Chapter V

Elderly Women’s Social Relations and Environment
ELDERLY WOMEN’s SOCIAL RELATIONS AND ENVIROMENT

“I have bonded with many people in the locality. I feel that interacting with people gives me hope to survive and I feel alive...at least once a month, I speak to my school friends and to other friends whom I have met in my life journey. I make an attempt to call my daughter even though I fear that she might ask for money.” - Manjula

“I telephone all my friends and relatives on the first day of every month, with a hope that they will be courteous and return my call. As I can’t travel out due to my knee pain, I don’t go to church often. I go to church once in a while, but I donate money for the church regularly.” - Mary

“I want to be a “getter” in old age, rather than a “giver”. I now want my brothers to take care of us. I don’t depend on my family members for any financial needs; I expect only care and concern. I can see my younger sister in a helpless situation, on the other hand, my brothers have taken me for granted, and my nephew and niece look for me when they want pocket money. I can’t say no to them. If I say no to them, they don’t talk to me. I have faith in them that they will take care of us once they get a job. Sometimes my half-brother visits us; they are caring towards my mother. My mother wanted me to care for my half-brothers too. My half-brothers run my father’s business. I feel that my family members perceive me as a motherly figure...they all look up to me, both financially and emotionally, but I like to associate myself with the identity of a doctor. My brothers told me that I am the ultimate authority of this family...I have no other option than to give them whatever they need. I hope that they will take care of me in the future.” - Lakshmi
In this chapter, the researcher tries to understand how elderly women consider themselves in the context of social relations, while ageing. The chapter also demonstrates how elderly women’s deprivation and realisation of their functioning, with respect to social relations, impact their freedom and choices.

Max Weber defines the term social relationship as “behaviour of plurality of actors in so far as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes accounts of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship, thus, consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action, irrespective, for the time being, of the basis for this probability” (Weber 1964: 26-27).

According to Max Weber, the interaction between individuals need not be positive always, there can be hostility, conflict or friendship. However, the interaction between two individuals makes it a social relationship, when there is meaningful action oriented towards other actors.

This implies that social relation is an individual’s behaviour in social context that is oriented towards others. The meaning of the behaviour or action is the outcome of the interaction that happens between the individual and others in the given circumstances.

With this orientation, the researcher tries to understand and explore how elderly women perceive their connectivity with others in their social context. In other words, the study tends to comprehend how elderly women see their relationship with others in old age. Their shared experiences on social relationship illustrate what elderly women want from others, what they value in a relationship, and how relationships change in old age.

Studies have shown that social relations in old age influences both positively and negatively on the elderly population (Stansfeld, Fuhrer, and Shipley 1998; Fogarty, Fredman, Heeren and Liebschutz, 2008).
The studies point out that even if the elderly people receive financial support from other social relations such as friends and others, they feel depressed when their family members fail to show moral support.

In this study, the researcher looks at social relations by grouping the capabilities in a way that relates to one’s own relationship with social systems. Thus, the researcher envisions that these capabilities are fibres of social relations. Along with it, the researcher conceptualised social environment and mobility of the elderly women using the definition proposed by Ingrid Robyns that portrays social environment ‘as a place where people live safely, enjoy a pleasant living and move according to their wishes’.

The researcher used the capability list proposed by Ingrid as guiding tenants to explore how elderly women see their relationship with the social systems, their mobility in the place they dwell. The list is as follows:

1. **Social Relations**: Being able to be part of social networks and to give and receive social support
2. **Mobility**: Being able to move and be mobile.
3. **Leisure Activities**: Being able to engage in leisure activities.
4. **Time Autonomy**: Being able to exercise autonomy in allocating one’s time.
5. **Respect**: Being able to be respected and treated with dignity.
6. **Religion**: Being able to choose to live or not to live according to a religion.
7. **Shelter and Environment**: Being able to be sheltered and to live in a safe and pleasant environment.

**a. Family and Community as a ‘Site of Care’ and Being Cared For**

The elderly women perceive staying with family as a blessing, as being surrounded by family members insulates them from fear. This is true for every older woman, irrespective of her social position.
The elderly women’s narratives show that women have internalised staying within the boundaries of family and community, as it gives them safety.

Elderly women wish to be connected to their extended family members and friends too, as they find it difficult to make new relationships, unless they are pushed into such situations. In some cases, women experience neglect. Irrespective of the neglect, they value their family relationships. They either opted to move away from the family or stay in situations, in which they start exploring newer families. The narratives of elderly women show that elderly women seek support from their children, spouses, and extended family members.

Kala likes to be with her sons and wishes to perform the role of a grand-mother. Kala always confined herself to family relationships. She doesn’t want to spend her old age among strangers in the paid old age home.

Likewise, Shanti in her life played a very supportive role in raising her nieces and nephews. Even now, after her nieces and nephews have their own families, she wishes to support them. She finds it difficult to adjust to the new place.

Shanti regularly chats with her nephews and nieces, at least once in a month. Apart from this, she is part of the organising committee in the temple and, especially after her retirement, she is very active in the temple activities.

Shanti shares:

“I make sure I speak to my nieces and nephews once a month. My house was filled with joy and happiness and I never felt like I was alone living in this flat. My niece once called me to visit her in America. I visited her and she wanted me to stay with her to take care of her children after my retirement."

