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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PROHIBITING ELDERLY ABUSE.

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Abstract

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Elderly abuse is a sensitive issue that requires immediate attention from policy makers, police and members of civil society. Indian elderly traditionally, have been treated with respect and were considered as authoritative figures who took critical decisions. However, with the advent of rapid industrialization, breaking down of traditional joint families and other factors, the position of the elderly has deteriorated in society. In the current context, it has become crucial for the elderly to opt for practical strategies for preventing themselves from abuse. **Method:** With such an understanding a survey was conducted using purposive sampling method among 65 respondents (male and female), aged 65-86 years, residents of urban Kolkata and having at least a graduation degree. **Findings** suggested that elderly are aware of abuse and ways to prevent it, but don't implement these strategies for various reasons. Most elderly agreed that a strong legal system along with necessary governmental education and empowerment of senior citizens about abuse is a practical call. **Conclusion:** Maintaining an active social life so as to prevent isolation was also suggested by many. The main thrust of this paper is to highlight some practical solutions for preventing abuse and the coping mechanisms and suggestions along with the concept of 'Gendered Elderly Abuse' since elderly women are even more vulnerable than men.

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Introduction:-

Respecting elders has always been a crucial component of the cultural fabric of Indian society. The same is true for other traditional societies. However, over past some years, incidents of elderly abuse have been reported in the media with alarming regularity. This has prompted academicians, researchers and lawmakers to investigate the causes of elderly abuse and analyze the situation from viewpoint of these abused elderly.

Currently, various definitions of elderly abuse exist. WHO (2014) defines elderly abuse as "single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship, where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person". Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2014) defines it as "any abuse or neglect of persons aged 60 and older by a caregiver or another person in a relationship involving an expectation of trust". The National Center on Elderly Abuse (2014) has pointed out seven types of abuse that include physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse, self-neglect, abandonment and neglect. For general purposes, elderly abuse can be defined as neglecting or abusing a senior citizen, causing him or her grave physical, mental, emotional and financial damages. While in reality all elderly people can experience abuse, certain risk factors such as economic dependence of the abused or abuser, lack of adjustment make the situation more vulnerable for some. WHO in its report (2014) has also mentioned certain risk factors that can aggravate elder abuse. These factors include presence of aggressive family members, financial difficulties, stress and depression in the caregiver, social isolation, generation gap and restructuring of traditional family structures. Apart from these above-mentioned factors, gender also plays an important role in elder abuse. Researchers consider women as a highly vulnerable group as many of

them are economically dependent, illiterate, and don't enjoy an active social life. Moreover, elderly women have a higher life expectancy and also experience widowhood, which make them even more vulnerable (Nayar, 2013).

While many people still refuse to acknowledge the presence of elderly abuse in India, the reality is different. A recent study conducted by Help Age India (2013) revealed that 23% of senior citizens experience abuse. The report further highlighted that 83% of elderly live with their family members, thus contradicting the myth that abuse takes place only in institutional settings. Most importantly, despite being abused, 70% did not report the incident. While majority cited 'maintaining confidentiality of the family matter' as the most important reason for not reporting the abuse, 20% revealed that they didn't know how to deal with the issue. This in turn, highlights the importance of educating the elderly about abuse and informing them about the proactive strategies they can implement for preventing abuse, even before it starts. The need of the hour is to make them understand the present socio-economic scenario and preparing themselves accordingly. Apart from the government, the general public, including the young generation should also play a crucial role in preventing elderly abuse.

While in the present scenario it is important to investigate the causes and effects of elderly abuse, it is even more crucial to prevent elderly abuse at the outset. Preventing abuse will help many elderly a dignified life, save resources of the state and in general, promote a sensitive and understanding outlook in the society. Against the background, this study has been designed to highlight some strategies elderly people can implement for preventing abuse.

