

# SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM AND WELL BEING OF ELDERLY WOMEN- INDIAN CONTEXT

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## Abstract

This article gives an overview of situation of elderly women in India. It emphasises significance of social networking in promoting wellbeing of elderly women. Even though both men and women are vulnerable to age related tribulations, severity of problems is more among elderly women. Paper throws light on the various factors associated with age that prevented her from maintaining social contacts, for e.g., change of social role in old age makes elderly women more vulnerable to social isolation and abuse. In India, even though the policy has been formulated to ensure the well being of elderly, how far it is successful in addressing the needs of elderly women remains unanswered. The final part of the paper discusses the proactive measures that need to be taken to empower the elderly women at various (individual, community and Government) levels.

**Keywords:** *elderly women, mistreatment, jeopardy, social isolation, vulnerable, social support system, formal support system, semi formal support system, informal support system, social networking, well being.*

## Introduction

*“True friendship is like sound health, the value of it is seldom known until it be lost”-*

Charles Caleb Cotton

Be it a child, youth or aged life will be monotonous without a companion. Significance of social networking in promoting physical and mental health is proved by many studies conducted abroad. Parker-Pope (2009) pointed out that a 10 year Australian study found that older people with

a large circle of friends were 22 percent less likely to die during the study period than with fewer friends. In pursuit of better health, we turn to doctors and other resources available, but we often tend to ignore a resource that could support us in fighting against illness and depression, speed recovery, slow aging and prolong life: our friends.

Social isolation has become a common problem among elderly, especially among elderly women. In old age, it is not easy for elderly to reach out to their old friends for support or develop new friendship. This situation makes them more vulnerable to various kinds of age related problems. Studies conducted at various parts of the world reveals that social support has a significant role in promoting well-being of the elderly. This article aims at emphasising the significance of social support in ensuring a healthy life for elderly women.

#### **Overview of situation of ageing women in India: reasons of their vulnerability**

Population aging has become a growing concern all over the world. Elderly population in India has risen from nearly 20 million in 1951 to 72 million in 2001. Eight per cent of the population is above 60 years of age and this rate will increase to 18 per cent by 2025. Because of this situation 21<sup>st</sup> century may be called as the “Era of Population Ageing”.

Old age is supposed to be the golden age for elderly. During the sunset years, when all their responsibilities as parents are fulfilled and when they are looking forward for adequate care and support from their children, they are deprived of it due to economic, social and psychological factors.

Females are in excess over males in old age because of higher life expectancy at birth and also the recent trends in mortality favouring females. When compared to elderly men, women are more vulnerable to the problems associated with old age.

Asharaf (2005) discusses about the factors creating hardship for women. They are: the feminine nature of ageing, society’s discriminatory treatment towards female education and employment and social discrimination and ill treatment because of the traditional roles attached to women in society. Such traditional attitudes and discriminations have made lives of women vulnerable in old age. Penhale and Kingston (1995) state that to be old in the UK, is to be marginalized which is single jeopardy; to be old and abused is double jeopardy; and to be old, abused and female is triple jeopardy.

According to Prakash (1998), problems of elderly women are not due to age *per se*, but due to psychosocial environment, diminishing supports and changes in life situation. To avoid such

situations in later life we need to be proactive and take steps much earlier in their life cycle. Equal opportunities and access to education, employment, compensation for their homemaker role, support in their family and maternal roles help in reducing vulnerability in old age. Health prospects of elderly women can be improved, if health professionals are sensitized to develop positive attitude towards women and need to be trained in understanding their typical mental and physical health problems.

Kalyan (1998) has given justification for expressing more concern for elderly women. He pointed out that even though both elderly men and women are going through the same biological process of ageing with progressive functional decline, women from womb to tomb leads a life vulnerable to numerous hazards of direct and indirect in nature. Gender discriminated life of women starts from childhood. Most tragic event in the life of elderly women is widowhood. This aggravates her misery due to acute economic dependency and social isolation. The last decades of elderly women should be supported by basic health care and counselling service, in which social support is the basic need.

#### *Change of social role*

Various problems are faced by the elderly due to the changed attitude of younger generation towards elderly. Society has become more self-centric, materialistic and achievement oriented that elderly are being deprived of their rights. Younger generation considers elderly as a burden on society, but they indeed fail to realize the fact that they are a resource, which can contribute to the wellbeing of the society.

