannot possibly use the money or take financial decisions on their own. Social traditions don't allow them to use their ancestral property / money for their own welfare. They may be rich or poor; they always have to act according to others' directives.
- In old age most of the older women face family problems like uncomfortable relations with daughters-in-law, limited interaction with children, grand-children. Their daughters-in-law don't like their interference in family matters, children are busy with their jobs, and their husbands invariably have mood swings after retirement and mostly restrict their free movements.
- Due to negligence, lack of awareness, financial support and religious mindset of women, older women often have to face acute health problems.
- Most old women are self conscious. Due to their home-bound lifestyle they don't attain confidence even in their young life. Changes in appearance in old age, dependence on spectacles, hearing aids, receding hairline, wrinkled skin... everything makes them more and more self-conscious.
- Human rights of older women are not defined specifically, but their rights are more sensitive than other individuals as in most of the cases they cannot protect their rights on their own.

- In old age women turn towards religion. Most women turn to religious activities (like *Satsang, Pravachan*) pilgrimage, etc. after losing their life-partner or any other family members. Some are from orthodox/religious background and have been following religious lifestyle since childhood.
- In today's fast paced modern life younger generations hardly find few moments to share with their elders. It has been realized that ever-widening communication gap between the generations is also responsible for miserable condition of older women. Because women remained sensitive throughout their life.

## **CONCLUSION**

In India, women have never found themselves at the centre stage. They have always been marginalized from the mainstream of the society. Living as second class citizen for centuries, their mindset has also developed accordingly and never enjoyed privileges of development.

They worked very hard throughout their life, they dedicated every moment of her life for the sake of her children and husband, and they poured love, compassion and empathy on her family and remained ready for any kind of sacrifice. But when she becomes old and need family support from her family members, children and others, they left her alone physically, socially, psychologically.

Today, we need to focus on issues concerning older women in order to ensure a respectful, more comfortable and healthy environment for them to live in. all concerned stakeholders need to work together in direction of -

- bringing perceptual change towards old age in general society
- sensitizing younger generations towards elderly women
- empowering younger women to develop them as strong older women
- spreading awareness older women about their rights & powers
- Bringing attitudinal changes in girls towards their life
- Initiating the process of strengthening human rights of older women

\*\*\*