Manjula likes to affiliate herself with her friends and neighbours. She loves to be around her daughter. Although she is willing to give her emotional support and guidance, she fears that her relationship could become strained if she fails to support her daughter financially.
Manjula shares:

“I have bonded with many people in the locality. I feel that interacting with people gives me hope to survive and I feel alive...at least once a month, I speak to my school friends and to other friends whom I have met in my life journey. I make an attempt to call my daughter even though I fear that she might ask for money.”

Mary likes to be connected with her siblings, nieces and nephews. She calls them on the first day of the month and prays for them. She feels it her responsibility towards her sister and brother. Since she can’t walk long distances, she decided to avoid visiting the church regularly but she donates money to the church and welcomes the church members to her house for prayers.

Mary shares:

“I telephone all my friends and relatives on the first day of every month, with a hope that they will be courteous and return my call. As I can’t travel out due to my knee pain, I don’t go to church often. I go to church once in a while, but I donate money for the church regularly.”

Lakshmi’s life is split between her family and her professional life. She is determined to be single so that she can support her family. In due course of her life, she has become the sole supporter of her family, financially and emotionally.

She elucidates:

“My sister and I decided to remain single when we came to know that our father had a second family. My younger sister solely depends on me for financial assistance. Apart from these issues, my sister and nephew look up to me for their daily requirements.”
Karpagamma is not angry with her children. She knows that they are also fighting against poverty. She feels happy to help her sons and daughter with whatever she can save from her salary. She helps them because she wants them to cremate her with due respect and not to ignore her when she dies.

She illustrates:

“I visit my sons’ once a month, I support them with whatever savings I have. Today evening, I am going to visit my elder son to give him 50,000 rupees as he needs the money to repay his debt, which he has promised to return. I trust him. Anyway he is the one who is going to set fire my pyre on the day of my funeral. I did not tell this to my younger son and daughter, but I do give them money whenever they need it.”

Meenakshi is born into a large family. She likes to associate with her sisters only. Her eldest sister lives with her daughter and her second sister lives with her. She likes to be part of activities conducted in the temple next to her house. In fact, Meenakshi feels lucky to be unmarried, feels blessed to take care of her family.

She shares:

“After my father’s death, our relationship with and participation in the temple has reduced drastically. Now, we don’t like the current temple management because they don’t decorate the Goddess as they used to do previously. I don’t go out or attend any functions and programmes.”

Kasturi likes to be part of her community. She regularly attends meetings conducted in the temple. She feels happy, believes that she is respected more and her presence is appreciated more in her community temple.
She narrates:

“I regularly visit my community temple. The Jain temple is the place where I feel more connected and respected. I attend all the poojas and sing with the group. I believe my presence is appreciated more in temple than at home. I am happy to meet my friends in the temple; we share our thoughts and read ritual books together. I feel more accepted and respected.”

Chandrika feels secured when is surrounded by her sister and her children. She feels scared when she is alone in their house. The presence of her family members gives her a sense of confidence.

She explains:

“I know that I am burdened by household work at my sister’s place. But I will not leave this place. I am aware that I cannot be safe at night. At the end of the day, someone in my family will ask whether I have eaten or taken medicine. My family members have their own struggles and I don’t get angry even when they shout at me.”

(i). Seeking Care from Young and Adult Members in the Family

Elderly women look up to adult and young members of the family for care and concern. The narratives point out that elderly woman continue to care for their family members, irrespective of their ageing process, but also want to be cared for by members whom they looked after for so many years.

Kasturi feels that her family, especially her children, does not give her respect and they realise her presence only when they are in a financial crisis.
She recounts:

“I find it more meaningful to visit the temple than be at home. My husband sits at the shop and chats with his friends. My children and grand-children talk to me whenever they need any favour.”

Lakshmi’s family sees her as a pillar of support. Although her younger brothers are employed, they look up to her for help whenever they are in a crisis. For her younger sister, Lakshmi is the only hope in her life. Her elder sister and her mother trust Lakshmi to take care of them. Although Lakshmi enjoys been the centre of attraction of the family, she never anticipated that she has to continue to support to her family even in her old age. Now-a-days, she is afraid that her family members, especially her brothers and sister, might not respect her, if she does not meet their needs. Lakshmi wants to give up her responsibility of caring for her family, as she needs care from them. She hopes to be taken care of, however, she like to associate herself with her profession than with her family now-a-days.

She narrates:

“I want to be a “getter” in old age, rather than a “giver”. I now want my brothers to take care of us. I don’t depend on my family members for any financial needs; I expect only care and concern. I can see my younger sister in a helpless situation, on the other hand, my brothers have taken me for granted, and my nephew and niece look for me when they want pocket money. I can’t say no to them. If I say no to them, they don’t talk to me. I have faith in them that they will take care of us once they get a job.”

She continues:

“Sometimes my half-brother visits us; they are caring towards my mother. My mother wanted me to care for my half-brothers too. My half-brothers run my father’s business. I feel that my family members perceive me as a motherly figure…they all look up to me, both financially and emotionally, but I like to associate myself with the identity of a doctor. My brothers told me that I am the
ultimate authority of this family...I have no other option than to give them whatever they need. I hope that they will take care of me in the future.”

Shanti has started accepting that she has to lead a lonely life in her old age. She is prepared to inform her nieces and nephew about any soickness in the future, so that they can be around her during her time of death.