Traditional joint family system, which existed in India, always gave respect to elders and their roles were very clear. But the situation has changed now by bringing enormous changes in values, attitudes and life style of people and elderly people has become role less. Subtle expressions of elderly of being isolated and neglected speak a lot to the society. Knowingly or unknowingly society and government has shut their eyes towards the problems faced by the elderly in families.

With the advent of industrialization, urbanization and modernization, concept of nuclear families emerged enhancing socio-economic and psychological problems for elderly members. The 'We' concept which existed in the traditional joint family system was replaced by 'I' concept (Vijaya, 2009). This individualistic attitude of people marginalized the elderly from the mainstream of society.

A shift from traditional joint family systems, which was family oriented, to an individual oriented nuclear family system is responsible for changing the status of aged in the family. Since the elderly women are no longer considered as productive, attitude of family members and society towards her becomes unhealthy.

Elderly men compared to women have more networking or friendship while majority of elderly women are confined to four walls of the house.

Rafique and Hussain (1997) found that gender is a significant factor behind the adjustment of aged people. Dominance of daughter-in-law in family affairs, and lack of involvement by older women in family problems increase adjustment problems of elderly women. Kamla (1998) stated that those female offspring nurtured and educated by parents as a valuable future of the family, proved to be better guardian of the aged parents than the son.

#### *Social isolation*

Various problems are associated with old age starting from health related issues (both physical and psychological), economic dependence and mistreatment by family members and outsiders. Those elderly who are alone with no support network are more vulnerable to such issues. People with good networking seem to be more confident and healthy as they nurture a feeling that someone is there for them to rely on. It has a bigger impact on their psychological well-being. Prakash (2003) pointed out that there are a few studies dealing with the status and problems of widows and elderly. Elderly women are more vulnerable to social isolation as a result of their loss of the wife role through divorce or widowhood.

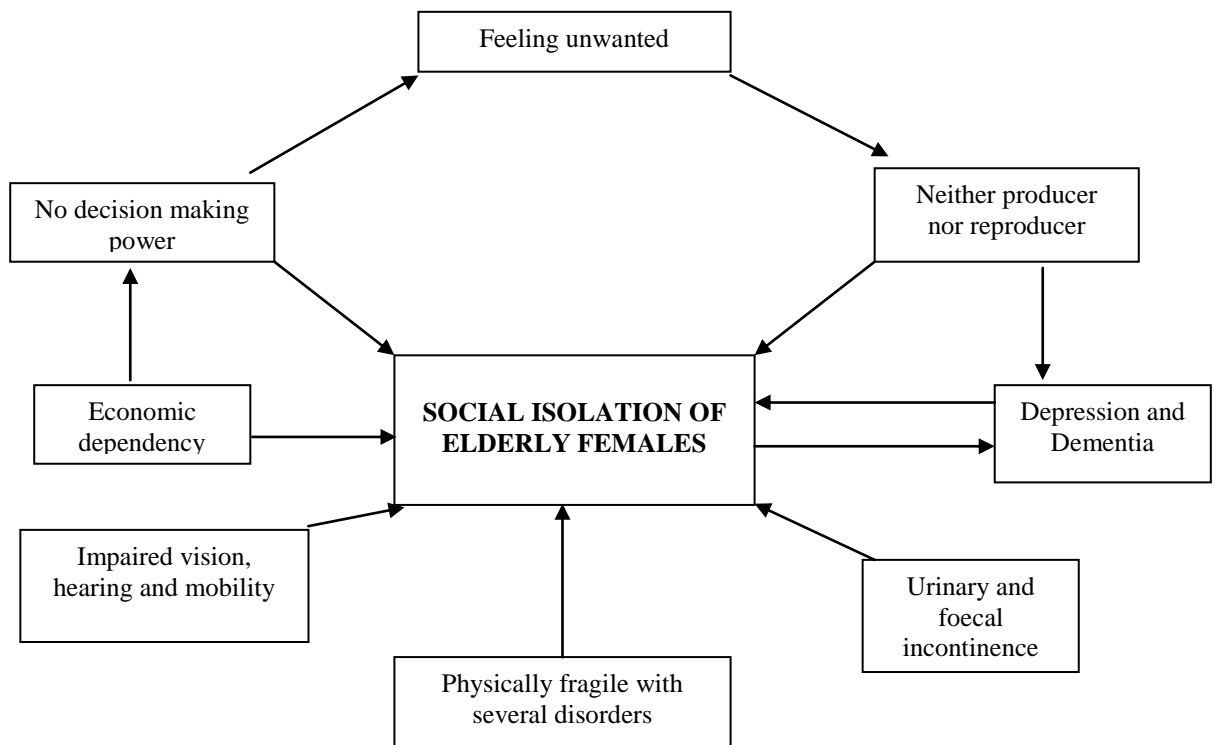
Dr. Lotika Sarkar Case (New Delhi) is an eye opener for policy makers to realize the trauma undergoing by older women who are alone. After her husband's death, her friend's son usurped her house and isolated her from her circle of friends, colleagues and students. At the age of 87, she is a frail shadow of herself, vulnerable both physically and emotionally. Alone, widowed and childless she has suddenly been rendered homeless and penniless (The Hindu, 2009). This incident has occurred to an older woman from an elite circle of New Delhi. From this we can imagine the plight of an older woman who is fragile, illiterate and from poor economic background.

