

## **Theoretical Perspectives on Elder Abuse: A Framework Analysis for Abused Elderly in Kerala**

\* Amala Mathew<sup>1</sup>, Dr.Sobha B Nair<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Kerala, India)

<sup>2</sup>(Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Kerala, India)

Corresponding Author: Amala Mathew

---

**Abstract:** In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, world is witnessing a growing population of older people. The number of older people of 80 years and above is increasing day by day. As the number of older people increases they need adequate support system from the family as well as society. The absence of welfare measures created problems and challenges to the elderly as well as their family members. Elder abuse and mistreatment in different spheres of society is the major area of concern related to the population ageing. According to 2011 census, the old age population constitute 12.6 percent in Kerala; it is higher than that of the national level. The demographic conditions of Kerala is drastically changing with the shrinking of younger population and increasing number of older generation, stand as a fertile ground for elder abuse or mistreatment from the family members itself. So in this situation, the present paper tries to expose the basic profile of the abused elderly and analyse different theoretical perspectives that helps to understand the depth of elder abuse within the family. The present study analysed the social exchange theory and situational model theory in connection with the elder abuse within the family and applied these theoretical frameworks to the existing situation of increasing elder abuse in Kerala.

**Keywords:** Care-giver stress, Elder Dependency, Elder abuse, Population ageing, Situational model theory, Social exchange theory.

---

Date of Submission: 30-08-2017

Date of acceptance: 08-09-2017

---

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Population ageing is an emerging phenomenon witnessed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world. This is an important challenge in the social and economic conditions of the people. The increasing number of older population needs efficient support mechanism and care for leading a peaceful life. But the changes occurred in the family system, demographic conditions and the new working conditions of younger generation affects the elder care support within the family and it enhanced the conditions of abuse and neglect of elderly within the family.

WHO's report based on the available resources on elder abuse estimates that 15.7 percent of people aged 60 years and above are witnessed abuse. These are based on the reported cases but the unreported cases of elder abuse are more than that of the reported cases ([http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/)).

A study on India's elderly conducted across 20 cities and involving over 5,500 older people have found that almost 32 percent have faced abuse from the family as well as from the society. The primary abusers of elders in the family are their sons, constitute 56 percent and followed by daughter-in-law in 23 percent cases (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Every-third-senior-citizen-in-India-abused-mainly-by-son-Study/articleshow/16596677.cms>). HelpAgeIndia, conducted a survey on elder abuse in India and reported that elder abuse increasing drastically in India. As per the study in the year 2014, 50 percent of the elderly experienced abuse. 48 percent male and 58 percent female faced abuse according to the HelpAge India report.

Ageing of population is more in Kerala when compared to other states in India. Kerala is considered as the greying state in India. The life expectancy in Kerala is more than 71 years. According to the 2011 census, the old age population constitutes 12.6 % with the age of 60 years and above. It is more than that of the national average. As age increases, their physical condition is deteriorating, they don't have economic support and they are emotionally disturbed if they do not have enough support mechanism. The changes in the family structure, the new work culture and role conflicts from the part of younger people stands as the major hurdle for providing support to the elderly. The above mentioned factors are contradicting with each other and there arises a conflicting situation with the younger and older generation. This conflict may lead to the abuse of elderly by their children and grandchildren.

Abuse and neglect of the elderly are unjust and inhuman especially within the family system. It has a deep rooted impact upon the older people when they have to face neglect and abuse from their own children. In such situation the elderly live in their house with a fear of being abused by their children. Such situation is increasing in our society, especially in Kerala. According to WHO, elder abuse can be defined as “a 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”. Elder abuse can take various forms such as financial, physical, psychological and sexual. It can also be the result of intentional or unintentional neglect” ([http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/)). The Kerala society nowadays is witnessing an increasing number of elder abuses. The news reports of the last two three years shows that the number of elder abuse cases were in an increasing rate. The paper describes the basic characteristics and profile of the abused elderly for getting a clear picture about the problem in Kerala. The present study tries to analyse the major theoretical aspects in connection with the elder abuse to make an in-depth understanding of elder abuse in the domestic settings in Kerala and tries to make a theoretical frame work for the analysis of the elder abuse to get a deep knowledge about the problem.

