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Research Article

Invisible Sufferings: Exploring the dynamics of Elderly Abuse in Indian Families

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Abstract

India's rapidly ageing population, coupled with changing family structures and socio-economic transitions, has brought increasing attention to the issue of elder abuse. Despite growing concern, elder abuse remains substantially underreported because of social stigma, family dynamics, and financial dependency. This exploratory mixed-methods study examines perceptions and experiences related to elder abuse among participants from the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 46 respondents. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, enabling the study to capture both quantitative patterns and participants' qualitative perspectives. Secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and academic literature were used to contextualise and support the analysis. Secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and academic literature were used to support the analysis.

The findings suggest that participants perceived financial dependency, changing family structures, emotional neglect, and inadequate institutional support as important factors associated with elder abuse. Financial independence was widely viewed as enhancing the autonomy and decision-making capacity of older adults. In contrast, economic dependence was perceived to increase vulnerability to neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. The study also highlights persistent barriers to reporting abuse, including fear of social stigma, emotional attachment to family members, and limited awareness of available legal and welfare mechanisms.

Rather than presenting elder abuse solely as a private family matter, the study interprets it as an issue closely linked to social justice, family dynamics, financial security, and institutional accountability. Although the findings are context-specific and not statistically generalisable beyond the study setting, they provide useful insights into the lived realities of older adults in the Jammu region and identify areas for future research and policy intervention. The paper concludes by recommending stronger social protection measures, improved implementation of existing legal safeguards, community-based awareness initiatives, and greater coordination among families, civil society organisations, healthcare providers, and criminal justice institutions to promote the dignity, rights, and well-being of older adults.

Keywords:

Elder Abuse, Ageing, Financial Dependency, Family Dynamics, Social Justice, Criminal Justice, Jammu and Kashmir

How to Cite This Article

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Introduction

India is undergoing a significant demographic transition characterised by a steady increase in its elderly population. Improvements in healthcare, declining mortality rates, and increased life expectancy have contributed to a growing proportion of individuals aged 60 years and above, a trend expected to continue in the coming decades (United Nations, 2019). While this demographic shift reflects important developmental achievements, it also presents complex social, economic, and policy challenges. Many older adults experience chronic illnesses, functional limitations, and disabilities that reduce their independence and increase their dependence on family members for financial, emotional, and physical support (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS] & National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly [NPHCE], 2020). As India's population ages, ensuring the dignity, security, and well-being of older persons has become an increasingly important public policy priority.

Within this changing demographic landscape, elder abuse has emerged as a significant yet largely invisible social problem. The World Health Organization (2022) defines elder abuse as a single or repeated act, or the failure to take

appropriate action, occurring within a relationship of trust that causes harm or distress to an older person. Elder abuse encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and financial abuse, as well as neglect. In India, however, such abuse frequently remains hidden within the private sphere of the family because of social stigma, cultural expectations, emotional attachment to caregivers, and the reluctance of older persons to report abuse (HelpAge India, 2022). Consequently, many cases remain undocumented, limiting both public awareness and institutional intervention.

Beyond being a public health and family welfare concern, elder abuse also represents an important issue of social justice and criminal justice. Physical violence, financial exploitation, intimidation, abandonment, coercive property transfers, and neglect constitute violations of the rights and dignity of older persons and, in many instances, involve legal offences requiring intervention by the criminal justice system. Although India has enacted the Maintenance and

Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, gaps in implementation, limited awareness, fear of retaliation, lengthy legal procedures, and concerns about disrupting family relationships often discourage victims from seeking legal remedies. As a result, elder abuse remains substantially underreported and inadequately addressed, highlighting the need for stronger coordination among law enforcement agencies, healthcare professionals, legal aid institutions, social workers, and community organisations.

The vulnerability of older adults is not determined solely by age or declining health but is deeply influenced by financial dependency, family relationships, and broader socio-economic conditions. Financial dependency often reshapes household power relations by reducing the bargaining capacity and autonomy of elderly individuals, thereby increasing their susceptibility to neglect, coercion, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. Conversely, financial independence enhances agency, strengthens decision-making capacity, and serves as an important protective factor against abuse. The situation becomes particularly severe when financial dependency intersects with disability, chronic illness, widowhood, or social isolation, creating multiple layers of vulnerability within family settings.

Traditionally, elder care in India was embedded within the joint family system, which emphasised intergenerational solidarity, shared responsibilities, and respect for older family members. However, rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, migration, globalisation, and the gradual shift towards nuclear families have transformed these traditional arrangements (Bloom et al., 2015). While these socio-economic changes have expanded educational and employment opportunities, they have also weakened traditional caregiving structures and altered intergenerational relationships. Consequently, many elderly individuals experience reduced participation in family decision-making, emotional isolation, and increasing dependency, thereby heightening the risk of neglect and abuse.

