

SILENT SUFFERING IN THE HOME: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON DOMESTIC HARASSMENT AND NEGLECT OF ELDERLY WOMEN IN THE AMBALA REGION

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ABSTRACT

Domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women remain largely unacknowledged within the private sphere of the family, despite the growing ageing population and the existence of statutory protections in India. This research paper adopts a mixed methodological approach, combining empirical and non-empirical methods, to examine the nature, causes, and legal dimensions of domestic harassment and neglect faced by elderly women in the Ambala region of Haryana. The empirical component of the study is based on primary data collected through structured questionnaires with elderly women, enabling an assessment of lived experiences, patterns of abuse, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The non-empirical component involves doctrinal analysis of statutory provisions, judicial interpretations, policy documents, and scholarly literature, with particular emphasis on the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. By integrating empirical findings with legal analysis, the study evaluates the effectiveness of the existing legal framework in addressing elder abuse and ensuring maintenance and welfare of elderly women. The research highlights the disconnect between legislative intent and practical implementation, while emphasizing the need for strengthened enforcement mechanisms, enhanced legal awareness, and gender-sensitive policy interventions. The paper contributes to elder law scholarship by providing an interdisciplinary perspective that situates domestic harassment of elderly women within both social realities and legal structures.

KEY WORDS:

Domestic Harassment, Elderly Women, Home Sufferings, Health Care

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of ageing has emerged as one of the most significant demographic developments of the twenty-first century. Improvements in healthcare, nutrition, and living conditions have resulted in increased life expectancy across the globe, including in India. While longevity is often viewed as a marker of social progress, it simultaneously presents complex social, economic, and legal challenges. Among these, the protection and welfare of elderly women demand particular attention due to their heightened vulnerability within familial and social structures. Domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women, though widespread, largely remain unreported and unaddressed, rendering their suffering silent and invisible. This study seeks to examine these issues through an empirical and legal lens, focusing on the Ambala region.

1.1 AGEING POPULATION AND CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES IN INDIA

India is witnessing a steady increase in its elderly population due to declining fertility rates and rising life expectancy. According to demographic projections, the proportion of individuals aged sixty years and above is expected to rise significantly in the coming decades. This demographic shift has profound implications for traditional systems of care and support that were historically rooted in family structures.

The Indian family system, particularly the joint family, traditionally functioned as the primary institution for elder care. Elderly members were accorded respect, authority, and economic security, often occupying a central position within household decision-making. However, rapid socio-economic transformations such as urbanization, industrialization, migration, and increasing participation of women in the workforce have led to the gradual disintegration of joint family systems and the rise of nuclear households.

These changes have weakened intergenerational bonds and reduced the capacity and willingness of families to provide care to elderly members. Elderly individuals, especially women, increasingly find themselves marginalized within households, dependent on younger family members for financial support, healthcare, and emotional companionship. The erosion of traditional support systems has thus contributed to new forms of neglect and abuse, making ageing a precarious phase of life for many elderly women in contemporary India.

1.2 GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF AGEING AND VULNERABILITY OF ELDERLY WOMEN

Ageing is not a gender-neutral process. Elderly women experience ageing differently from men due to lifelong structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy, gender discrimination, and economic marginalization. Women in India often have limited access to education, employment, property ownership, and financial resources throughout their lives. These disadvantages accumulate over time and become more pronounced in old age.

Widowhood further exacerbates vulnerability. A significant proportion of elderly women are widows who lack independent income and social support. In many cases, widowed elderly women are perceived as economic burdens and are excluded from household decision-making. Cultural norms frequently expect elderly women to remain silent, submissive, and grateful for basic care, discouraging them from asserting their rights.

Moreover, elderly women are often engaged in unpaid domestic labor even in advanced age, yet their contributions remain undervalued. Dependence on sons or daughters-in-law places them in subordinate positions within family hierarchies, increasing the risk of emotional abuse, neglect, and financial exploitation. The intersection of age and gender thus produces a distinct form of vulnerability that demands focused scholarly and legal attention.

1.3 DOMESTIC HARASSMENT AND NEGLECT AS A HIDDEN SOCIAL PROBLEM

Domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women constitute a deeply concealed social problem. Unlike other forms of violence, elder abuse typically occurs within the private sphere of the home and is perpetrated by family members or caregivers who are expected to provide support and protection. The abuse often manifests in subtle and non-physical forms such as verbal humiliation, emotional manipulation, social isolation, denial of food or medical care, and economic deprivation.

These forms of maltreatment are frequently normalized within families and society at large. Elderly women themselves may internalize abuse as an inevitable consequence of ageing or dependency. Fear of retaliation, emotional attachment to children, concern for family reputation, and lack of alternative living arrangements further discourage reporting.

The hidden nature of domestic harassment is reinforced by weak institutional mechanisms for detection and intervention. Law enforcement agencies, healthcare professionals, and social welfare institutions often lack training and sensitivity to recognize elder abuse, particularly when it does not involve visible physical harm. As a result, domestic harassment of elderly women remains under-documented and inadequately addressed in public discourse and policy frameworks.

1.4 NEED AND RATIONALE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Despite growing awareness of elder rights, there is a paucity of region-specific, gender-focused empirical research on domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women in India. Existing studies often adopt a generalized approach to elder abuse without adequately addressing the unique experiences of elderly women or examining the practical functioning of legal protections. The Ambala region presents a relevant socio-legal context due to its mix of urban and rural populations, traditional family norms, and evolving socio-economic conditions. Studying this region allows for a nuanced understanding of how domestic harassment manifests across different social settings.