Review of Literature:-

As stated earlier, elderly abuse is a sensitive and complicated issue. It is also associated with feelings of guilt, shame, helplessness and this is a major reason why many elderly don't feel comfortable in talking about the issue. Still, many studies have attempted to explore the issue. One study conducted by Ushasree and Basha (1999) revealed that apart from being deprived from food and proper medical care, many elderly people have been financially exploited. This study also highlighted that certain critical differences exist between more disabled and less disabled elderly. The severely disabled elderly were deprived of attention and empathy by their caregivers, whereas the people suffering from comparatively lower disability were exploited financially. Another study conducted by Patel and Katoria (2013) revealed that 16% of the elderly residing in West Delhi have experienced abuse within past 6 months. According to the study, verbal abuse is the most common type of abuse, followed by physical and emotional abuse. While in 24% of cases, the abuse occurred because of property-related issues, in 18% cases each, it was due to absence of health care and basic requirements. Other issues that instigated abuse included not taking responsibility of the household and raising kids and depending on others because of disability. Peri, Fanslow, Hand & Parsons (2009) had conducted a study among senior citizens of New Zealand. Most of the respondents were of the opinion that the main reason why they are mistreated is because of the fact that they are no longer associated with 'paid employment'. In other words, they are considered as unproductive and hence, burden on family members. The respondents also stated that elder women are at greater risk of financial abuse as socio-cultural norms usually prevent them from educating themselves about financial matters. Another study conducted by Raju (2013) revealed 23.3% of elderly women in Mumbai have experienced abuse. In this paper, the researcher has also discussed certain specific problems faced by elderly women that put them at a greater risk for abuse. These factors include lack of job opportunities, insufficient finances, irregular medical care, insufficient nutrition and lack of company. Researchers Homer and Gilleard (1990) had conducted a study at Putney and Barnes hospital, where 45% of caregivers admitted that they had abused elderly people in some way or the other. Most elderly, however, refused to accept prevalence of abuse in the hospital. The risk factors for abuse included consumption of alcohol by the caregiver and previous history of abuse. Conner, Prokhorov, Page, Fang, Xiao, Post (2011) attempted to study the prevalence of elderly abuse in private households. According to the study, the greater assistance an elderly requires from the caregiver or relative, the higher is his/her risk of being abused. The researchers further stated that elderly people suffering from cognitive impairment require greater help in completing daily activities and hence, can face greater abuse. According to the study by Brozowski and Hall (2010) that was conducted in Canada, women, divorced elderly, residents of urban areas and those belonging to the low-income group have greater risk of facing sexual and physical abuse. Gorbien and Eisenstein (2005) state that risk factors for elderly mistreatment range from low income and education, isolation, older age, functional and cognitive impairment, previous history of violence or psychological abuse to stress experienced by caregiver and substance abuse by the caregiver or elderly person.

Research Objectives:-

- ❖ To understand what is considered as abuse by senior citizens.
- ❖ To know what are the practical solutions for preventing/reducing abuse.

- ❖ To know what can be a possible policy framework regarding elderly abuse so that there can be positive changes in the society regarding treatment of the elderly.

Methodology:-

Area: This survey was conducted in the urban Kolkata in ward no 115.

Sample: A sample of 65 respondents consisting of 35 women and 30 men, aged between 60-86 years with minimum of a graduation degree were selected using purposive and snowball sampling.

Procedure: After the sample was drawn, a face to face interview was taken for collecting information. An interview schedule was prepared consisting of a five point category of answer for each question. Each of the five point of response categories ranged from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Respondents were asked to choose any of these response categories for each option.

Findings:-

This paper focuses mainly on the strategies that senior citizens can consider for preventing abuse. For analyzing the situation from their viewpoint, queries related to what constitutes abuse and its prevention were asked. They were also requested to express their opinion regarding a suggestive policy framework. The main purpose of asking this question was to acquire information that would enhance capacity of the government, NGOs and other organizations that work for the elderly.

Table 1: Opinion regarding what causes elderly abuse.

Serial number	Categories Items/Opinions/Response	1 Strongly agree	2 Agree	3 Neutral	4 Disagree	5 Strongly disagree
	Opinion regarding prevalence of elderly abuse in domestic settings					
1	Beating/injuring	26 (40%)	20 (30.76%)	9 (13.84%)	6 (9.23%)	4 (6.15%)
2	Ignoring/disrespecting	3 (47.69%)	25 (38.46%)	5(7.69%)	3(4.61%)	1 (1.53%)
3	Neglecting/abandoning	36(55.38%)	22 (33.84%)	5 (7.69%)	2 (3.07%)	0
4	Stealing money, withdrawing money without consent	29(44.61%)	34 (52.30%)	2(3.07%)	0	0
5	Overmedication/under medication	26 (40%)	21 (32.30%)	5 (7.69%)	7 (10.76%)	6 (9.23%)

The first objective of the paper was to know opinion of the respondents regarding what constitutes abuse. For this reason, respondents were asked whether beating, ignoring or disrespecting, neglecting, stealing money without consent and providing harmful medications constitute abuse. The data obtained have been presented in Table 1.