## II. AREA OF STUDY

The study was conducted in three districts of Kerala, India viz. Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam and Kannur. These districts are selected as sample because the number of cases filed under the Senior Citizens Act is higher in these districts. The cases were selected on the basis of the number of cases registered in 2014 under the Senior Citizens Act, 2007. From this, Thiruvananthapuram records the highest number of cases of elder abuse in Kerala following with Ernakulam and Kannur.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted with the descriptive method with the aim of describing the profile and characteristics of the abused elderly in Kerala and describes it with the theoretical frameworks of elder abuse. The population of the study involves those elderly who filed case under the Senior citizens act 2007 and selected three districts of Kerala, from which 256 samples were selected using simple random sampling method.

## IV. PROFILE OF THE ABUSED ELDERLY

The basic profile of the abused elderly helps to understand the depth of the problems faced by the older people from their family. The most important among them is the age of the respondent. Age determines the vulnerability of elderly to abuse.

**Table I:** Age distribution of elderly

Age of elderly	Frequency	Percent
60-69	86	35.0
70-79	90	36.6
80-89	61	24.8
90 and above	9	3.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The age of the respondents' shows that majority (71.5%) of respondents belong to the age group of 60-79. As with the increasing age, the chances of abuse and neglect are also increasing among the elderly. The oldest old group were more vulnerable to abuse which constitutes the age group of 80-89 and above. Here the oldest old people constitute 28.5 percent of abused elderly in the families.

Dependency is another important factor that determines the life satisfaction of a person. The independent person gets more life satisfaction than a dependent individual. In the case of elderly it is more relevant that dependency of them to their children and other family members created troubles in their life. As age increases the chances of dependency of elderly also increases. They became frail and forced to dependent on others for their day to day activities.

**Table II:** Dependency of elderly

Dependency of elderly	Frequency	Percent
Yes	235	95.5
No	11	4.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The above table distributes the dependency level of abused elderly. Here 95.5 percent of the elderly

were dependent on their care giver for their day to day activities. They were dependent for physical, emotional and financial matters. Only 4.5 percent of the abused elderly were not dependent on others. From this it is clear that dependency stands as an important factor for abuse. Sources of abuse describe the perpetrators of abuse; in most cases, the abusers were primary care givers in the family. Most probably it will be the children or partner.

**Table III: Source of abuse**

Source of abuse	Frequency	Percent
Son	86	35.0
Daughter	43	17.5
Daughter-in-law	42	17.1
Son-in-law	8	3.3
Others (specify)	4	1.6
Both son and daughter	7	2.8
Both son and daughter-in-law	41	16.7
Both daughter and son-in-law	15	6.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The above table reveals that sons were the abusers in most cases which constitute 35 percent. Followed by daughters (17.1 percent) and daughters-in-law (17.1 percent). In this way, it is clear that majority of the elderly get abused from their sons. As per the living conditions of our society, the most of the older people were live with their sons and daughter-in-law and they were expected to provide care and support to their older parents. So the elder people are completely dependent on their sons for their basic needs. This situation of dependency creates the abuse and neglect of the elderly by the sons and daughter-in-law.

## V. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ELDER ABUSE

Theoretical frame works are the base of every research study. Theories are formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena and, in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions (Swanson, Richard A. and Chermack, Thomas J., 2013). Theoretical frame work is the basic structure of a study that holds a theory of a research study. The theories in a theoretical framework explain why the research problem under study exists. It explains the interrelationship between the concepts of the study and existing theories and it develops a new fact or knowledge that is the final result of a research work. Theoretical framework is the connection path for the researcher to the existing knowledge.

There are large numbers of theories covering biological, psychological and social aspects of ageing and its problems. Most of these theories are not applicable to the study of elder abuse. In order to explain the causes and consequences of elder abuse within the family, need of an appropriate theory is a matter of great concern. Theories used in the present study were social exchange theory and situational model theory.