The experience of ageing is also shaped by intersecting inequalities related to gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and access to resources. Elderly

women, particularly widows and those lacking independent financial resources, often face greater vulnerability because of cumulative disadvantages arising from patriarchal social structures, unequal property rights, limited employment opportunities, and lifelong economic dependence (Pillemer et al., 2016). Similarly, elderly persons living in poverty or with disabilities frequently encounter additional barriers in accessing healthcare, legal protection, and social security benefits. These intersecting disadvantages demonstrate that elder abuse cannot be understood merely as an individual or family problem but must be analysed within broader structural and institutional contexts.

Although the Government of India has introduced several welfare measures and legal safeguards to support older persons, including the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, important challenges remain regarding implementation, accessibility, institutional capacity, and public awareness. The persistence of elder abuse despite these measures suggests that welfare programmes alone are insufficient without stronger institutional mechanisms, effective legal enforcement, and comprehensive social protection policies.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the relationship between financial dependency, changing family dynamics, and elder abuse in contemporary India, with empirical evidence from the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

Demographic Profile of the Elderly Population in India

India is witnessing a steady rise in its elderly population, driven by declining mortality rates and improvements in healthcare, along with the demographic momentum created by earlier high fertility rates. The post-independence cohorts now constitute a significant share of the ageing population, many of whom experienced limited access to education and were engaged in informal or unregulated employment during their working years.

According to the National Statistical Office (NSO) report *Elderly in India 2021*, the population aged 60 years and above is projected to increase from 138 million in 2021 to approximately 194 million by 2031, marking a rise of about 41% within a decade. The report also highlights a gendered pattern in ageing, with elderly women expected to outnumber men, reaching nearly 101 million compared to 93 million males by 2031, up from 71 million females and 67 million males in 2021.

Supporting these trends, the United Nations report on *World Population Ageing* (2017) suggests that by 2030, the number of individuals aged 60 years and above in India is likely to exceed the population of children below the age of 10. The proportion of elderly persons in the total population has also been steadily increasing, rising from 8.6% in 2011 to 10.1 % in 2021, and is projected to reach approximately 13.1% by 2031.

Historical census data further reveal that the ageing population has been growing at a faster rate than the general population. Notably, elderly women have consistently outnumbered men since the 1990s, and this trend strengthened over time. These demographic changes underline the urgency of addressing issues related to ageing, particularly in terms of care, dependency and social protection.

Literature Review

The growing body of scholars on ageing in India has increasingly recognised elder abuse as a significant social concern, particularly in the context of rising life expectancy and changing family structures. Elder abuse is widely conceptualised as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing physical, emotional, psychological, financial abuse, and neglect, typically occurring within relationships of trust. Global estimates suggest that nearly one in six older adults experiences some form of abuse, highlighting its widespread nature (Pillemer et al., 2016). In India, however, the issue remains substantially underreported due to social stigma, familial pressures, emotional attachment to caregivers, and limited awareness of legal and institutional support mechanisms (HelpAge India, 2022).

A central theme in the literature is the role of dependency in shaping vulnerability among older adults. With advancing age, declining physical and cognitive capacities often increase reliance on caregivers for Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs). Empirical evidence from India demonstrates a strong association between functional limitations and the likelihood of experiencing abuse (Sathya & Premkumar, 2020). However, dependency extends beyond physical limitations and operates within broader relational, economic, and institutional contexts.

Scholars such as Dong (2015) argue that dependency restructures intra-household power dynamics by placing elderly individuals in subordinate positions. These asymmetrical relationships often facilitate neglect, coercion, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. The risk is further intensified where caregivers experience financial hardship, emotional stress, or competing family responsibilities (Eastman, 1994; Nolan, Grant & Keady, 1996). Consequently, dependency should be understood not merely as a condition of need but as a mechanism through which authority, control, and decision-making become unequally distributed within families.

Importantly, these dynamics operate across multiple levels of social organisation. At the micro level, declining health, disability, psychological well-being, and financial insecurity influence the experiences of individual older adults. At the meso level, caregiving relationships, household power structures, family conflict, and intergenerational interactions shape the likelihood of abuse or neglect. At the macro level, demographic ageing, labour market insecurity, inadequate pension systems, urbanisation, migration, and institutional weaknesses influence family caregiving arrangements and the availability of formal support. Examining elder abuse through these interconnected levels provides a more comprehensive understanding of how individual experiences are shaped by broader social, economic, and institutional processes.

Disability and functional impairment constitute another critical dimension of vulnerability. Studies indicate that elderly individuals with multiple functional limitations are significantly more likely to experience abuse because of increased dependence on caregivers (Sathya & Premkumar, 2020). This highlights the close relationship between disability, dependency, unequal power relations, and susceptibility to mistreatment.

Beyond dependency and disability, an increasing body of literature emphasises the importance of an intersectional perspective in understanding elder abuse. Vulnerability is not determined by age alone but is shaped by the interaction of gender, socio-economic status, disability, marital status, educational attainment, and place of residence. Elderly women, particularly widows and those without independent financial resources, experience cumulative disadvantages resulting from patriarchal norms, unequal inheritance rights, limited labour force participation, and lifelong economic dependence (Pillemer et al., 2016). Likewise, elderly persons living in poverty, rural areas, or with disabilities often encounter additional barriers in accessing healthcare, legal protection, and social security benefits. These intersecting inequalities demonstrate that elder abuse reflects broader patterns of social exclusion and structural disadvantage rather than isolated family conflicts.