While many people think that only physically hurting or injuring an elderly can be considered abuse, the truth is that not interacting with elderly people, ignoring their views or neglecting them, stealing money without their consent and providing them with wrong medications can also come under the purview of elderly abuse. In this respect, it can be mentioned that according to WHO (2014), elderly abuse, in general, can be divided into few categories that include physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse. WHO further states that neglect should also be considered as one type of abuse.

Table 2: Opinion regarding preventing/reducing abuse.

	Categories	1	2	3	4	5
Serial number	Items/Opinions/Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	Opinion regarding preventing/reducing elderly abuse					
1	Staying economically independent	34(52.30%)	25(38.46%)	5 (7.69%)	1 (1.53%)	0 (%)
2	Strengthening inter-generational bond	42(64.61%)	13(20%)	8(12.30%)	1(1.53%)	1(1.53%)
3	Leading a socially active life	36(55.38%)	24(36.92%)	1 (1.53%)	3 (4.61%)	1(1.53%)
4	Doing research or background check before hiring caregivers	18(27.69%)	27(41.53%)	8 (12.3%)	10(15.38%)	2 (3.07%)
5	Understanding the rights of senior citizens	33(50.76%)	21(32.30%)	5 (7.69%)	4 (6.15%)	2 (3.07%)

The second objective of the paper was to know about some practical solutions that can prevent elderly abuse. The data obtained have been presented in Table 2. Several suggestions regarding how to prevent elderly abuse exist at the theoretical level. However, the need of the hour is to find some practical solutions that would address the critical issue of elderly abuse. Table 2 shows that 52.30% of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement that staying economically independent can be an effective way of preventing abuse as the elderly doesn't need to depend on anyone for meeting the required expenses. 38.46% agreed with this statement, while 7.69% remained neutral and 1.53% disagreed. It can be added here that staying financially independent, even after retirement, is important as it increases one's self-worth and helps one to stay in touch with the reality.

Strengthening inter-generational bond is important for preventing abuse as it allows parents and children or between grandparents and grandchildren to understand each other and develop a positive relationship. 64.61% and 20% of respondents strongly agreed and agreed with this statement respectively, while 12.30% stayed neutral. 1.53% disagreed and strongly disagreed in both cases. In the 21st century, the socio-economic structures of most societies, including the traditional ones are undergoing rapid changes, thus causing confusion and misunderstandings. For this reason, implementing this strategy is especially important as it will help concerned parties to understand each other better.

Table 2 shows that 55.38% and 36.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively with the fact that leading a socially active life can prevent abuse as it helps one to stay in touch with friends, family. 1.53%, however, stayed neutral, with 4.61% and 1.53% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. It is crucial to remember that in many cases, abuse takes place because of isolation. Therefore, staying in touch with friends, family members and relatives is important.

Acquiring detailed information about a caregiver before hiring him/her is an effective step in preventing abuse. This is because in many families, parents of working children have to spend many hours with the caregiver and hiring a person who has a past record of violence or isn't sensitive towards the elderly enhances the risk for abuse. As Table 2 shows, 27.69%, 41.53%, 12.3%, 15.38%, 3.07% of the respondents strongly agreed, agreed, stayed neutral, strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively with the statement.

According to Table 2, 50.76% of the respondents strongly agreed that knowing one's rights as a senior citizen can prevent abuse, while 32.30% agreed with it. 6.15% strongly disagreed with it, while 3% disagreed. 7.69% remained neutral. Understanding one's rights is extremely crucial as it allows one to take concrete steps, in case of any abuse.

Table 3: Opinion regarding a possible policy framework for preventing/reducing abuse.

	Categories	1	2	3	4	5
Serial number	Items/Opinions/Response	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	Opinion regarding a policy framework that addresses elderly abuse					
1	Drafting stricter laws against abuse with clearly defined punishments	40(61.53%)	21(32.30%)	1 (1.53%)	2 (3.0%)	1 (1.53%)
2	Organizing seminar/workshops regularly for creating awareness among elderly	15(23.07%)	28(43.07%)	5 (7.69%)	7 (10.7%)	10 (15.38%)
3	Developing skilled and trained caregivers	37(56.92%)	16(24.61%)	1 (1.53%)	4 (6.15%)	7 (10.76%)
4	Providing special legal assistance to elderly who have reduced decision making capacity	43(66.15%)	19(29.23%)	3 (4.61%)	0	0
5	Developing community-based efforts that can respond to elderly abuse quickly	17(26.15%)	26(40%)	9 13.84%)	9 (13.84%)	4(6.15%)

The third objective of the paper was to understand viewpoint of respondents regarding a possible policy framework that can effectively prevent elderly abuse. The data acquired have been presented in Table 3. As it can be seen in Table 3, 61.53% and 32.30% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively with the statement that policy framework should include strict laws against different types of abuse with clearly mentioned punishments for each type of abuse. 3.0% and 1.53%, however, disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively as they felt that laws won't change anything. According to them, the mindset of the people needs to be changed first. 1.53% stayed neutral.

