

*Shelter Homes and Elderly Women: A Case Study of  
Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh*

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In a country where the lower middle income stratum is broad, there is a vast population of elderly family members who are expelled from their families. This trend of lately has been on the rise with the disintegration of joint family system and increase in modern nuclear families where each member in an ideal situation works and earns. In a society which is impoverish and still developing, the elderly are treated as disposable in families which are struggling economically and try to reduce the expenses of any family member who is not adding up to the family income. The abandoning of parents is higher among very low or low income generating families.

This problem aggravates for women who are given an inferior or subordinated position in India and have remained dependent lifelong on father or a husband. Although last decade has witnessed improvement in the image of women who are mostly marginalized in a patriarchal society, elderly women still remains the most neglected lot. They are the ones who are taken for granted for being all self-sacrificing and responsible through out their lives. They are often regarded to be an epitome of devotion, often presumed to have no needs for care or service.

Elderly women also bear the brunt of household responsibilities despite a majority of them suffering from blood pressure, poor eyesight and arthritis. Those who lose their property due to loss in position in the family after the death of husband often end up being stranded. Such women while having age try to make their ends meet but as they grow old many of them end up at shelter homes which in the present context are ill equipped and prehistoric in their definition. Lowly sentiments are attached to these places which are often state run, funded or sponsored. It remains to be a place for a needy or a destitute and not possibly a deliberate decision of any sane mind. The Indian definition of a Shelter home urgently needs to be corrected and updated. There is a need for shelter homes such that elderly could find comfort

in them and which could be a home outside home for them. The homes for elderly women require further attention with respect to their special needs.

The paper is based on a study of 100 elderly women from Varanasi. Most of the shelter homes and ashrams in Varanasi have a dismal number of women residing in them. These surveys were conducted through multiple visits. Other than the ashrams and shelter homes visited, it was also tried to find out more such places which could possibly be sheltering elderly or destitute women. The paper tried to discover the reasons for the influx of women, present state of their accommodation in the ashram or shelter homes, and conditions of their stay at these ashrams. The patterns were observed regarding these women, from where they belong, their ethnic background and what expectations bring them here. Although the women found in state shelter homes were less poor and often had a family, it was the old ashrams where elderly women found were mostly from the very poor background.

There is a striking contrast between the earlier generation of women who belong to the age group of late 70s or in 80s residing in these ashrams and those who were admitted later or more recently. The younger entrants of women are those who have seen life in some decent form and were not always in an abject state. They are mostly from the lower middle class families and victims of unsuitable circumstances.

Unlike earlier generation of widows who were mostly from eastern states of west Bengal, Orissa, Manipur and eastern regions of Bihar, this new generation of women hail from towns of Uttar Pradesh or surrounding states of Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Bihar. They have lived life with some sort of amenities in their family and assert the same at shelter homes. These demands and assertions are rarely made with the staff and fights are often among other women asserting for their space and power. They see shelter home as an opportunity to better their living conditions as compared to previous generations of women who had no other choice.

A stark difference is in the culture and attitude of these women and their distance from ritualistic lifestyle, which earlier generation of elderly women performed. These women are least interested in religious activities and find rituals of temple singing and bhajans to be a part of a mundane routine. They see it as a part of servitude towards the system which has accepted them.

The family conditions in most of the cases lead to the eviction from their own home. Often the death of husband followed by the arrival of daughter in law changed the relationship exuding power politics in family. The women who no longer enjoyed the powerful position of centre found compliance towards children demeaning. Most of the elderly women stated that they couldn't tolerate disrespect met at the hands of their son and ill-treatment by the daughter in law. They find life in shelter home under the suzerainty of administrative staff to be better than facing frequent family quarrels.

Elderly women of earlier generations are mostly found in groups as over the years they have brought other women from their families, relatives, localities to the ashram along with them. These often belong to the same state culture and feel more comfortable with each other due to similar cultural affinity. They had come here through a human chain of women who got dragged one along with the other. The new ones have mostly arrived through some middle person who was known to them and who knew about the ashram or somebody in the ashram staff.

