

Indian Journal of Gerontology

2021, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 314–326

ISSN: 0971–4189, UGC No. – List B, Science–121

Elders' Dignity and Challenges During Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to investigate and understand the elder dignity and challenges of elderly persons of 60 years and above during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. A paradigm shift in the current trends and process dealing with the challenges of ageing at the individual, family, community, and all others concerned have been analysed in the span of the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper has two objectives: (1) to analyse the socio-psychological problems of the elders, and (2) to examine the sources of these problems. Given the limited availability of the information on the concerned issues, the researchers have used the available secondary materials.

Keywords: Dignity, Alienation, Psycho-social problem, social isolation, Cultural shock, digital divide.

Society, on the whole, is gripped by a coronavirus outbreak and the situation is worse for the elderly population. The entire humanity is now facing the challenges of the coronavirus-2019 diseases (Covid-19) where almost all the countries are under lockdown to save human lives. The pandemic is still accelerating globally, with infections doubling. During the lockdown period, the fear created by coronavirus has produced widespread anxiety and the crisis in the

everyday life of individuals particularly 60 years and above. Most studies and electronic media literature on the elders of the world focus on the death rate of the aged by the Covid-19/distressed elders due to social distance or lockdown. There are increasing numbers of distressed elders after the outbreak of Covid-19 and the consequent India's lockdown which stirred up anxiety and fears of dying alone among the elderly mostly from middle and upper-class homes, which have been badly affected as those in rural areas (Help Age India).

Drawn from different studies and perspectives, the Covid-19 victimized those who were already suffering from diabetes, cardiac diseases, and hypertension. According to the Ministry of Health, the elders are considered as the most vulnerable to Covid-19. It has been observed that most of the deaths are being reported from the elderly population, above all, among the elders with comorbidities. Similar news reported that as many as 16.7 per cent of the 60+ affected by the Covid-19 already had health issues (Times of India, 2020). People aged 60 to 74 years comprising 8 per cent of the total population accounted for 388 per cent of Covid-19 deaths. Those above 74 years, representing 28 per cent of the population, constituted 128 per cent of total deaths (Times of India, 2020). This Covid-19 pandemic acts as a beginning point of the reorientation of the primary health care systems. Poor health infrastructure is the reason for the vulnerability. Maharashtra has more number of elder populations compared with other states and they have poor infrastructure facilities, which resulted in a leading position in Covid-19 cases (Amit Kapoor & Sampriti Mukherjee, 2020).

Due to Covid-19, death was the furthestmost riddle among the elders. The co-morbid condition such as diabetes makes the infection deadlier. In this 34 per cent of the patients are in the age of 40 to 60 years and 19 per cent of the cases are in the age of above 60 years (Hindustan Times, 2020). It is estimated that about 6 per cent of the senior citizens in India live alone. Loneliness among elders is a predicament that cuts across classes and is a challenge in cities as well. The World Health Organization (WHO) has said that "older age and underlying conditions increase the risk for severe infection." Government support was required for these people. A more

permanent and substantial policy is required to take care of elderly people, especially during a crisis (Help Age, 2020).

Above 50 per cent of the elder people died in Covid-19 and 38 per cent of coronavirus cases are above the age of 74. Especially 73 per cent of the elderly people who were affected by COVID 19 already had health problems. The virus easily affects elderly people because of their poor immunity and it very easily affects the elders who are sick. Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) also said that the elder people who died in hospitals were assessed in terms of their medical condition (Times of India, 2020). The increase in Covid-19 infections among elderly people is not seen in absolute numbers but in proportion to the overall spread of the virus.

Focusing on the shift in elder dignity, Age Well Foundation's online survey argues that 71 per cent of the elders faced abuse during the lockdown period. In this survey, 58 per cent of the respondents claimed that the interpersonal relationship was the main factor which is responsible for the fast increasing incidence of elder abuse in families. The most common ways of elder abuse were found to be disrespect and verbal abuse, silent treatment, denying proper food, denying medical support, ignoring their daily needs, financial cheating, physical and emotional violence, and forcing them to work. Among them, 63 per cent of the elders were facing neglect in their life. More than half of the elders (56.1%) suffer from abuses in their families as well as dear and near ones (NGO Age Well Foundation, 2020).