According to Sanghvi (1998), diminishing health, death of husband and the distance that members of family live from one another, leads to loss of social support networks for elderly women. Anupriyo (2007) states that, in Indian context it seems that men might not be as vulnerable

to distress and miseries in old age as women generally are. This is because women in India form a small percentage of the working population and thus they are denied the retirement benefits that working men has access to when they grow old.

Yatish and Parantab (2008) pointed out that, the status of senior female members has been affected severely due to less importance assigned to them because of socio-religious practices prevalent in the society especially in the remote areas of the country. Older people increasingly suffer social losses with age. Their social life is narrowed by loss of work associates, death of relatives, friends and spouse and poor health which restricts their participation in social activities.

Plight of elderly women is worse, compared to that of elderly men. Therefore special attention needs to be given to their problems in order to equip them to handle it. Since social isolation makes her vulnerable to all kinds of injustice, first step should be to strengthen the support system for elderly women. In short, social support is the basic need of elderly women in leading a healthy life. Factors influencing the social isolation of elderly women are given in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Factors influencing social isolation of elderly females (Kalyan, 1998)

Various factors are associated with social isolation of elderly females. When they grow old, they cease to be the producers or contributors and become dependant (physically,

psychologically and economically) on their family members. Their immobility chains them to the four walls of house and feeling of unwanted creep in their minds. All the above said factors will have negative implications on their physical and mental health.

### *Abuse*

The topic 'elder mistreatment' or 'elder abuse' has gained prominence only recently. Following the discovery of child abuse in the 1960s and marital violence in the early 1970s elder abuse has been one of the last forms of family violence to receive societal attention (Wolf and Pillemer, 1989). Mistreatments against elderly women are of various types. Mistreatments like physical abuse, verbal abuse, neglects and abandonment towards older women are increasing in society.

The greatest fear in the elderly to vocalize the problem they face in families is fear of further harassment by their family members. If they have proper support system they can rely upon, they feel protected and speak out. Existence of informal or formal support system itself prevents the family members from mistreating the elderly.

Soneja (2001) through a study conducted in Delhi among the urban elderly found that almost all of them experienced lack of emotional support, neglect by family members, feeling of insecurity, loss of dignity, maltreatment and disrespect by the family. She found that not a single person was willing to label it as abuse. Prakash (2003) elicited information from elderly about their conceptualization of elder abuse. Both elderly men and women felt that women are likely to be abused. They opined that the transition from married to widowed status brings about dependency and vulnerability in women.

According to Asharaf (2005), the reasons for increased ill treatment and abuse of elderly women are their lack of awareness and access to legal provisions. Since there are no laws specific to older women, laws need to be sensitized to protect their needs. This abuse and neglect occurs both from family members (children, grand children and other relatives) and from people outside the family (friends, domestic helpers, thieves, etc.).

In India, there has not yet been a country wide cross regional study giving estimates of elder abuse (Prakash, 2001). Even though, it is a known fact that elder abuse has been taking place in the families, it remains largely hidden with in the privacy of the home. Older persons, who are abused or mistreated, are reluctant to share their experiences with people outside their home. Very

often they are dependent on the abuser, who may be her close relative. This prevents them from exposing the injustice done by the kinsfolk towards them.