The transformation of family structures in India has also received considerable scholarly attention. Traditionally, the joint family system functioned as the primary institution of elder care, ensuring intergenerational support and social security. However, urbanisation, migration, industrialisation, and economic restructuring have contributed to the gradual decline of joint families and the emergence of nuclear households (Bloom et al., 2015). While families continue to provide the primary source of care, their capacity to support older adults has weakened, creating what many scholars describe as a growing "care deficit."

Empirical studies, including those by Kumar, Patra, and Somdutt (2019), confirm the existence of elder abuse in both rural and urban settings, although actual prevalence is believed to be considerably higher because of underreporting. These studies emphasise the importance of improving financial literacy, strengthening awareness of legal rights, expanding access to welfare schemes, and developing effective reporting and intervention mechanisms.

Although existing literature has made significant contributions, elder abuse is still frequently examined either as a public health concern or as a family-level issue, with relatively limited attention given to broader structural inequalities, governance, and criminal justice dimensions. Similarly, while quantitative studies provide valuable evidence regarding prevalence and associated risk factors, they often overlook the lived experiences, household power relations, and institutional contexts that shape abuse.

A critical review of the literature therefore reveals several important gaps. First, although financial dependency is widely recognised as a major risk factor, relatively few studies explain how it transforms household power relations across micro-, meso-, and macro-level processes. Second, most existing studies rely

predominantly on quantitative surveys, providing limited insight into the everyday experiences of older adults and their caregivers. Third, limited research integrates Political Economy of Ageing, Dependency Theory, and Feminist Gerontology within a single analytical framework to explain elder abuse. Fourth, the interaction between gender, disability, socio-economic inequality, and institutional access remains insufficiently explored in the Indian context. Finally, relatively few studies examine elder abuse simultaneously as a public health issue, a social welfare concern, a criminal justice issue, and a question of social justice.

Addressing these gaps, the present study combines empirical evidence with a multidimensional theoretical framework to examine how financial dependency, changing family dynamics, gender inequality, and institutional limitations interact to shape elder abuse in contemporary India. By linking individual experiences with broader structural processes, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of ageing, vulnerability, and social justice.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework by integrating the Political Economy of Ageing, Dependency Theory, and Feminist Gerontology to examine elder abuse as a result of interacting economic, social, and family factors. The framework views elder abuse not only as a family issue but also as a consequence of broader structural inequalities and institutional limitations. At the macro level, the Political Economy of Ageing explains how demographic transition, inadequate social security, limited pension coverage, and economic insecurity increase the financial vulnerability of older adults. These structural factors often compel elderly individuals to depend on their families, thereby increasing the risk of abuse. At the meso level, Dependency Theory highlights how financial, emotional, and physical dependence alters power relations within households. As older adults become more dependent on caregivers, their autonomy and decision-making authority may decline, increasing their susceptibility to neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. At the micro level, Feminist Gerontology emphasises that experiences of ageing differ according to gender, disability, and socio-economic status. Elderly women, widows, and persons with disabilities are often more vulnerable because of lifelong social and economic inequalities. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of elder abuse by linking individual experiences with family relationships and broader institutional conditions. The framework guides the interpretation of the study's findings by demonstrating how financial dependency, changing family structures, and inadequate social protection contribute to elder abuse and highlights the need for stronger social security measures, effective legal implementation, and coordinated institutional support.

Central Argument of the Paper

This paper argues that elder abuse in India is not merely an individual or family issue but a broader social problem shaped by financial dependency, changing family dynamics, and inadequate social security mechanisms. It highlights that financial dependency significantly increases the vulnerability of