This aggressive virus is making people confront the reality of death every day, but our culture doesn't sensationalize the elderly and immunocompromised fatalities. The bias is pervasive and insidious, their lives are seen as expendable. It is this idea that underscores the push some politicians are making to reopen the economy sooner than most public health experts are recommending. The economic costs are not worth the deaths of some elderly people (Maryellen, Stewart 2020).

Socio-web and Cultural Shock – Correlated to Covid-19

Society is a web of social relationships between the institution, community, and organization. The social institution plays a vital role in the aspect of the relationship. Families are the basis of the social

existence and backbone of human society. Family structures are the deciding phenomenon for the entire society. The social system has become dynamic, due to westernization and modernization, the 'cultural shock' may happen. The joint family system is a pillar for the stability of the social system and structure. In this media-driven world, the joint family is split into the nuclear units and the elder people have become unloved. Elders are serving as leaders, teachers, and giving emotional as well as spiritual guidance in a family. A high level of socialization among seniors helps increase longevity. The unreliability in the social structure is due to the 'nuclear families' and the elders being neglected. This loneliness and isolation among the elders are not only affecting the individual and families but also society. During the crisis, support for the elders is necessary to handle the situation and avoid the infection. But with the spread of Covid-19, the elders are considered to be the most vulnerable segment of population. The elders' isolation and disconnect among the circumstances are creating an inappropriate situation in society. Already the era for the elders' neglect is supplemental and complementary and it may enlarge in a quandary situation. The mature or senior is not a word, it is the form of superior, a paradigm shift in attitudes to older people is required, towards viewing them as a resource rather than a burden. The older or senior person has unique talents through their experience in the realms of community development and social development. They have more ability to enhance the quandary situation as Covid-19 compared with the other citizens of society. The web between the relationship of elders and society is pivotal (Deepak, 2000; Ronald Inglehart & Wayne E. Baker, 2000; Gitanjali Kolanad, 2001; Cacioppo, JT & Cacioppo, S., 2018)

Socio Dimension of the Covid-19

Even though the covid-19 is health-affecting infectious disease, the impact of the virus takes place in all aspects of society. Spin it into different angles, their impacts among the people, especially among the elders is increased. Death is a noticeable visibility but the invisible impact of Covid-19 is the vulnerability, mental health, abuse, and neglect is a hidden complication in the crisis time. Figure: 1 Possible Impact Due to Covid-19 among Older People.

Elder's Victimization in Covid-19

The isolation and neglect of the elderly already exist in society, particularly in many retirement homes. The isolation in Covid-19 might either get them deprived of their regular health checkups or stay in crowded environments which may increase health risks. They will also have sensory issues, memory problems, mobility challenges, and mental health issues. The elderly are often victims of loneliness and social deprivation if they were quarantined due to public chaos and competition; there is a chance to skip the testing. Apart from physical health, elderly people are directly affected by various psychological evils. Health anxiety, fear of life, loneliness anxiety, and so on. Such type of anxiety among the elders increased during social distancing/lockdown. Further, they are affected by stress; this is because they are repeatedly thinking about the news of Covid-19 and its spread. It further leads to panic about their future safety. These types of panic among the elders might be increasing depression and obsessive fear about their life span. They are more vulnerable to misinformation as well as these types of mental and psychological health issues. The existential questions like 'End of life, what after me, and care of family' arising in the pandemic. Elders are susceptible both physically and psychologically (Indian Express, 2020).

Age and ageism is a crucial text in Covid-19, the focus of this paper is to assess the vulnerability of mental health care, and the needs of elderly people. It focuses on the psychological and mental health problems of elderly people in the pandemic. The mortality rate of the elders increased due to respiratory problems and the geriatric age group is already having unique physical, socio-psychological and other environmental vulnerabilities. The additional burden of this infectious disease is neglect, loneliness, isolation, depression; anxiety, and abuse are the associated evils of social distancing among elders in the present times. It can be more problematic all over the world especially for institutionalized elderly like old age care homes. At the time of social distancing, families are responders to ensure the mental health of elderly people. Emotional support, encouraging physical activity, and ensuring nutrition among the elders may reduce the physical and mental problems of elder people. An elder in old age homes or in

isolation should need telephonic counseling to avoid psychological problems (Debanjan Banerjee, 2020).