Bennet and Kingston (1993), state that independent studies suggest that there is a correlation between high level of dependency in the elderly person and abuse by a supporter. Factors leading to the mistreatment of elderly can be categorized as pathology of the abuser, intergenerational transmission of violence, dependency and reverse dependency, career stress and social isolation. Elderly victims of financial abuse tend to be unmarried with limited social contacts/networks. Though both males and females are the subjects of elder abuse, women are worst victims of this problem. Most often, because they lack social networking and they are not informed of the support services available to them.

Srinivas and Vijayalakshmi (2001) stated that most likely victims of elder abuse are widowed women – with poor economic background and dependant. In their study they have also reported that abuse has negative implications – social, psychological, and behavioural of the elderly.

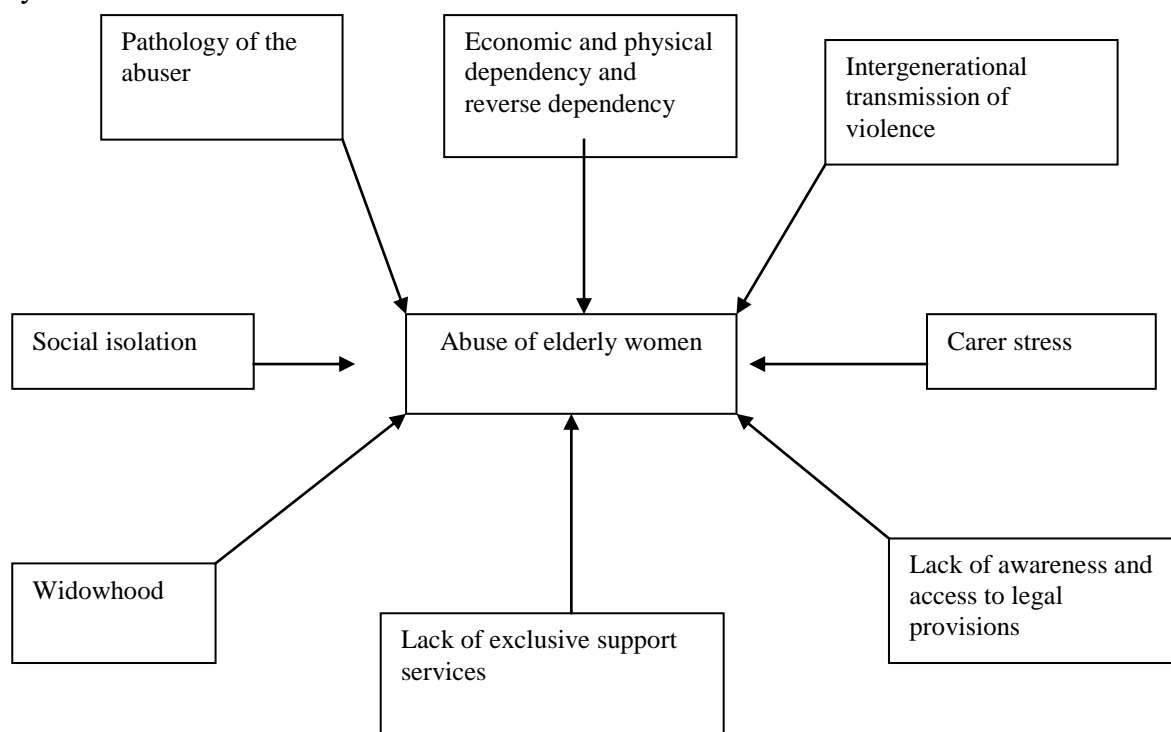


Figure 2. Factors associated with abuse of elderly women

Shah et al. (1995) stated that dependency of women, high level of illiteracy, lack of remunerative occupation and negligible awareness about legal and economic rights create

difficulties for older women. Increase in ill treatment and abuse are due to lack of awareness and access to legal provisions. Since there are no laws specific to older women, laws need to be sensitized to protect their needs.

Very few cases of elder abuse and neglect are reported because only tip of the iceberg is being visible to the world. To increase the level of confidence in the elderly and to monitor the acts of family members there should be some support system in the society. Elderly women are more comfortable to confess their problems in a protected environment. Therefore exclusive support services for the elderly women have become the need of the hour. Factors associated with abuse of elderly women are shown in Figure 2.