older adults by reducing their autonomy and decision-making power within households. Drawing on empirical evidence from the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, the study examines the major forms of elder abuse, explores the relationship between financial dependency and mistreatment, and assesses the effectiveness of existing welfare measures. The paper emphasises that strengthening financial security, improving social support systems, and ensuring effective implementation of welfare and legal measures are essential for protecting the dignity, rights, and well-being of older adults.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted an exploratory quantitative research design to examine perceptions regarding elder abuse in the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The study relied primarily on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire. To provide broader contextual understanding and support the interpretation of findings, relevant secondary sources, including government reports, policy documents, books, and peer-reviewed journal articles, were also consulted.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions covering key themes such as family dynamics, financial dependency, awareness of elder abuse, reporting behaviour, and perceptions of existing welfare and legal mechanisms. A total of 46 respondents participated in the survey. The inclusion of open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their views, providing qualitative insights that complemented the quantitative findings obtained from the closed-ended responses. Secondary data were collected from authoritative sources, including publications of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the National Statistical Office (NSO), the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), HelpAge India reports, World Health Organization publications, and relevant academic literature.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling technique because of practical constraints related to accessibility, time, and the sensitive nature of elder abuse. Since elder abuse often remains a private and underreported issue, probability sampling was not considered feasible within the scope of the study. The initial target sample comprised approximately 50 respondents; however, after excluding incomplete responses, the final sample consisted of 46 participants. Although the sample size is relatively small and limits statistical generalisation, it is appropriate for an exploratory study aimed at generating context-specific insights into perceptions of elder abuse in the Jammu region.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns in respondents' perceptions of elder abuse, financial dependency, changing family dynamics, gender differences, and awareness of welfare mechanisms. Responses to the open-ended questions were reviewed and organised thematically to support the interpretation of the quantitative findings. These qualitative responses were used to enrich the discussion by providing additional context and illustrating participants' perspectives.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured by designing the questionnaire on the basis of established themes identified in the existing literature on elder abuse, including financial dependency, family relationships, social protection, and institutional support. The study also drew upon secondary literature to contextualise and interpret the findings. Nevertheless, certain limitations should be acknowledged, including the relatively small sample size, the use of convenience sampling, and reliance on respondents' self-reported perceptions. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and context-specific and should not be generalised to the wider elderly population in India.

Ethical Considerations

Formal institutional ethical approval was not required for this study because it involved voluntary participation in a low-risk social science survey and did not involve clinical procedures or sensitive biomedical data. Nevertheless, the study adhered to accepted ethical principles governing social science research. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage without any adverse consequences. No personally identifiable information was collected, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the study. All data were securely stored, used exclusively for academic purposes, presented only in aggregated form, and permanently deleted after completion of the research.

Results and Findings

India's transition into an ageing society, driven by declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, has significantly altered the demographic structure. While this transformation reflects advancements in healthcare and longevity, it simultaneously exposes structural vulnerabilities within existing systems of care. The findings of this study, based on empirical evidence from the Jammu region of J&K, reveal that elder abuse is not an isolated or incidental occurrence but a socially embedded phenomenon shaped by changing family structures, economic dependencies, and cultural transitions.

Transformation of Family Structures and Decline of Elder Authority

The findings indicate that respondents perceived significant changes in traditional family structures over the past few decades. Most participants believed that the gradual shift from joint families to nuclear families has reduced the involvement of older adults in household decision-making and everyday family activities. Respondents reported that migration, urbanisation, changing lifestyles, and increasing work-related commitments have weakened traditional caregiving arrangements. Many participants observed that older adults now receive less emotional attention and social support than in the past. Several respondents also indicated that elderly family members often experience loneliness, reduced authority within the household, and greater dependence on younger family members for financial and personal assistance. Overall, the responses suggest that participants perceived changing family structures as an important factor influencing the well-being and social position of older adults within families.

Visibility and Normalisation of Elder Abuse

Visibility and Normalisation of Elder Abuse

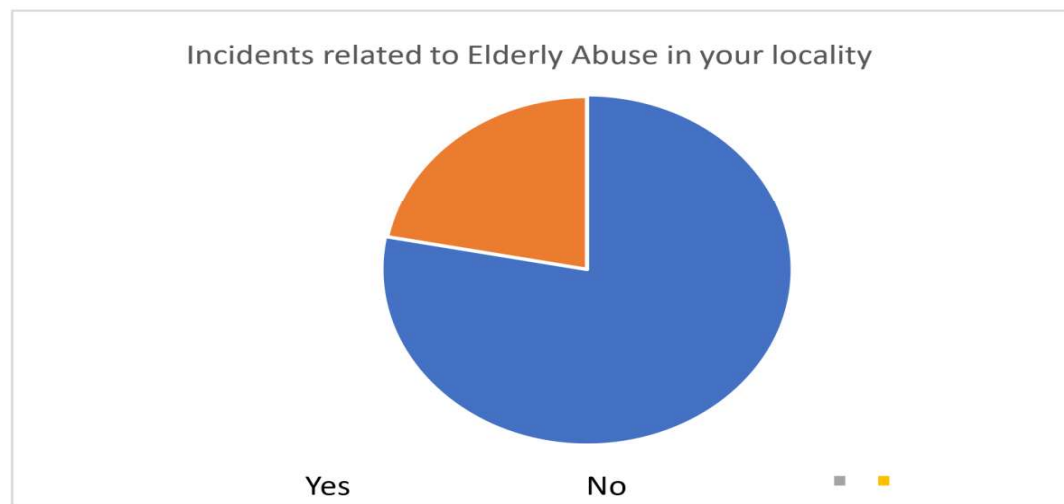


Figure 1. Respondents' Perceptions of Incidents of Elder Abuse in Their Locality

Source: Primary Survey (N = 46).

Interpretation: Figure 1 shows respondents' perceptions regarding the occurrence of elder abuse in their locality. The responses indicate that participants generally recognised elder abuse as an existing social concern, although the extent of its occurrence varied according to individual perceptions.