The Societal Dilemma of Elders: Social Panorama

The majority of the world's elderly population lives in developing countries. Elderly mistreatment and neglect are hidden and ignored problems in developing countries. There are 14.8 per cent of the people affected by the novel coronavirus at the age of 80+ and 8.0 per cent of the elderly are the age of 70–79. 1.3 per cent of the people affected by corona at the age of 50–59. 0.4 per cent of the people affected at the age of 40–49. 0.6 per cent is affected below 40. The elderly are more vulnerable to Covid-19; this is because of both physical and social reasons. Health is not only a physical thing, it is also intertwined socially. Social distancing makes the loss of social security; Depleted social networks, loss of experience in social roles, and other factors are an added reason for the health issues of the elderly. On the one hand, the elder people don't have a good immune system against health problems so they are vulnerable to infectious diseases and on another hand, they might also have isolation or social mobility challenges. They can't get information and ideas about what to do and they are sometimes not able to get the food and other necessary needs. In many developing societies the senior citizens are more likely to live in poverty which makes the situation more difficult and this kind of social problem will affect the elder's health too (Kate Whiting, 2020).

When it comes to infectious diseases, older people are the most vulnerable. According to the data released by the government in India, 51.2 per cent of deaths that happened due to Covid-19 have been among adults above the age of 60 years. Anxiety among the older people increased at the pandemic time, due to the fear of infection, fear of their social guilt, embarrassment, feeling of abandonment during isolation, and fear about the future. These problems are exacerbated among the elder people, especially among those who live alone or in old age homes. The Covid-19 pandemics is reported to have affected the mental health of many, in April. The report is based on India spends interviews on Covid-19, with the elderly persons connected through helpline and support groups. The problems of elderly callers

ranged from a shortage of medicines and physical support to anxiety, fear, and anxiousness (Parul Agarwal, 2020).

The outbreak of Covid-19 and the high rate of mortality will inevitably cause mental health problems. Seniors who are living alone are more prone to feel lonely and helpless and these mental disorders could be exacerbated by the Covid-19. The elderly population faces the greatest challenges faced by Covid-19. They affected physical, mental as well as social dimensions. Their affliction will inevitably lead to a huge burden being placed upon health care systems and containment. Compared to the younger generation, due to limited access to the internet for news and updates promptly, seniors may not be well informed or prepared for the pandemic (Qing Zhang MD, 2020).

Psychosocial Tribulations of Elders

The isolation and home confinement could also increase in psycho-social problems among the elders. A digital divide is an economic inequality between social groups, broadly constructed in terms of access to the use of knowledge of information and communication technologies (ICT) based on social, economical, cultural, and political factors. Between information about rich and poor is a social divide due to the 'digital divide' and 'social divide,' the use of new technological devices for social contact is very difficult for them. They lost their formal and informal social networks in this crisis both in rural and urban areas. Elderly face great barriers to access health services and support. Age discrimination and neglect to be increasing in crisis time like Covid-19. In the critical phase of the pandemic, elder people in the social institutions could have higher risks to be isolated from the outside and they have a risk of not receiving food and medicine. Social institutions that take care of elders can act as an incubator of infection. The acute phase of the pandemic puts high pressure on the health care system and the availability of resources is not enough to cope with their needs. Social problems like the digital divide, social distancing, Age discrimination, social networks, and social institutions (like families, age care homes, and so on) play a paramount role in the aspect of the elder's health (Donatella, Rita Petrett, 2020).

Every Indian home has elderly people. The rest of the world too has elderly people but not too many countries are as hugely and densely populated as India. In many countries or societies, some more elderly people live in poverty. Poverty presents a whole range of health challenges not only to physical health also in mental health. It makes it more difficult to sustain their life in the present world. In India, there is more number of elders who live in elder homes. During a crisis period like Covid-19, they became helpless. They are compelled to be socially isolated to prevent or control the novel virus. Isolation may be a normal thing for other age groups but it creates harm among the senior citizens. The novel coronavirus creates multiple complications among elderly people (Rajkumar, Singh 2019).