Manjula wishes to stay near her daughter and expressed it to her daughter on many occasions. Her daughter has ignored it. However, she has decided to stay in Chennai and hopes to have an identity card in Chennai, so that she can avail the services for elderly people from the government.

She illustrates:

“I am not sure whether my daughter will take care of me in my old age. My daughter works as a Hindi teacher in a CBSE school. I can sense that my health is declining; I may not be able to work as a home nurse and provide care for another elderly person. I suspect that my only daughter will not take care of me in my old age. I am planning to work as long as the elderly man is alive, and consider my current job as my last job. I wish to have a ration card from Tamil Nadu, so that I can receive rice for a lesser amount. I want to be in Chennai because here, I can recollect my childhood memories.”

Kala and Rajathi want their sons to be around or at least near them. But, unfortunately, they are out of the country for jobs. These women have mixed emotions towards their sons. They want their sons to be near them, and, at the same time, they do not want to spoil their careers.

Kala shares:

“I know it is difficult for my son and his family to shift to India. But I desire that they should be with me. I don’t know whether it is right or wrong.”
Rajathi elucidates:

“I am living with my widowed daughter and my grand-son is in primary school. We are afraid to live alone, though we live in apartments surrounded by good people. Still, it can’t replace my son.”

Arokiyamma thought that she will be taking rest in her old age. However, it didn’t happen and she is expected to care for her daughters. It is actually a burden for her as she now has to care for herself and others.

She shares:

“I’m unable to accept the fact that I still have to care for my daughters and grand-children when they should be actually caring for me.”

Sarala lives in a locality surrounded by her relatives. She always stood by her relatives during troubled times and took care of her cousin’s children whenever required. Now, it is disappointing to see that she feels lonely and has to care for herself.

She expresses:

“It is disheartening to see my grown up cousin’s children ignoring me.”

Mary gets disappointed and angry when her siblings or nieces do not visit her or when they do not enquire about her well-being. She expects this from her sister and brother because she is the one who played a motherly role in their lives. Sometimes, she gets angry and shouts at her sister, who is a widow. Later, she calls her and apologises.

Karpagamma’s niece and her grand-daughter extend their support to her. They take care of her happily. It is Karpagamma who feels guilty that she is unable to support her family through her tailoring skills. She admits:
“My niece decided to work as we were getting older and now, it is my niece and grand-daughter who are supporting us. My niece and grand-daughter tell me not to be afraid of anything, but I am losing my confidence.”

Rani and her mother nurtured their nephew. Rani’s confidence in life was her mother, and her nephew was her hope. Now, she understood that she might not get any support from her nephew. She feels happy that she can speak to and share things with her niece, and she is the only family member she connects with. Rani has requested her niece to cremate her body and not to allow it orphaned. This is the only help she wants from her niece.

She narrates:

“We survived on our father’s pension, and the rent we received. My younger brother supported us. My nephew is now an engineer and he has two sons. I never expected that he could do this to me. I sometimes speak to my niece, who stays in Bangalore. Initially, my niece was shocked, when she heard about my circumstances, picked up an argument with her cousin brother, but it was hopeless as her husband didn’t support her in helping me out. My niece is a housewife and her husband wanted her to focus on the family, didn't encourage her in finding support for me. Often, my niece calls me and shares her helplessness. I never wanted any help from my niece; I have only requested her to cremate my body, after my death, as I don’t want my death body to be lying orphaned (Rani started crying).”

Pushpa wishes to be part of and engage with her social system of family and friends. Unfortunately, her maternal family members ignore her and in her family, nobody is alive to take care of her. She desire to be related to people and interact with others and this helps her realise her existence. She happily interacts with her customers in the fruit shop.
She explains:

“In recent days, I have understood the need to interact with people. I am experiencing loneliness and a sense of vacuum for words. I desperately want to be in association with people. I make it a point to talk to customers about their family and convey my wishes to them and it brings me happiness. While growing old, I have realised that I was living for others throughout my life. Now, I have no resources to live my life and am waiting for death to arrive.”

Mostly, elderly women, who are widowed and single, expected support from their family and extended family members. They believe that at least relatives should care for them. However, they get disappointed when they have to practice the same role in old age.

Annam puts it plainly:

“My life is fine after retirement. I sometimes wonder why my husband still expects me to support him, rather than him supporting me to handle daily challenges of old age.”

Bhayalakshmi seems to be in agreement with Annam.

“I often fall sick because of my health issues. I get irritated when my husband asks me to do his work or demands his favourite food or snacks.”

(ii). Looking for Care from Spouse

In the study, the married women expected care and respect from their spouse. Now, these women have started reflecting on their roles as caregivers to their husbands and they attempt to articulate their desire. However, their attempts are ignored as usual.

Kala lives in the paid old age home with her husband. They survive with his pension and the interest amount they get from the money they deposited in the bank after selling their house. Kala has no say on financial decisions till today.
Kala prefers to live with her son in Bangalore. Because of her husband’s decision to live in the old age home, she is unable to be part of her son’s family.

She wishes:

“With my husband’s pension and the interest we receive from bank deposits, we are able to meet the day-to-day expenses. We have to pay 15,000 rupees per month for accommodation, food and medical emergencies.”

Mary is tired of convincing her husband that their sons are not against him and do not want to grab their property. Even in her old age, she is tolerating all the verbal abuses of her husband.