The survey findings indicate that respondents were generally aware that elder abuse exists within their communities. As illustrated in Figure 1, many participants acknowledged that incidents of elder abuse occur in their localities, although the perceived frequency varied among respondents.

Participants identified emotional neglect, social isolation, financial exploitation, verbal mistreatment, and physical abuse as common forms of elder abuse. Several respondents observed that neglect and emotional abuse often remain unnoticed because they are considered part of normal family behaviour rather than recognised as abuse.

The findings further suggest that respondents perceived multiple forms of abuse as occurring simultaneously rather than in isolation, with emotional neglect and financial exploitation being frequently mentioned together.

Culture of Silence and the Politics of Non-Reporting

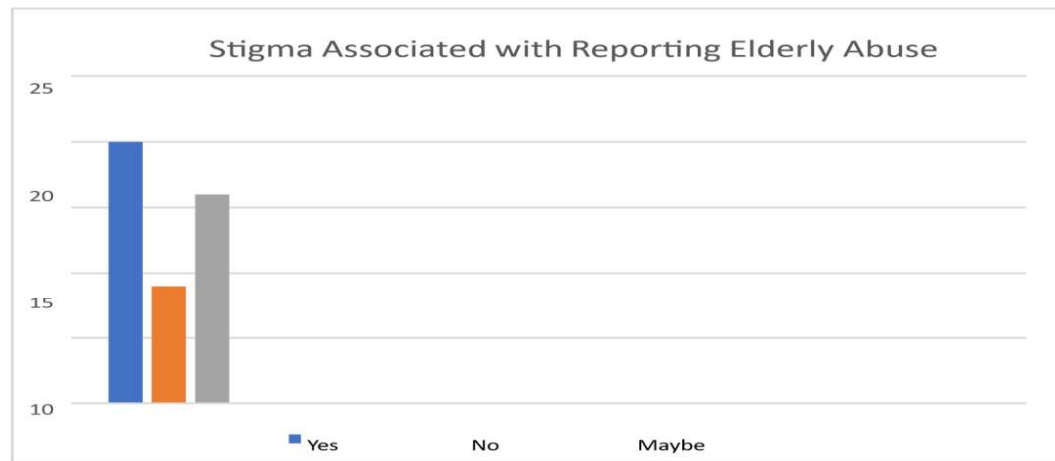


Figure 2. Perceived Stigma Associated with Reporting Elder Abuse

Source: Primary Survey (N = 46)

Interpretation: Figure 2 illustrates respondents' views regarding the stigma associated with reporting elder abuse. Most participants believed that fear of social stigma and concerns about family reputation discourage older adults from reporting abuse. The findings reveal that respondents perceived elder abuse to be substantially underreported. As presented in Figure 2, many participants believed that older adults hesitate to report abuse because of fear of social stigma, emotional attachment to family members, financial dependence, and concern for family reputation. Several respondents stated that older adults often tolerate neglect or mistreatment to preserve family harmony or avoid creating conflict within the household. Others believed that limited awareness of legal rights and available welfare mechanisms also discourages reporting. Overall, the findings indicate that respondents viewed social and family-related factors as major barriers preventing older adults from seeking assistance.

Financial Dependency as a Structural Determinant of Abuse

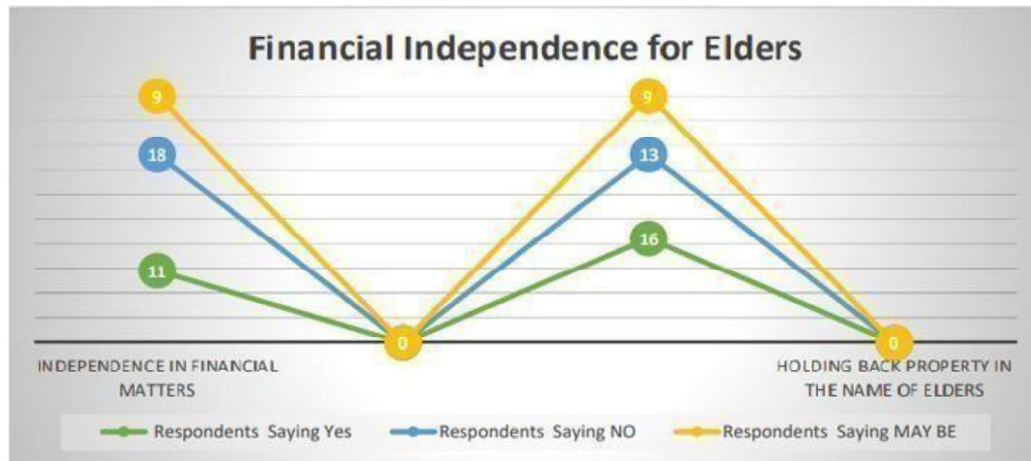


Figure 3 Respondants Perception on Financial dependency

The findings indicate that respondents perceived financial dependency as one of the most important factors associated with elder abuse. Many participants believed that older adults who depend financially on their family members are more likely to experience neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. Respondents also reported that financial independence through pensions, personal savings, or other independent sources of income was associated with greater autonomy and participation in household decision-making. Some participants observed that financial dependence often limits the ability of older adults to express their opinions or challenge unfair treatment within the family. Overall, respondents considered financial security to be an important factor influencing the dignity and well-being of older adults.