The psychosocial factor of the elderly has a vital role in social and cultural dimensions. In the technological world, elders are seen as non-productive, futile, and a burden to their surroundings, families, and society. They are isolated by society and only they are considered as objects of sympathy and not empathy. Their only needs in the final period are to expect companionship and love. They wish to participate in the gatherings and functions of their family. Seclusion is the foremost reason for health problems among the elder people. Already the isolation of elders has increased in this mechanised world, but it was doubled in the crisis period. It may be a manageable one in developed countries but in the aspect of developing countries, it is a great barrier especially in highly populated countries like India. Health and economy are conjoined factors for the overall development of the country. In the aspect of health not only physical health but mental and social health of the individual emphasizing the development (Debanjan Banerjee, *et al.*, 2020).

Alienation of Elders

There is a low degree of integration of elders within the society that resets the social bond. The Pandemic time is also increasing risk factors in this phenomenon. The elders are the vulnerable people affected by Covid-19; they are easily neglected and separated from their families. The psychological thought of the elders usually is that they are meaningless to society. The elders are becoming hopeless due to the lack of social security from the cherished circles. The feeling of

frustration and inadequacy among older people is a very common thing in social isolation during the pandemic. As a result, the older people who are in social isolation in this pandemic are completely alienated from the social relationship, social integration, social interaction, families, neighborhood, work, and society as a whole. Alienation is characterized by the five type's symptoms like social isolation, meaninglessness, normlessness, powerlessness, and self-estrangement. Figure: 2 Parameters of Alienation among elder people.

Alienation among older people happens when they are dissatisfied with society. The elders are expecting more care from their surroundings and they are interested in participating in all the social aspects of their families. The elders expect social recognition from society but society considers them as unusable or unfit for anything. This neglect is a first cause to the elders that alienates them from society. This leads to a loss of hope for them and they think they are powerless to do anything. The elders become self-estranged, due to the gradual decline and disappointment about the self. The absence of social contact, social interaction, and relationship with the family and friends, an individual, and society will lead to social isolation, which in turn would foster loneliness. Living alone is seen as a potential health risk due to functional disorders, inappropriate nutrition, smoking, social exclusion, and chronic illness among the elders (Lobsang Norbu Bhutia, 2020; Micheal James, 2020; D. Raja, 2020; Karenwoodall, 2020).

Conclusion

Elders are the most vulnerable people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the psycho-social aspect, the elders are vulnerable not only bodily but also socially and psychologically. Society is largely connected by a diverse set of social systems and its dynamic. The culture also diverges from one society to another. Due to modernization, cultural shock may happen; the existing culture may fuse into that of a nuclear family. The change in the family pattern will create a change in society's structures too. This pattern may be severe in this pandemic. The elders are considered as unfit for anything, but actually, they have more knowledge about cultural treatment. It may

be helpful in this pandemic. Ageing is an inevitable process; it is only for the parts of the body and not for their mind and its activity. Elders are not a burden to society; they are the responders of society.

Compared with the younger generation, they are less connected with the internet and other accessories of modern life. The elders who are living alone may feel hopeless during the pandemic. Social isolation may lead to fear of life, loneliness, normlessness, self-estrangement, and depression. Social distancing and social isolation will alienate the elders within society. The abuse and neglect from their family members or their environmental circumstances may cause stress and depression. Elders already have some underlying conditions like respiratory problems, chronic illness, and diabetes, and so on. The weaker immunity and psycho-social factors make it harder for them to fight Covid-19. The wandering and irritability can worsen and it makes it difficult to follow the instructions and the hygiene. The stress about the infection may lead to mistrust of the healthcare system and paranoia situation. The divide between the social relationship and society is a social divide and the divide between the individual and communication is a digital psycho-social divide. The social and digital divide might have happened and it was the foremost reasoning for all the problems of elders during the pandemic. The study finds that telephonic counseling, medical care, social respect, social dignity, psychological needs from their families, and personal hygiene are the immediate needs of the elders to face the challenges.

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