She shares her agony:

“It is because I promised in front of God in the church... I am tolerating my husband’s behaviour in my old age.”

Other married women in the study expressed that they wish that their spouses understand their emotional needs such as fear of death, fear of losing support from children and decline of functional health as time passes.

b. Elderly Women and their Emergent Family

Rani, Karpagamma, Manjula, Sarala and Kala’s narratives point out the unexpected struggles these elderly women had to undergo due to change in their home environment. They never expected that they might end up in an old age home. It took a lot of time for them to realise that they have to live among new people. However, these women have started to accept their new reality and have begun to consider people at their work place or old age home as their family. The person in charge of the free old age home is very happy about Rani’s contribution in the kitchen and they pay her 1,000 rupees per month. However, she returns her salary as a donation to the old age home. She pays it as a gratitude for their service towards elderly people. She would like to work in the kitchen till she is alive.
Karpagamma considers the hospital staff as her family. They take care of her needs as they are impressed by her hard work and sincerity in keeping the ward clean. She also considers the patients in the ward as her family members and consoles the caregivers. She never has had any complaint from the patients or from staff. She believes that God has blessed her in her old age, by letting her work at the hospital.

She explains:

“I visit each bed in the ward and give them hope that they will recover soon. The staff likes me so much that I don’t have to worry about my daily meals. They give me breakfast, and lunch prepared at their home. They treat me like their family member. If they forget to pack for me, they order food for me. I am so overwhelmed by their care.”

Although Manjula has a daughter, she is unable to stay with her as she considers Manjula a burden on her. So Manjula continues to work as a home nurse so that she gets shelter and work at the same place. Her life is uncertain after two years as she feels that she will be unable to work as a caregiver.

She describes:

“I want to be with my daughter after two years as my health can deteriorate because of ageing. But my daughter ignores me whenever I say anything about this. I feel that being with my daughter or near her would be ideal. I don’t know what my fate holds in store for me.”

Sarala now lives alone in her old age home. After her husband’s death, she feels lonely, but continues to live in the old age home. As she has no other alternatives, she feels safer and has taken up a job in the same old age home.
She explains:

“Now, the old age home inmates are my family members. I never interacted much with people when I was living with my husband. After his death, I started exploring the old age home. I feel like I am part of a large family.”

Kala is forced to live in the old age home as her husband has taken a decision to live in a paid home. He feels that paid old age home can provide immediate care and medical service compared to living alone in one’s own house. Kala is deprived of living with their sons because of her husband.

She elucidates:

“I am trying to like the surroundings in the paid old age home. Although, initially, I was very upset and angry with my husband, but later I understood that my situation could be different at my son’s place. Slowly, I have started accepting my life in the old age home.”

Pushpa is not part of any socialisation system. She is homeless. Even though, she likes to connect with her siblings and relatives, they show little interest in her problems and perceive her as a burden. She takes shelter in a temple and works at a road-side shop. She considers the road-side shop owner as a relative and people residing on the pavements as her friends.

She shares:

“Even though I think of committing suicide, it is not possible for me as I don’t have the guts to do it. After my husband’s death, I am on the road. People living on the pavement are my friends and relatives. My shop owner is my guardian angel. He is exploring old age homes for me. I hope to soon leave this pavement.”

**c. Aid from Institutions**

Elderly women’s narratives suggest that they were unaware about the aid they can receive from sources such as government and non-government organisations.
This also shows their ignorance about their rights and the role of such institutional intervention.

Puspha considers her government pension and her employer as the only social system she has in her old age. She feels lucky to have an employer who helped her get government old age pension. She believes that her employer shows more concern towards her than her own siblings.

She shares:

“My shop owner reads newspapers daily. One day he told me about the old age pension. I was not sure how to apply for it. He took the initiative and approached the government officials for my pension. I am really thankful to him. I was refused support from my siblings, but this unknown person, whom I know for the past two years, made sure that I get the pension.”

Rani likes to spend time talking to the inmates of the old age home. Her affiliation with her peers and staff in the old age home gives meaning to her existence.

She recollects:

“I have made friends in the old age home. I spend time with them in the afternoon and take rest till the evening.”

Karpagamma likes to be part of the hospital. She feels that God has answered her prayers when her children and relatives refused her accommodation. She is thankful to God that her health is good and she can work, but cannot engage in heavy labour like before. She wishes to work till she is alive.

She shares:

“The care, the hospital staff shows me, I don’t think even my parents and husband have shown to me. I am thankful to God. Once upon a time, when my sons refused to accommodate me at their house, I started believing God doesn’t exit. However, he gave me the work and health so that I don’t have to depend on anyone. I have
now started praying that I should die in the same ward. I save my salary to give it to my children whenever they need it.”

d. Self-respect in old age

Elderly women like to be respected by their family members. They feel that respecting older people should be a norm even in the modern age. They would like to be connected to relatives, siblings and community members. They are longing for respect from family members and others.

Kasturi perceives that she is not respected and treated with dignity by her daughters-in-law. She compares the duties she performed as a daughter-in-law and feels that she was far more respectful than her daughters-in-law are towards her. She believes that culture should remain constant and expects everyone to follow the culture strictly.