23.07% and 43.07% respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that policy framework should include regularly organizing workshops or seminars for elderly for creating awareness about abuse. They added that strategies for preventing abuse should also be discussed in these seminars. 10.7% and 15.38%, however, disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. 7.69% did not agree or disagree.

Training and developing skilled caregivers is also essential as many working children now hire caregivers for looking after their parents. As Table 3 reveals, 56.92% and 24.61% of respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that policy framework should include developing skilled caregivers as they now take care of senior citizens, instead of children who may be busy with their careers. Additionally, 6.15% and 10.76% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively with the idea, while 1.53% remained neutral.

While all elderly require care and assistance, those with diminished decision taking capacities usually require additional help. While 66.15 % of respondents strongly agreed that government needs to focus its attention on elderly who may have reduced decision making capacity and ensure that they are not abused in anyway, 29.23% agreed with the same. 4.61% stayed neutral. Finally, including community-based efforts or resources in the policy framework is important as these resources can respond to incidents of elderly abuse immediately. 26.15% and 40% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed with the statement, while 13.84% and 6.15% disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. 13.84% remained neutral.

Analysis:-

It is important to understand that elder abuse is a critical problem and every member of the society-ranging from family members and police to the lawmakers should be well-equipped for handling this problem. Also, elderly people should understand the signs of abuse so that they can ask for help, if mistreated. They should be encouraged to monitor their financial affairs regularly so that no one-even trusted family members can take undue advantage of

the trust and cause serious damages. A recent study conducted by MetLife Mature Market Institute, the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and National Committee for Prevention of Elder Abuse (2009) estimated average financial loss by victims of elderly abuse as around \$2.6 billion dollars. National Adult Protective Services Association (2014) also recognizes financial exploitation of the elderly as a serious problem, stating that in maximum cases, the abuser is a close relative or family member. Educating oneself about financial issues can be a good way to prevent abuse. Such a step will allow one to control finances and enhance confidence.

It is also important to remain socially active as much as possible. Social activities can include going out for walks, meeting friends and relatives and organizing informal meetings. Even if health issues restrict someone from venturing outside, it would still be a good idea to stay in touch over phone or emails. Apart from improving the quality of life, such a step also minimizes the risk for abuse. This step is especially crucial for elderly women as they often fall prey to physical abuse, because of their isolation. In the 21st century, many children are forced to live away from elderly parents because of career or other reasons. In such a case, it is even more important to stay in touch with parents and ensure that they are leading a happy and healthy life. Additionally, before appointing a caregiver, it would be a good idea to check his/her background. Finally, the police and lawmakers of our society should also take concrete steps against elderly abuse. Apart from drafting strict laws against elderly abuse, the police should lodge complaints immediately, if any elderly person complains of abuse. Police officers can also collaborate with NGOs for monitoring the well-being of the elderly. Apart from implementing safety measures, community policing can also be considered by the lawmakers.

Conclusion:-

The above discussion points out the fact that elderly abuse is a common occurrence in our society. Unfortunately, the senior citizens themselves and their family members are not always prepared for handling this ongoing crisis. Even if they are aware of the strategies that need to be implemented for stopping abuse, they don't implement them for fear of retaliation, stigma or other factors. Even the lawmakers and police don't pay sufficient attention to the issue or react pro-actively. Occasionally, the government and lawmakers do try to create awareness about elderly abuse. Unfortunately, such a step often doesn't bring desired results as simply informing people about existence of elderly abuse fails to create any strong impact. Rather, they should be educated about identifying the signs of abuse so that they can stop it as soon as possible. They should also be encouraged to report incidents of abuse to the police.

Considering gravity of the situation, it is responsibility of the sociologists to highlight the issue of elderly abuse, its causes and preventive strategies so that it attracts attention of every member of the society. We must be equipped the resources that would help us to prevent abuse as quickly as possible.

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