### 5.1 SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

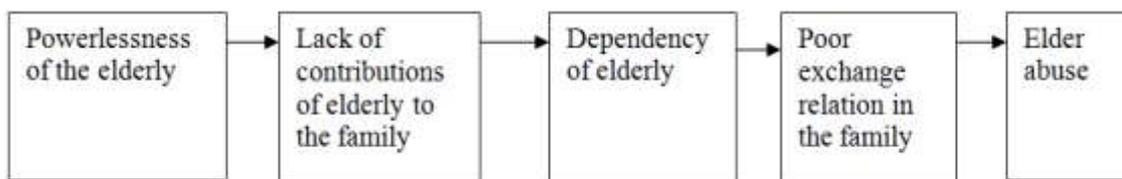
Social exchange theory was developed by the Sociologist George C.Homans in the year 1950. The basic principle of this theory is that the individuals in social situations choose behaviours that maximise their likelihood of meeting self-interests in those situations. Social exchange theory deals with a number of key assumptions. First assumption is that the individuals are rational actors and they are calculating the costs and benefits in social exchanges. Second assumption related to social exchange theory is that the individuals who engaged in interactions are rationally seeking to maximise the benefits to be gained from those situations especially in terms of meeting basic human needs. Thirdly, exchange processes that produce rewards for individuals lead to patterning of social interactions. These patterns of social interactions not only serve individuals' needs but also constrain individuals in how they may ultimately seek to meet those needs. Social exchange theory assumes that the individuals are goal oriented in the freely competitive social system. In a competitive social system, the exchange processes leads to variations in the power and privileges of social groups. In exchange relations power is in the hands of those who possess greater resources. Thus they are in a better position to benefit from exchange (Cook S.Karen and Rice Eric, 2003). This power variation is taken by Dowd for explaining the abuse faced by elderly within the domestic settings.

He argued that as people age, the ratio of rewards to costs associated with social interactions might shift bases on social status (e.g. being an elder) and personal resources (e.g. money, power, the ability to work or provide care to others). In this exchange theory of ageing, Dowd highlighted the perceived loss of status and power that he assumed is associated with ageing (Dowd 1975). He argued that because resources decline with age (e.g. health, income, loss of work or community roles etc.); old people are more likely to be in unequal or imbalanced social exchanges. These imbalanced relationships can result in a power disadvantage, were in the

older person is required to depend or rely on others to meet their basic needs (Wan H Wylie and Antonucci C Toni, 2016).

Social exchange theory focuses on the power and exchange relations of individual within the family. As age increases the power of elderly within the family has changed. Older people did not have decision making power within the family and at the same time they did not provide any contributions to the family income. The older people are weak in mutual exchanges with other members in the family and were dependent on the family members for their day to day activities. All these lead to abuse of the elderly within the family. This can be explained through the following frame work:

### 5.1.1. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK



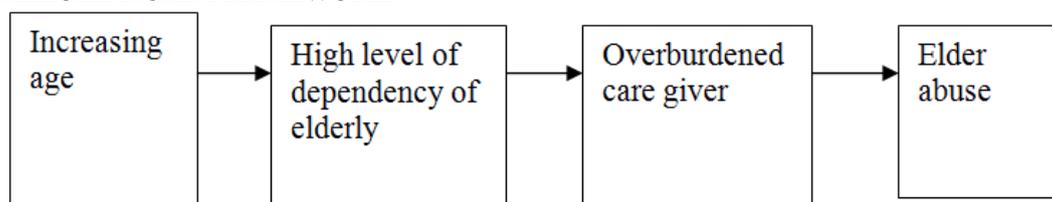
The frame work reveals the fact that lack of exchange relations within the family leads to elder abuse. As age increases people lost their power in their family because of lack of job and income. The powerlessness leads to the decrease in the contributing capacity of the aged persons. Physical and economic contributions from the part of elderly are deteriorating within the family and they are depending on the family members for their day to day activities and economic needs. All the above mentioned factors results poor exchange relations in the family and which give rise to elder abuse within the family. From this it is clear that the contributions of elderly in the exchange relations of the family lead to the increasing mistreatment towards elderly by other members in the family. There is interconnection between the contributions of elder people and abuse towards them in the family.

### 5.2 SITUATIONAL MODEL THEORY ON ELDER ABUSE

Situational theory is one of the most important modernist theories in order to understand the phenomenon of elder abuse. It is one of the most widely accepted explanations of elder abuse. This theory focuses on the stress of care giving leads to elder abuse. According to this theory, a stressed care giver creates an environment for abuse (MomtazAbolfathiYadollah, Hamid AizanTengku and Ibrahim Rahimah 2013).

According to this perspective, elder abuse occurs when an overburdened care giver who suffer from the immense stress related to care giving, take out their frustrations on the person requiring care (Phillips,L.R. 1986). The basic premise of the situational theory is that the stress associated with the structural and situational factors affects the abuser and it reflects in their abusive behaviour towards the elderly. The situational factors that have been linked with the elder abuse includes: Firstly elder related factors such as physical and emotional dependency, poor health, impaired mental status and a difficult personality. Secondly; structural factors like economic strain, social isolation and environmental problems. Finally; care-giver related factors such as life crisis, burnout or exhaustion with care giving, substance abuse, problems and previous socialization experiences with violence (Pillemer, K. A., & Wolf, R. S. 1986).