She shares

“I am an educated mother and educated mother-in-law. I never moved from the role of a dutiful daughter-in-law. It is really a challenge to make my daughters-in-law understand these things. I was caring towards my mother-in-law. I used to massage her feet in her aging days, even at night. I used to seek her blessing every morning by touching her feet. My daughters-in-law never did such things, though they are from our community. I feel that I am not respected enough.”

Rani expected to be treated with respect by her nephew. However, it was a shock for her to accept that she was perceived as a burden by the family. Although Rani was unmarried because of some astrological issues, she was never disrespected by her family members. On the other hand, Lakshmi feels that her family members respect her only for her financial contribution. In recent days, Lakshmi feels that she might not be respected if she begins to depend on them. Still, she continues to show care and financial support for her family with a hope that they might take care of her when she falls ill. She explains:
“I fear whether I will be respected if I don’t support my family members. I have these doubts arising when my nephew and niece get angry with me, if I fail to give them pocket money. My family gives me a sense of affiliation, even though they are demanding. I never communicated to my family members that they are being demanding, but expressed it through irritation and anger.”

Kala believes that women are treated with respect if they perform their roles as obedient daughters, wives and caring mothers. She says she was respected by her family because she performed these roles sincerely.

Now-a-days, Manjula gets an impression that her daughter is not treating her with respect. Her daughter does not allow Manjula to stay in her house. Whenever she visits Kerala, she stays in one of her daughter’s friend’s house. Manjula is upset when she heard from her daughter that her son-in-law’s family members suspect her of sexual immorality because she is living alone and earning. Manjula was disappointed when her daughter did not argue with them about the same.

She illustrates:

“In recent times, I started having a feeling that my daughter is ignoring me and treating me like a bank account. My daughter talks to me whenever she needs money. My daughter doesn’t invite me to her house. Whenever I go to Kerala, I stay at her friend’s house, and my daughter and grand-children meet me in the temple. My daughter said to me that her in-laws suspect me of immorality and say that I am not a good woman and fear that I might take shelter with my daughter.”

Karpagamma feels that her elder sister, niece and her grand-daughter treat her with respect. She feels sad when she is treated improperly in the temple by the temple management as she belonged to a family that managed the temple.

Puspha feels that her existence is meaningless. Her siblings avoid any affiliation with her. She believes affiliation can bring her respect and dignity and she hopes to find it in an old age home. She narrates:
“I sometimes feel that I might lose my ability to talk. I keep sharing my thoughts with God. I want someone to ask me how I’m doing or whether I had lunch. I do call my niece, but I can’t spend money on public phones. I feel I should join an old age home soon. At least, I can meet many women of my age and talk to them. Hope the time will come soon. I don’t want to live, I find no meaning in life and it is the worst to be alone and homeless when you are old.”

She continues:

“I am willing to work as a domestic worker at my relative’s house. But they don’t want me because they feel my presence might bring bad luck to them as they know that I am childless. How can I be responsible for that? I don’t know for whom should I live?”

Karpagamma feels upset that her own sister deceived her and treated her badly. She is willing to forgive her sons for not accommodating her. She is happy that they respect her and consult her while making decisions and treat her well whenever she visits them.

Annam, Susheela, Mohana, Sarala, and Chandrikala have articulated that respect is something they don’t want to compromise on as it is the only motivation for them to live.

**e. Ritualism, Religion and Spiritualism in Old Age**

Elderly women in the study showed a lot of interest towards ritualism, irrespective of their religious backgrounds. The narratives display that elderly women have been trained to be ritualistic through their socialisation. Even in their old age, elderly women sacrifice their meals and pray, with a hope that their lives will be better. Such perceptions are seen in women across social positions and these women tend to feel guilt if they fail to perform rituals.
Pushpa believes in Hinduism and follows it religiously. Likewise, Kasturi strongly conforms to the religious norms of Jainism. She follows the ritualism of her community vigorously and gets upset when her own family members don’t follow the rituals, especially her daughters-in-law. She believes that it is her responsibility to show direction to her daughter-in-laws to follow the same.

Manjula used to follow Hindu ritualism. After her disturbed marriage, she stopped Hindu ritualism and started believing in all Gods. Now, she attends a Christian prayer meeting in her neighbourhood, goes to temple and listens to Islam reading on the television. She started rationalising that all Gods are one and there is a single super power that guides and protects people who are honest and sincere.

Mary strongly believes and follows Christianity. She has internalised religious beliefs so much that she couldn’t break her marriage and tolerated her husband’s suspicious behaviour. Still, she takes care of him, despite his abusive behaviour.

She reflects:

“I believe that marriage happens once in a life time and it is arranged by God. As I have promised in front of God in the church to be with my husband, I feel responsible towards my husband. I accept him despite how badly he behaves.”

Rani lived her life according to her father’s wishes. As her father was a strong believer of astrology, he wanted Rani to get married only after her thirtieth birthday. Rani didn’t go to school though her father was a teacher himself. Thus, Rani lived her life according to her father, who believed in astrology.

“My father taught me to read and write at home. My father is a strong believer in astrology. My family astrologer had told my father that I was born with a horoscope, which predicted life-threatening dangers. The solution was to stay at home and I was advised to get married only after I reach my thirtieth year.”
Shanti practises Hinduism. She believes that her karma was to be single and care for her family rather than have a family of her own.