Gendered Nature of Elder Abuse

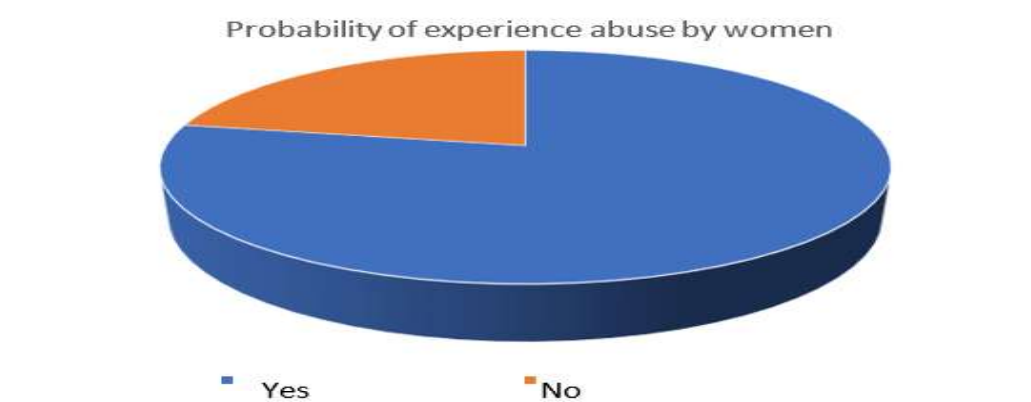


Figure 4. Perceptions Regarding Women's Vulnerability to Elder Abuse

Source: Primary Survey (N = 46)

Interpretation: Figure 4 presents respondents' opinions on whether elderly women are more vulnerable to abuse. The responses suggest that many participants perceived widows and financially dependent elderly women to be at greater risk of neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. The survey findings indicate that respondents perceived elderly women to be more vulnerable to abuse than elderly men. As shown in Figure 4, many participants believed that widows and financially dependent women are particularly vulnerable to neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation. Several respondents attributed this vulnerability to limited financial independence, traditional gender roles, and unequal access to economic resources throughout life. Participants also observed that elderly women living alone or without independent income often face greater challenges in accessing support. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents perceived gender as an important dimension influencing experiences of elder abuse.

Inadequacies in Social Security and Institutional Mechanisms

Awareness of social security mechanism

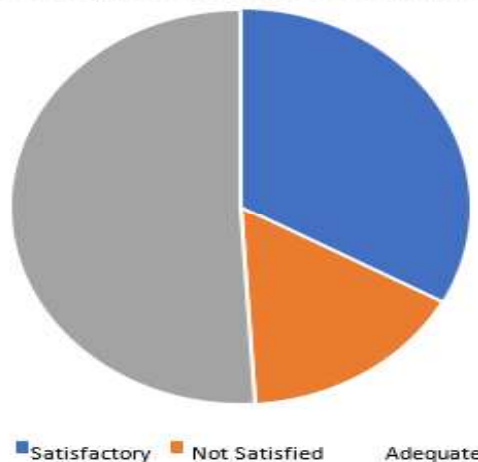


Figure 5. Respondents' Satisfaction with Existing Social Security Mechanisms

Source: Primary Survey (N = 46).

Interpretation: Figure 5 presents respondents' perceptions of existing social security mechanisms for older adults. While some participants expressed satisfaction, many believed that current welfare measures require stronger implementation and wider accessibility.

The findings reveal that although various welfare schemes and legal provisions exist for older adults, the findings indicate mixed perceptions regarding existing social security mechanisms for older adults. As illustrated in Figure 5, respondents expressed varying levels of satisfaction with available welfare schemes and institutional support. Many participants believed that although government programmes and legal provisions exist, their implementation remains inadequate. Respondents frequently mentioned limited

awareness, procedural difficulties, and restricted accessibility as barriers preventing older adults from benefiting fully from available schemes. The findings suggest that participants perceived improvements in implementation and awareness as necessary for strengthening support for older adults.