### 5.2.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



Situational theory reveals the fact that the life situations in the family give rise to elder abuse. There are a number of situational factors that affects the living condition of elderly within the family. According to situational theory there are three important factors which affect the living condition of an individual. The most important among them is the individual related factors; in which age of a person plays an important role. As age increases the issues faced by the elderly is also increasing. Increasing age leads to the chances of high level of dependency of elderly over the family members. They became physically and emotionally weak and needs more support. Here comes the importance of second factor that is structural factors; which includes the economic strain and social isolation of elderly. As age increases elderly face financial problems and social isolation. They

were not interested in the social activities and were withdraw from the main stream of society. And at the same time they do not have the ability to meet their economic needs so they were forced to depend on their family members for their economic needs. All these things leads to the final situation that is the care giver related factors. The role conflicts and over dependency of elderly on the care giver make stress on the care giver and they react negatively towards the elderly. This makes a gap in the relationship of elderly and caregiver or family members. In most cases children were the care givers and there exist a conflicting relationship between both of them and the care givers shows abusive behaviour towards the elderly.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The paper analyses the increasing phenomenon of elder abuse in family and the reasons for this elder abuse with a theoretical perspective. The profile of the elderly who has suffered abuse depicts the age of the elderly, dependency of the elderly and sources of abuse, plays an important role in order to understand the problem of elder abuse. The two theories i.e., social exchange theory and situational model theory gave a detailed framework for creating an in-depth knowledge in the problem of elder abuse. These theories are better explained in the context of elder abuse in the family and the frameworks used in the study contributing to the reasons for elder abuse by the family members or caregivers within the family. Moreover the article analyses the importance of family members as well as society for addressing the problems of elder people and abuse in the family by their children and grandchildren.

## REFERENCE

- [1] Ageing and life course, *elder abuse*, world health organization, retrieved from: - [http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/en/](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/en/) retrieved on:- 20-06-2017.
- [2] Kounteya, Sinhal. September, 29, 2012. Every third senior citizen in India abused, mainly by son: Study. Tamil nadu. Times of India. Retrieved from:-<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Every-third-senior-citizen-in-India-abused-mainly-by-son-Study/articleshow/16596677.cms>. Retrieved on:- 12/07/2017.
- [3] Subha, Soneja. Country report for World Health Organization, *Elder abuse in India*, HelpAge India, New Delhi, retrieved from: - [http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder\\_abuse/alc\\_ea\\_ind.pdf](http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/alc_ea_ind.pdf) retrieved on: - 20/08/ 2016.
- [4] Swanson, Richard A. And Chermack, Thomas J. Theory Building in Applied Disciplines, (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. Sanfrancisco, CA, 2013).
- [5] Cook S.Karen and Rice Eric. Social Exchange Theory, Handbook of Social Psychology Edited by John Delamater (Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, New York, 2003).
- [6] Dowd J James. Ageing as Exchange: A Preface to Theory, *Journal oof Gerontology*, 1975, Vol. 30, No.5.
- [7] Wan H Wylie and Antonucci C Toni. Social Exchange Theory and Ageing, *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology* (Springer Publishers, Singapore, 2016).
- [8] MomtazAbolfathiYadollah, Hamid AizanTengku and Ibrahim Rahimah; ThMomtazAbolfathiYadollah, Hamid AizanTengku and Ibrahim Rahimah; Theories and measures of elder abuse, *Psychogeriatrics*, 2013; 13:182-188. Accessed from <http://onlinelibrary.wiely.com/doi/10.1111/psyg.12009/pdf> Accessed on 04/11/2016 <http://onlinelibrary.wiely.com/doi/10.1111/psyg.12009/pdf> Accessed on 04/11/2016.
- [9] Phillips, L.R. Theoretical explanations of elder abuse: Competing hypotheses and unresolved issues. In K. Pillemer and R. S. Wolf (Eds.), *Elder abuse: Conflict in the family* (197-217). Dover, MA: Auburn House.
- [10] Pillemer, K. A., & Wolf, R. S. *Elder abuse: Conflict in the family*. 1986. Greenwood Publishing Group.

IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved  
Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

\*Amala Mathew1. "Theoretical Perspectives on Elder Abuse: A Framework Analysis for  
Abused Elderly in Kerala." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) ,  
vol. 22, no. 09, 2017, pp. 29–33.