Karpagamma believed in Hinduism. However, she got irritated with ritualism when she could not afford for it and started believing in Christianity as she felt that prayers are more smoothing. In her old age, she started believing that God lives in people’s hearts and now, she does not follow any religion. Similarly, Lakshmi started believing only work is God and he is present in people’s hearts rather than in ritualism.

f. Leisure for Elderly Women

Manjula listens to devotional songs, watches programmes on health care and alternative medicine, whenever she gets time from her routine work. For Mary, her pray time is the only time during which she feels relaxed. Karpagamma’s recreation is reading prayer books, and watching television programmes related to news and religion.

She shares:

“I read my prayer book, whenever I get time. I watch programme related to God on television.”

Puspha has always devoted her leisure time to visiting the temple, throughout her lifetime. Even today, her leisure time continues to be spent in the same manner. Rani spends her time listening to older people in the old age home. She visits the temple on the day of her parents’ birthdays and performs pooja. She does not differentiate time for herself and she concentrates other activities of the old age home.

She recounts:

“I visit the temple on my parents’ birthdays and perform poojas in their names.”
Lakshmi does not have any leisure activities. She takes rest whenever she gets time. Kala loves to read newspapers and story stories. She used to spend her afternoon reading story books and sharing the stories with her son. Today, Kala has a lot of time to read books, but she has no one to listen to her. Similarly, Karpagamma also spends her time in prayers.

From her young age, Shanti spent her leisure times in engaging in temple activities or assisting her father in temple activities. Shanti believes leisure time is time to be spent in God’s name and she is now involved in temple activities and rituals. This makes more sense to her.

She narrates:

“I am part of the organising committee of the temple. After my retirement, I spend most of my time in the temple and its related work. I have never missed any rituals to be performed for God. My neighbours call me the most spiritual woman in the building. I do watch television; I don’t want to watch serials. I listen to devotional songs”

Karpagamma’s lifetime was split between her children, her alcoholic husband and her survival for day-to-day meals. Although Shanti was independent and could decide her time allocation, it was all confined to her family sphere.

Kala lived her life according to her father and her husband. In her old age, she thought she will spend time with her grandchildren. However, to her nightmare, she is living with her husband in a paid old age home. Thus, her life is decided by her husband.

Lakshmi, Rani, Karpagamma, Mary and Manjula spend their lives caring for family members. Mary allocated her time as a caring mother, dutiful wife, supportive mother-in-law and committed and ritualistic Christian.
Kasturi’s time was prioritised and planned by her husband largely. Although she was encouraged by her husband to study, her activities were supervised by her husband. Her days were occupied with household work and, in old age, her time is spent on paid work.

**j. Unpleasant Home Situations in Old Age**

Kasturi believes her home has become an undesirable place to stay, because of her elder son’s continuous demand for financial support for his business. Beside these issues, she has to work hard to meet her day-to-day expenses taking tutorial classes even at 61 years of age. She is upset because she never expected to work in her old age.

She shares:

“I feel children must not depend on older parents for financial assistance, as we have spent a lot of money on their education. I feel hurt when they keep pestering me for money. I work hard and save some money for my husband’s health, after beginning to work at the age of 61 years. Children have to treat their elderly parents with respect, seek their guidance and not ignore their presence, when they become old.”

Kasturi is afraid that her elder son might turn abusive if she does not agree to his plan to rebuild her house into an apartment. Although she is promised a single-bedroom flat, she requests her son not to rebuild the house still she is alive and assumes that they might respect her request.

She shares:

“I am apprehensive about my son’s constant compulsion to sell the property to a builder and rebuilt it as an apartment building. My sons have promised me a single-bed room flat in the same building, if the house is sold to the builder. Nevertheless, I don’t want to sell the property till I am alive. I get a secured
feeling when my husband is around, more than the security of a single-bedroom flat.”

Lakshmi’s father made her the legal owner of the house before his death. Her siblings live in the same compound in separate houses. She does not want to sell her house or convert it into an apartment. However, her brothers want the house to be rebuilt as an apartment building. She is experiencing pressure from her brothers.

She admits:

“My siblings and I live in the same compound. I live in a house with my mother and elder sister. My brothers and sister live with their families in the row houses built inside the compound. My sisters-in-law do not want to live in the same compound; there is pressure on us from our brothers to sell the property. I am really upset with my family circumstances.”

k. Spousal Death and Childlessness

Puspha lived with her in-laws in a slum in central Chennai. Her married life was unpleasant because of her alcoholic husband. She managed to live with him as she was supported by her mother-in-law. Although her childlessness was stigmatised by her relatives, her husband and mother-in-law never discriminated against her. As they knew, it was not her mistake. After her husband’s death, Pushpa became homeless as she had to repay her husband’s debt by selling the small house in the slum, something that she had never anticipated.

She explains:

“He was alcoholic, and used to often beat me. It was my mother-in-law who protected me most of the time. I consoled myself and started accepting his habit of drinking and violence, as he genuinely accepted his impotence. After my husband’s
death, I had to sell my house to repay my husband’s debts. My maternal family refused to help me. Now, I live in the corner of a small temple, situated in the middle of the road.”

Now, in her old age, Puspha takes bath in public toilets, sleeps on the temple corridor as she is refused shelter by her siblings. She wants a shelter and has requested a free old age home to take her in and is awaiting their reply. She is happy that God has convinced the temples authorities to allow her to sleep there at night. She initially feared that they would refuse her because she belonged to a lower caste.