Most of the newer entrants were not needy in the true sense and have a family to fall back upon in times of emergency. The earlier generation of women was below poverty line and lived in absolute penury devoid of any material possessions. The new entrants are often found in possession of more material with a tendency of hoarding articles they receive in alms or donations at the shelter homes. A number of these women who occasionally visit their son or daughter's house carry these hoarded articles and saved money to contribute economically in their children's life subtly trying to reassert on their symbolic positions of guardian despite knowing that their child asserts his/her independent position. There were a lot of women who when asked if they wish to go back did not replied yes but said there is nobody to return to emphasizing the neglected state they were subjected to in their families. Those women who had no position or any image to maintain in their family have left and do not visit back stating that there is no-one at home trying to hide the fact that they are no more considered a worthy member in their family.

Earlier generation of devotees belong to the generation of women who were pious devotees seeking peace through religion. They carried the ritualistic tradition of the holy space where they entered or the city where they settled permanently after leaving home. Maintaining their own religious sanctity was their way of surviving by getting their identity sanctioned in the society. The alien cities where they were unknown at least provided them with the prospects of being invisible by not being judged through their true identities. The dismal percentages of such women in the century old ashrams show that the religious reasons as well as routes which brought great influx of women over past few centuries have started to wane away.

## **Conclusion:**

Hence the paper can be concluded with some major findings that have been figured out as the major reason of the destitution of women. They are mainly divided into three categories as follows:

- **Socio-Cultural Norms:** like having only daughters, No family member left at home, Abandoned by Son, Husband died, no children, in-laws cursed her for being unproduc-

tive and left her, Widowhood-related customs, Peer guidance and Financial Lures.

- **Religious Norms:** In search of salvation in Kashi, Involvement with the Ashram for long period, Religious aspirations, Finds solace in spiritual living, Religious beliefs: widowhood.
- **Family Problems:** Left home in depression, Abandoned, Pregnant before marriage, In-laws tried to kill her, Poverty after death of husband , Mentally disturbed hence abandoned at station in a miserable condition, Family members murdered for property issues, Got disheartened in life by Traumatic marriage, death of family members.

The preponderance of women in the elderly population of the country demands shelter homes is specifically designed as per their cumulative needs. Such conditions demand nursing and care keeping in mind that these are not patients but elderly women who had a lifetime of struggle and hardship in bringing up families and children. Women perform more laborious tasks with their bodies consistently through their lives than men do and it is this reason that their old age geriatric care differs in care. They often face osteoporosis leading to inability in performing even personal activities. Incontinence has been a major issue with women who survive over 80 years of age.

Also while taken care, they demand a certain amount of respect for their age and individual freedom to take personal decisions which are mostly absent in the monitoring environment of shelter homes. Dignity, thus has been unsaid and an unresolved issue at the centre of the geriatric care. Shelter home spaces on which many women are completely dependent for shelter are the very places where they are mistreated for being dependent. Their incapability often attracts apathy and derision at the hands of the staff and administration who consider their own jobs of taking care of elderly women as a charitable task.

The bulk of the study is around widows who form a substantial percentage of both women and elderly women in the shelter homes and ashrams. Their lives are marked by hardship due to negligent behavior of family members especially sons and not necessarily daughters who join the husband's family after marriage. Their circumstances become miserable as they grow old and loneliness creeps in their lives. Among all other stakeholders, Insecurity is highest for widows due to their insubstantial conditions. The ashram systems of the previous era are diminishing whereas the concept of shelter homes is on a rise. Some of the ashrams too have acquired a more systematic arrangement of shelter homes. These are private or paid accommodations where an elderly woman would require paying for the space of stay and other services. Such homes were observed yet not taken under the study. Hence, it is suggested that a special study on the elderly women living in private shelter homes should be conducted separately in future to understand the social status of those women.

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