Vulnerability of elderly women to abuse is associated with various factors. Figure 2 shows that lack of proper social support has a significant role in increasing the vulnerability of elderly women to abuse.

### **Policy for older persons**

The National Policy on Older Persons was announced by the Indian government in 1999, which aims at age integrated society and envisages an umbrella of measures including support for financial security, health care, education, shelter, welfare and protection against abuse and exploitation. But how far the policy has been successful in addressing the needs of the elderly women is questionable. Even though it is mentioned in the policy that, needs and requirements of elderly women are different from that of elderly men, but there has been no reference for elderly women in particular. The policy addresses only the urban population but ignores the elderly living in rural areas (majority) and engaged in unorganized sectors. Tushti (2005) states that gender issues are not sufficiently highlighted in the policy. Section on health and nutrition, does not specifically refer to gender issues in case of health of older women.

A big omission in the policy paper is a discussion on the property rights of women, especially widows; widowhood is intolerable because women lack both social and economic support. All these factors combined together make older women the most vulnerable among older persons.

A number of councils, associations and bureaus have been planned for implementing the provisions of policy, which have representation from citizen's groups, retired person's associations but there is no reference made as to whether the elderly women will be adequately represented on these bodies.



Majority of the elderly women are unemployed or associated with unorganized sectors. To lead a life with dignity and self worth is of utmost importance to older women. But various factors made their life miserable such as widowhood, economic dependency, and physical frailty. They need support from all dimensions e.g.; familial, social, economic etc. to maintain a dignified life. At present older women are in a hopeless situation due to lack of family care and support. Modification of the existing policy and enactment of laws that insists on care of older persons may bring some positive changes in the plight of elderly women.

Due to various socio economic factors, elderly women in India face different types of health related issues. Since most of them are financially dependent on their children, many a times they don't vocalize their health problems to the children. Government of India should take appropriate measures to support elderly women in this aspect. Illango (2005) is of the viewpoint that if government takes measures to provide economic assistance to the families in order to take care of the aged people, it acts as an incentive to look after the aged and keep the older people with them.

Separate medical insurance scheme, health insurance policies and free medical care can be provided for the elderly women. If free clinical facilities were provided through mobile dispensaries, it would be of great help to the rural elderly women. Government can also encourage voluntary efforts in this direction.

### **Social support**

Problems of elderly women can be mitigated to a great extent, if they have proper social support system. Elderly women are more vulnerable to mistreatment due to various factors. Several studies show that, status of an elderly woman is determined by her marital status, economic status, physical and mental health and social network. Economic dependency, physical and mental frailty aggravates her vulnerability. Confinement of women folk to the four walls of houses makes them more isolated in their old age. Family members who mistreat elderly women will have a tendency to prevent them from developing any kind of networking with people outside the family. This social isolation of elderly gives more strength to the abusers. Social networking among elderly empowers them by updating about their rights, legal safeguards and thereby improving their self-confidence.

Abundance of time and lack of any task make the old persons idle and emotionally deprived as there is nobody to talk to them. Hobby classes can be organized for them to compensate for their depression due to lack of emotional support from near and dear ones. Enhancing social

networking among the elderly will contribute to their being updated about the latest in the world; the legal safeguards to defend themselves and will there by reduce their vulnerability to crime (Yatish and Parantap, 2008).

Role of support system in protecting the life of older women is worth mentioning. Arun (1999) observe that well being of elderly depends on their feeling of being wanted, useful and respected. It enhances their self-esteem and dignity, thus contributing positively to their well being.

Marjorie and Bennet (1980) placed emphasis on how social support system helps in meeting three major needs of elderly: (i) socialization (ii) carrying out the tasks of daily living (iii) assistance during times of illness or crisis. These authors categorized support system into two – formal and informal. Formal support system is the support provided by the government and other formal organizations in the area of economic, health, education and transportation entitlement. Informal support system is the provision of day to day companionship by friends and neighbours. Both formal and informal support system has significant role in promoting mental and physical health of elderly, thus ensuring their welfare. Yatish and Parantap (2008) emphasize the role of support of groups from non-governmental sector in the form of ‘Victim Assistance Group’ can be increased in dealing with old age victims of violent crimes, harassment or family abuse.