“I wake up at 4 a.m., take bath in the public toilet, change my saree under the sunlight. I never anticipated a situation like this in my life. I can’t afford to rent a house. I have written to an old age home to provide shelter with the guidance of one of my fruit shop customers, who visits the shop regularly.”

She continues:

“However, I am thankful to God for inspiring the temple authorities to approve my assistance in the temple activities, because, usually, people from our caste (schedule caste) are not allowed to work in the temple. I feel proud that they have accepted me. They give me part of the offering like banana, prasadham (food prepared as an offering to God).”

1. Work Place Safety

Manjula in her old age sees her employer as a hope to lead a safe and respectful life. Although her siblings live in Chennai, she is refused shelter and they see her as a burden. Nevertheless, she is confident that she can find another job, but not sure whether she will get a good employer.
Moreover, she wants to work in an old age home that provides her accommodation. She thinks that it is the best arrangement in old age.

She admits:

“I feel like I am living with my father and I will have shelter and safety till he is alive. I am not sure whether I will continue to live in Chennai or will I move to another city. I pray that my owner should live longer so that I have a roof to shelter myself and have an income to survive. I have no shelter other than this house. My siblings are not willing to accept me. I don’t want to lose my self-respect by staying with my daughter. They only way I can live with dignity is to save some money, stay in some free old age home and get employed in the old age home.”

Rani lived in her parents’ house till her mother was alive. There were financial problems, still they managed it well. It was after her mother’s death, her life circumstances changed. She was deceived by her nephew, as he planned to sell the house and dropped her at the old age home.

However, Rani feels that she is blessed to stay in the old age home as the people in the old age home take care of her well and she is now employed, which gives her a sense of dignity and respect for her life.

She claims:

“I was admitted in the free old age home two years ago by my nephew. My nephew wanted to sell my house, had a plan to purchase a flat in South Chennai and invest the remaining money in the real estate business. Although he works in an IT firm, he decided to sell the house to get extra income for his family. He never shared his idea till my mother was alive. My mother died two years ago; it became easy for him to convince me to transfer the power of autonomy of the property to his name. I never expected that I will be living in an old age home during the last days of my
life. Yet, I like this home because I have the freedom to cook and take care of people older than me. I have accepted this as my home.”

Karpagamma takes shelter in the hospital ward in her old age. She feels safer living alone than staying with her family members. She is happy to be surrounded with people who respect her for the age and work. She wants to spend her days working for the hospital and die without creating any problem for anyone.

She explains:

“I have been working as a cleaner for the past five years, and live in the same ward. I sleep inside the ward on a blanket, wake up early in the morning to clean the toilet, bathroom and sweep the ward. Initially, I used to sleep in the corridor outside the hospital. Once my ward's staff nurse saw me and asked about my family. I said that I don’t have a place to stay. The staff nurse requested me to sleep inside the ward from that day onwards. Ward number 233 has become my house for the past five years, and will continue to be the same till I die. I am lucky to have good people around me. All the nurses and doctors call me Karpagaamma with respect. I realised only hardwork provides food and shelter in old age.”

m. Living with Family Members

Meenakshi is the legal owner of her maternal family house. She is happy and considers her house a temple. She doesn’t want to sell her house to anybody after her death and decided to convert it as a temple property, and her niece and her granddaughter have agreed to the same.

She recounts:

“I was made the legal owner of the house by my father, as my brothers were not willing to take the responsibility of providing care for us.”

Shanti lives in a single-bedroom flat. Now-a-days, she is afraid to stay alone. She has requested the apartment association members to visit her house once in a
while, so that they are aware that she is safe and in case, anything happens to her, they can be aware of the problem.

She elucidates:

“*I was staying with my father, who died two years ago, and I am alone now. Though my brother and his wife lives in the next building in the same compound, I feel like living alone makes one a vulnerable target for theft.*

**n. Paid Old Age Home**

Kala lived in the old age home after her husband’s heart attack. Two years ago, her husband had a heart attack and their children were unable to attend his needs as they were occupied in their own lives. Her husband was disheartened with their behaviour and decided to take a decision of shifting to an old age home, thinking it is a safe place for them. But he never consulted Kala regarding the same. She does not know what to do after her husband’s death in the paid old age home. She wants to stay with her younger son, but her husband refuses because he married a girl from an upper caste. Kala believes caring and nurturing does not have a caste and she wants to be with her younger son in India. She does not know how to argue with her husband, but remains quite as usual.

She explains:

“*It was an unexpected arrangement for us in the old age. I thought I will live with my grand-children and cook them delicious food. However, I have to obey to my husband’s decision of living in a paid old age home. Initially, it was difficult, I was angry with my husband and with sons as both did not want to adjust. I have three sons, two are settled abroad, they do not want to be in India, and do not want to take our responsibility. My youngest son lives in Bangalore and he wants us to shift to Bangalore. My husband was adamant and disheartened about my childrens’ decision to have nuclear families. He did not want to stay at home, so he sold the house and gave the share to his sons; they did not accept it. We*
deposited the money in the bank. My husband’s decision was influenced by his heart attack. Two years ago, my husband had a massive heart attack and there was no one around us to take him to the hospital. It was our neighbours who helped me admit him in the hospital. This incident really affected my husband. He felt it is unsafe for both of us to be alone and my children were not to be trusted. He did not want to have a home nurse. He felt that by being in paid home, we can at least have good service for the money paid.”

n. Mobility in Old Age

Kasturi and Karpagamma restrained their interactions to family members. Lakshmi was always independent and took decisions considering her family well-being. Rani’s parents decided everything about her life. After her mother’s death, she thought that she will live with her nephew in her house. Unfortunately, she is now staying in the old age home.