Role and Limitations of Social Welfare Organisations

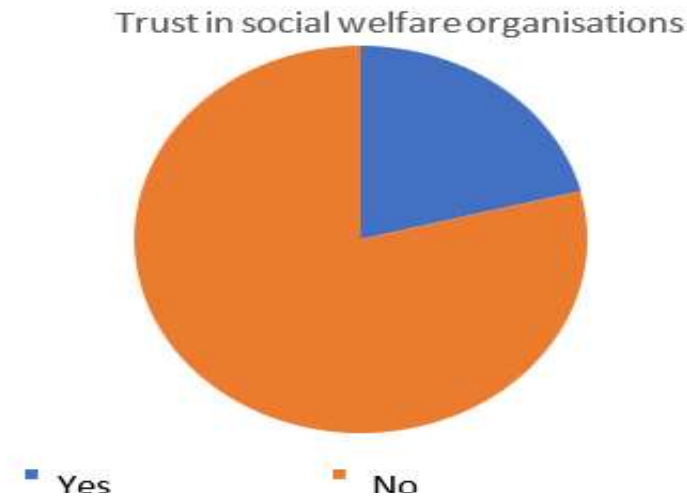


Figure 6. Respondents' Trust in Social Welfare Organisation

Source: Primary Survey (N = 46)

Interpretation: Figure 6 illustrates respondents' level of trust in social welfare organisations working with older adults. The responses indicate that although such organisations are viewed positively, participants believed that their outreach and effectiveness could be further strengthened. The findings indicate that respondents generally viewed social welfare organisations as playing an important role in supporting older adults. As shown in Figure 6, many participants expressed confidence in the contribution of these organisations towards awareness generation, counselling, and assistance in accessing welfare services. However, respondents also believed that the reach of such organisations remains limited, particularly in rural areas. Several participants suggested that stronger coordination between government agencies, healthcare providers, community organisations, and civil society groups would improve support for older adults. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents recognised the importance of social welfare organisations while also identifying the need to expand their outreach and effectiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this exploratory study provide important insights into respondents' perceptions of elder abuse in the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Although the study is based on a relatively small,

non-probability sample, the findings highlight the complex interaction between family relationships, financial dependency, gender, and institutional support in shaping the experiences of older adults. Interpreted through the Political Economy of Ageing, Dependency Theory, and Feminist Gerontology, the findings suggest that elder abuse extends beyond individual family conflicts and reflects broader structural and social inequalities.

Transformation of Family Structures and Decline of Elder Authority

The findings indicate that respondents perceived changing family structures as an important factor influencing the position of older adults within households. The gradual transition from joint families to nuclear families, together with urbanisation, migration, and changing socio-economic conditions, appears to have altered traditional caregiving arrangements and reduced the participation of older adults in family decision-making. These findings are consistent with the Political Economy of Ageing, which argues that broader economic and demographic transformations influence family relationships and systems of care. As traditional support structures weaken, older adults may become increasingly dependent on family members for emotional, financial, and physical support. Similar observations have been reported by Bloom et al. (2015), who argue that demographic transition and economic modernisation have significantly reshaped intergenerational support systems in India. The findings also support the first objective of the study by illustrating how social and economic changes influence the vulnerability of older adults. From a social justice perspective, they emphasise the need to strengthen community-based support services and institutional mechanisms capable of complementing family care in contemporary society.

Visibility and Normalisation of Elder Abuse

The findings suggest that respondents recognised elder abuse as a visible social issue; however, many also perceived emotional neglect, social isolation, and controlling behaviour as normal aspects of family life rather than as forms of abuse. This normalisation may reduce awareness of abusive behaviour and discourage timely intervention by both families and institutions. These findings are consistent with previous studies by HelpAge India (2022) and Pillemer et al. (2016), which demonstrate that elder abuse frequently remains hidden within relationships of trust despite being widely experienced. Dependency Theory further explains that unequal power relations within families can make subtle forms of neglect and emotional abuse appear routine rather than unacceptable. The findings therefore indicate that preventing elder abuse requires not only legal protection but also greater public awareness regarding the different forms of abuse experienced by older adults.

Culture of Silence and Non-reporting

One of the important findings of the study relates to respondents' perceptions regarding the underreporting of elder abuse. Participants believed that fear of social stigma, emotional attachment to family members, financial dependence, and concerns regarding family reputation discourage older adults

from reporting abuse. These findings support Dependency Theory, which argues that unequal dependence within caregiving relationships reduces the ability of vulnerable individuals to resist or report mistreatment. The findings also reinforce the Political Economy of Ageing by suggesting that inadequate institutional support and limited access to legal remedies further discourage reporting. The results are broadly consistent with HelpAge India (2022), which reported that many older adults choose not to report abuse because they fear family breakdown or social isolation. From a criminal justice perspective, these findings suggest that improving legal provisions alone is insufficient unless accompanied by confidential reporting mechanisms, legal awareness programmes, accessible legal aid, and stronger institutional support.

Financial Dependency as a Structural Factor

Financial dependency emerged as one of the most significant issues identified by respondents. Participants consistently perceived that older adults lacking independent financial resources were more vulnerable to neglect, emotional abuse, and financial exploitation, whereas financial independence enhanced autonomy and participation in household decision-making. These findings strongly support Dependency Theory, which explains how unequal control over economic resources reshapes household power relations. Older adults who depend financially on family members may experience reduced bargaining power, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and neglect. Similar findings have been reported by Dong (2015) and Sathya and Premkumar (2020), who identify financial dependency as an important factor associated with elder abuse. The findings also reinforce the Political Economy of Ageing by highlighting the importance of pensions, social security, and financial protection in promoting the dignity and independence of older adults. Strengthening income security may therefore reduce vulnerability and improve overall well-being.