Morano and Morano (2006) explain three components of support system: the informal network, the semiformal support system and formal supports. Informal supports are provided by family and friends; semiformal support refers to the support provided by neighbourhood organizations such as churches or senior citizens centre. Formal supports include financial (social security, supplemental social security) medical as well as social welfare agencies and private fee-for-service providers. Arun (1999) states that well being of elderly women depends to a large extent on the nature and extent of social support available to them.

Informal social network is the group of a person’s social relationships, social support is the actual help – financial, emotional etc. that social network provides. People in the network may or may not provide social support. Illango (2005) is of the opinion that, in India, informal care is essentially needed because of minimized formal care services and due to the culture and traditional values. In India, care-giving and receiving is family-centred and therefore India badly needs a series of measures that would not only encourage family care but also provide respite for the overburdened care givers.

In a comparative study on the socio economic status of elderly women in India and Japan,

Rathi and Radhika (2006) found that problems like feeling lonely and lack of good friends to share feelings ranked high among respondents from India. They feel alienated and lonely with the gradual decrease in participation in social activities. Participation in social, household and religious activities is essential for the well-being of the elderly.

Social connectedness brings happiness elderly women and promotes healthy ageing. Reinhart and Fisher (1989) stated that previous studies have found that relationships with friends provide more life satisfaction to the elderly than relationships with kin. Their study proved that expressive support of the daughters is important to the well-being of elderly widows. Most striking finding of their work is that elderly women consistently reported relationships with daughters to be more fulfilling than those with female friends.

To overcome the feelings of loneliness and to promote sound physical and mental health, they need to be connected with the community. Rathi and Radhika (2006) suggested that elderly women should be associated with creative and developmental programs. To involve them in various social, recreational, educational and cultural activities, old age clubs and other organizations should be formed. In India, the number of institutions for elderly care in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states is higher than in any other state and majority of these institutions are run by religious organizations and most provide free residential care.

Exclusive help line service for elderly women can be said to be a first step in establishing a formal support system. Helpline for children has proved to be successful in many cities of India in combating harassment and exploitation of children thus ensuring their protection. An NGO (Non-governmental organization) in Bangalore 'Nightingales' who has been working for elders since 1996 started elders helpline – 1090 (toll free number) in 2002 as a joint venture of Bangalore city police and Nightingales Medical trust. Complaints of harassment, ill-treatment, physical and mental abuse, financial exploitation, cheating etc. are all handled by the helpline. They proved to be successful in combating violence against elderly and disseminating information among elderly to protect themselves (Jayanthi, 2003). This model also can be replicated in other states.

### **Empowering elderly women**

Above discussions throws light on the need for support systems for the well being of elderly women. As the coordinator of a helpline service for women, author has come across instances where elderly women suffering and looking for support. Fear of children and society prevented them from coming out of their shell and open up. To face and overcome challenges in

their later years of life, they need to be empowered.

It is advisable to be proactive rather than finding solutions to the problems of elderly women. Proactive measures have to be taken to empower the elderly women from all dimensions - individual level, community level and government level.

*Individual level:* Elderly women, who are the targets of abuse, neglect and all kinds of exploitation have to be empowered. This can be done by (Veeton, 2001):

- Informing them about the physiological and psychological changes associated with age and its implications on their behaviour patterns. This helps them in adapting to the changing situations of life.
- Educate and train them about the adjustments they have to make to lead an active, productive and successful life.
- Impart information about elderly rights and support services available to protect them, which improve their confidence level.
- Promote networking with people outside family, which may prevent exploitation of elderly women by their family members.
- Promote the above said measures; voluntary organizations government organizations can take initiative.

Awareness about self is a prerequisite in empowering individuals. This will enable elderly women in realising their potential and strengths, which further helps in striving towards empowerment. Once they identify the areas that need to be strengthened to promote their well being, they seek social support.

*Community level:*

- Set up senior citizens clubs or centres, that can support the requirements of older persons – training on life skills, information regarding whom to approach for help in case of emergency etc. (Veeton, 2001).
- Form Self Help Groups (SHGs) or Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs) for elderly women to improve their confidence level and self-esteem. They can start income generating activities to develop a feeling in them that they are contributors to society. This can also act as a mechanism where elderly women can come together, share their experiences and ventilate their stress (Veeton, 2001).

- NGOs can facilitate empowerment of elderly by initiating various programs in the community.

- Support and cooperation of all the members of society is needed for the successful functioning of initiatives taken for elderly.