Kala’s mobility was restricted to her in-law’s house, local market and to the school. Kala was always assisted by her husband and she never went alone. Shanti was dependent on her parents and it is with the help of her father that she learnt to be independent. Her father was supportive, when she wanted to become a teacher. She restricted her mobility to her family and professional spheres.

Kala shares:

“I spent my entire married life at my in-law’s house. I was only allowed to go to the market, and expected to return home within half an hour. If I got late, my husband would look for me in the market.”

Karpagamma moved from place to place in search of jobs. Pushpa restricted herself from attending social events as she was considered bad luck because she was unable to bear a child. Her widowhood and homelessness has now pushed her to increase her social interaction outside the family, in search of help to survive.
Manjula decided to take control of her life after her husband’s death. In her old age, she chooses to continue her job, considering the fact that her daughter might not be able to accommodate her. In a way, Manjula’s life was controlled by her circumstances rather than by herself.

Mary confined her mobility to the home, giving tuition, and church. When she was diagnosed with a skin disease in her old age, she restricted herself from going to church and social events due to her damaged knees.

**Discussion**

The narratives suggest that social environment of elderly women changed with their age. Unfortunately, the elderly women are unable to cope with the changes in their family members’ behaviour. Their social mobility revolved around their family, communities and employment when they were adults, and ageing has brought about a change in these spheres.

The elderly women like to be associated with their family and community, irrespective of the challenges they face in old age. Regardless of their social positions, elderly women expressed that they would want to be a part of their family and community and wished to contribute in their given capacities. Only when they were challenged with life circumstances, they explored other support in the neighbourhood or in their place of employment.

The narratives highlight that elderly women value their family as the core when it comes to social relations and its environment. They value the care shown to them by the family members, irrespective of the age of the family members. They expressed that they liked to be surrounded by people whom they value.

At the same time, they are willing to care for the family members in their own capacities, in return. They accepted the fact that they cannot be as productive as their younger selves, but liked to contribute to social relations in their own way. This is seen across social positions, in the study.
The elderly women expressed that they do not want to be perceived as burdens by their family members and feel that it is their right to be treated with respect. They get disheartened when their self-respect and dignity is under question. They have also understood that dependence is the key challenge that they have to overcome in order to change the perspective of their family members.

However, it is impossible for them to overcome this challenge as they have less freedom in their adult age to think about their selves and reflect on the dependence created by the social system. This is evident from their narratives, where they expressed that they never had much leisure time. They have spent most of their lives performing their social roles and worshiping, things that they were made to value as leisure activities.

Even if they had time, they spent it on reading religious texts and reciting devotional songs. This is seen across people of different faiths in this study. Such practices have led to ritualism over spiritualism. Thus, elderly women continue to be ritualistic and believe ritualism will save them in old age and they continue to practice it.

The elderly women’s marital status and attitude of family members towards them decides their capabilities to have pleasant and safe environments in their old age. Spousal death and childlessness can push women to become homeless in their old age. The daily living experiences of elderly women can be unpleasant in old age, if she is the owner of a property or has an abusive partner, relative, husband or children.

Widowed and unmarried elderly women, who are employed, feel their workplace is a safer environment to live in. Older couples with sufficient financial resources prefer to trust paid old age homes rather than their children. In those situations, women have to abide with their husband’s decisions as they are dependent on their husbands.
Unmarried elderly women living with supportive family members and living in matriarchal households with only female members do enjoy a pleasant and safe environment in old age. On the other hand, unmarried elderly women, who live alone, spend their time fearing their safety.

The findings bring to light that most of the elderly women live in patriarchal family situations that make “dependence” a key value. This deprives the elderly women of thinking beyond their social roles and their environment. In their old age, these women feel choked and stuck when their social relations change and deprive them of their basic needs to live a functional life. Although the elderly women’s narratives show that they do not aspire for anything newer in their old age, they do prefer to have the same respect and consideration as they had in their middle age.

The elderly women started rationalising that change in their old age is because of their karma or sin which they have carried to their old age. This gives them a reason to engage more in ritualism for salvation. They feel that ritualism can help them and only through divine intervention, their lives can change.

The researcher is aware that elderly women need support and information that changes their social relations. The influence of patriarchal ideology has prevented elderly women from exercising freedom in life. The patriarchal system, instead, has made them dependent on men and constructed the social system in such a manner that never allowed women to question it.

At this moment, it is important to document the processes that are disturbing the family structures as elderly women perceive family as the only comforting nest for them. This is due to the strong social roles that they have internalised during the socialization. For instance, stigma attached to the marital status deprives them from associations in their kinship. Sometimes, they engage in self-pity rather than challenge their situation.
Elderly women from different social positions have expressed that they want to be associated with their family members and extended family members as it gives them a sense of fulfilment.

So, seen from the capability perspective, choices and processes have deprived elderly women from exploring and overcoming challenges in their old age as they are left with no options to live independent lives.