Gendered Nature of Elder Abuse

The findings indicate that respondents perceived elderly women, particularly widows and financially dependent women, as more vulnerable to abuse than elderly men. Participants associated this vulnerability with limited financial independence, traditional gender roles, and unequal access to economic resources. These findings are consistent with Feminist Gerontology, which emphasises that experiences of ageing are shaped by the interaction of gender, socio-economic status, and lifelong structural inequalities. Previous studies by Pillemer et al. (2016) similarly highlight that cumulative gender disadvantages continue into old age and influence vulnerability to neglect and exploitation. The findings therefore suggest that policies addressing elder abuse should adopt an intersectional approach by recognising the combined influence of gender, financial dependency, and social inequality on the lives of older adults.

Social Security and Institutional Support

Respondents expressed mixed opinions regarding the effectiveness of existing welfare schemes and legal provisions for older adults. Although

participants acknowledged the existence of various programmes, many believed that limited awareness, procedural barriers, and weak implementation reduce their effectiveness. These findings support the Political Economy of Ageing, which argues that institutional arrangements play an important role in shaping the quality of life of older adults. Welfare measures and legal safeguards are most effective when they are accessible, adequately implemented, and supported by responsive institutions. The findings suggest that greater investment in awareness campaigns, simplified administrative procedures, and improved implementation of existing welfare programmes could enhance protection for older adults and reduce their dependence on family members.

Role of Social Welfare Organisations

The findings indicate that respondents recognised the positive contribution of social welfare organisations in promoting awareness, counselling, and support for older adults. However, participants also believed that these organisations require greater outreach, particularly in rural and underserved areas. These findings highlight the importance of collaborative approaches involving government agencies, healthcare institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities. Strengthening coordination among these stakeholders may improve access to welfare services, legal assistance, and psychosocial support for vulnerable older adults. Overall, the findings suggest that preventing elder abuse requires a comprehensive approach that combines effective family support, financial security, institutional accountability, community awareness, and accessible social protection mechanisms. Such an approach is essential for promoting the dignity, rights, and well-being of older adults and advancing the broader goals of social justice.

Conclusion

The present exploratory study examined perceptions of elder abuse among respondents in the Jammu region of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, with particular emphasis on the influence of changing family structures, financial dependency, gender, and institutional support. The findings suggest that respondents perceived elder abuse as a multidimensional social issue shaped by the interaction of individual, familial, economic, and institutional factors rather than as an isolated private family matter. Participants identified financial dependency, declining intergenerational support, emotional neglect, and inadequate awareness of welfare and legal mechanisms as important concerns affecting the well-being of older adults.

The study further indicates that social and demographic changes, including urbanisation, migration, and the gradual transition from joint to nuclear family systems, have altered traditional caregiving arrangements and contributed to increasing vulnerability among older adults. Respondents also perceived that elderly women, particularly those who are widowed or financially dependent, face greater risks of neglect and exploitation because of persistent gender inequalities and limited economic independence. Furthermore, the findings highlight that fear of social stigma, emotional attachment to family members, and inadequate

awareness of available legal protections discourage many older adults from reporting abuse.

The study demonstrates the relevance of the Political Economy of Ageing, Dependency Theory, and Feminist Gerontology in understanding elder abuse as a complex social phenomenon shaped by structural inequalities, unequal power relations, and changing family dynamics. These theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for explaining how economic insecurity, social transformation, and gender-based disadvantages collectively influence the experiences of older adults.

Although the study is based on a relatively small non-probability sample of 46 respondents and therefore does not permit statistical generalisation beyond the study setting, it provides valuable exploratory insights into public perceptions of elder abuse in the Jammu region. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature by highlighting the importance of examining elder abuse within its broader socio-economic and institutional context.

The study recommends strengthening social security programmes, expanding financial protection for older adults, improving awareness of legal rights and welfare schemes, enhancing community-based support services, and promoting greater collaboration among government agencies, healthcare providers, legal institutions, civil society organisations, and families. Such measures can contribute to protecting the dignity, autonomy, and rights of older adults while promoting a more inclusive and socially just environment.

Future research should employ larger and more representative samples across different regions of India using probability-based sampling techniques to enable broader comparisons and improve the generalisability of findings. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies may also provide deeper insights into the evolving nature of elder abuse and the effectiveness of policy interventions over time.

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Authors' Contributions

The author solely conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the manuscript. All aspects of the research work, including interpretation of findings and final approval of the manuscript, were carried out by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for social science research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, and no personally identifiable information has been disclosed. All data collected through the survey were used solely for academic purposes and were securely handled and subsequently deleted after the completion of the study.

Declaration on the Use of AI-Assisted Tools

The author declares that AI-assisted tools were used solely for language refinement, grammatical editing, and structural organisation of the manuscript. All core aspects of the research, including data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and theoretical development, are entirely the original work of the author. No AI tools were used for generating research data, conducting analysis, or formulating substantive academic arguments. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content presented in this study.

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