Group effort or team effort is always acknowledged in Indian society. As a group or collective action, if elderly women are taking up their concerns, they can act as a pressure group. Team effort has always been successful when compared to individual efforts.

*Government level:* Whatever attempts made by elderly and society, to protect the rights of elderly that will not be effective unless we have the support of Government. National Policy for Older Persons was announced with the aim of bringing up an age-integrated society, but how far it is successful in its implementation is questionable. Since the elderly women are more vulnerable and are in a triple jeopardy, their needs and requirements should be given special attention. Policy has overlooked the problems faced by elderly women.

- Exclusive support services for elderly women should be established;
- Help line services where they can contact for any kind of information, telephonic counselling, for any and every kind of support in case of abuse or neglect by family members or outsiders (Srivastava, 2003).

- Setting up of free legal aid cell. In old age women are subjected to various kinds of financial exploitation, to prevent this and help her to manage her possession, she needs legal help.

- Empowerment oriented training need to be provided through day care centres or clubs
- Promote setting up of geriatric clinics and adopt interdisciplinary approach in treating elderly patients in all hospitals.

- Yatish and Parantab (2008) stated that community policing with increased attention to older persons will help in bringing the gap among the police and senior citizens. Awareness generation programs can be conducted periodically for police personnel to instil in them sensitivity towards the problems and issues concerning to senior citizens with special reference to elderly women.

- Organize sensitization campaigns through school children, youth (NSS), women's cell in colleges etc. so that intergenerational gap can be bridged.

- Promote community outreach programs to support the elderly and their family members.

- Efforts should be taken to support the abusers of elderly to handle their stress, which is reflected on the dependent elderly as abuse or neglect. (Counselling, Mobile Medicare units or services for elderly etc.) (Veeton, 2001).

- Elderly has to be treated as a resource to the society and make use of their experience and wisdom in moulding the children and youth.

- Yatish and Parantab (2008) stressed the importance of promoting empirical studies on the issues related to senior citizens which help the policy makers while formulating policies for the welfare of senior citizens.

Women throughout their life are facing challenges of various types. Usually women are mentally strong enough to overcome these challenges. But as they advance in age, women become weak both physically and mentally. Their roles in family become insignificant and turn out to be role-less. Inadequate care from the part of family members and feeling of hopelessness lead them to depression or social isolation. To bridge the inter generation gap and create an age integrated society both government and non-government bodies and citizens must share the responsibility.

Social networking or social connectedness plays a significant role in promoting well-being of elderly women. This will improve their quality of life and promote healthy ageing. Informal, semi-formal and formal support system can provide support to them thus ensuring their protection. An organized effort of individuals, community, Non-Government Organizations and Government machineries are the pre-requisites for ensuring a happy life in their sun set years.

### **Conclusions**

Population ageing is a universal phenomenon. Higher life expectancy at birth and low mortality rate favouring female population resulted in outnumbering of female elderly over male elderly. Various problems (biological and psychosocial) are associated with old age, and elderly women are more vulnerable to these kinds of problems. Being old, female and abused jeopardizes elderly woman. Society's discriminatory attitude towards women made their life miserable in old age.

Diminishing social support networks aggravate vulnerability of elderly women to social isolation in their later years of life. Since social isolation makes her more susceptible to all kinds of injustice, setting up of proper social support system is the need of the hour. Appropriate social support system ensures protection of life and property of elderly women. Elderly victims of

mistreatment usually have limited social contacts/networks. Elderly women are the worst victims of this problem because more often, they lack social networking and are not informed of the support services available to them.

In India, existing policy on older persons and laws are insufficient to cater the needs of elderly women. Social networking among elderly women empowers them by updating about their rights, legal safeguards and thereby reducing their vulnerability to crime. Social support system has a significant role in promoting well being of elderly women. Support system can be informal, semi-formal and formal. Family and friends provide informal supports; semiformal support refers to the support provided by neighbourhood organizations such as churches, senior citizens centres, clubs etc. Formal supports include financial, medical or other support services provided by NGOs and Government organizations. Exclusive help line service for elderly women can be said to be a first step in establishing a formal support system. Feeling of being wanted, useful and respected enhances elderly women's self esteem and dignity, thus contributing positively to their well being.

Proactive measures need be taken to empower the elderly women from all dimensions – individual level, community level and government level to create an age integrated society.

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