Furthermore, while the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 provides a statutory framework for elder protection, little empirical research has been conducted to assess its awareness, accessibility, and effectiveness at the grassroots level. This study is therefore necessary to bridge the gap between law and lived reality by integrating empirical findings with legal analysis.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine the nature and forms of domestic harassment and neglect experienced by elderly women in the Ambala region.
2. To analyze the socio-economic and familial factors contributing to the vulnerability of elderly women.
3. To assess the level of awareness and perception of legal rights among elderly women.
4. To critically evaluate the effectiveness of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 in addressing domestic harassment and neglect.
5. To suggest legal and policy measures for improving the protection and welfare of elderly women.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What forms of domestic harassment and neglect are experienced by elderly women within family settings?
2. How do gender, economic dependency, and family structure influence the vulnerability of elderly women?
3. To what extent are elderly women aware of their legal rights under the MWPSC Act, 2007?
4. What barriers prevent elderly women from seeking legal remedies against domestic harassment and neglect?
5. How effective is the existing legal framework in ensuring the protection and welfare of elderly women?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a systematic and interdisciplinary research methodology to examine domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women within family settings in the Ambala region. Given the complex and multidimensional nature of elder abuse, which encompasses social, economic, legal, and gendered dimensions, the research employs a **mixed method approach**, integrating empirical fieldwork with doctrinal legal analysis. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of both lived experiences and the functioning of legal protections under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

4.1 EMPIRICAL COMPONENT OF THE STUDY

The empirical component constitutes the core of the field-based inquiry and focuses on collecting primary data directly from elderly women to understand the realities of domestic harassment and neglect.

4.2.1 STUDY AREA: AMBALA REGION

The empirical study was conducted in the **Ambala district of Haryana**, encompassing both urban and rural areas. Ambala was selected due to its socio-cultural diversity, coexistence of traditional family structures and urban influences, and representative demographic composition. The region reflects transitional family patterns, making it suitable for examining elder abuse within changing social contexts.

4.2.2 SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The study selected a sample of **150 elderly women aged sixty years and above**. A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to identify respondents who met the inclusion criteria, namely:

- Women aged 60 years or above,
- Residents of the Ambala region,
- Living within family settings, and
- Willing to participate voluntarily.

Purposive sampling was considered appropriate due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the difficulty in accessing elderly women willing to disclose experiences of abuse. Efforts were made to include respondents from diverse socio-economic, educational, and marital backgrounds to ensure representativeness.

4.3 NON-EMPIRICAL (DOCTRINAL) COMPONENT OF THE STUDY

The non-empirical component involves a **doctrinal legal analysis** of statutory provisions, judicial interpretations, policy documents, and scholarly writings related to elder rights and welfare. Special emphasis is placed on the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, including its objectives, procedural mechanisms, and enforcement challenges.

Secondary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, government reports, Law Commission publications, and judicial decisions were critically examined to evaluate the adequacy of existing legal frameworks. This component complements the empirical findings by situating them within the broader legal and policy context.

4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the vulnerability of the respondents, strict ethical standards were adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage.

The interviews were conducted with empathy and sensitivity to avoid traumatization. No identifying information was recorded, and data were used solely for academic purposes. The study refrained from making judgments or offering legal advice during data collection to maintain objectivity and ethical integrity.

4.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGY

Despite careful design, the study has certain limitations. The reliance on self-reported data may result in underreporting due to fear, shame, or social stigma. The purposive sampling technique, while suitable for sensitive research, limits the generalizability of findings beyond the study area.

Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on domestic settings and does not examine institutional abuse in care facilities. Time and resource constraints also restricted the sample size and geographic scope. Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the significance of the findings, which offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of elderly women and the functioning of legal protections.

5. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

The preceding chapter established that domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women are deeply embedded in changing family structures, gendered vulnerabilities, and socio-economic dependencies. To meaningfully analyse these realities, it is essential to develop an analytical framework that clarifies key concepts, identifies the forms of abuse, and employs relevant theoretical perspectives. This chapter provides the conceptual and analytical tools necessary to interpret the empirical findings of the study and to evaluate the adequacy of legal responses, particularly under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

Rather than viewing elder abuse as isolated incidents of interpersonal conflict, this framework treats it as a multidimensional social and legal phenomenon shaped by power relations, dependency, and structural inequalities. By integrating sociological theories, gender analysis, and human rights perspectives, the chapter establishes a comprehensive foundation for understanding the domestic harassment and neglect of elderly women.

5.1 CONCEPT OF ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Elder abuse refers to any act, omission, or pattern of behaviour that causes harm, distress, or deprivation to an older person within a relationship where trust, responsibility, or dependency is expected. The defining feature of elder abuse is not merely the harm caused, but the betrayal of trust inherent in relationships such as family caregiving. Abuse may be intentional or unintentional and may arise from action or neglect. Neglect, as a form of elder abuse, involves the failure to meet basic physical, emotional, medical, or social needs of an elderly person. Unlike physical abuse, neglect is often passive and therefore less visible, yet its consequences can be equally severe. In the Indian familial context, neglect frequently manifests through denial of adequate food, healthcare, emotional support, and personal care.

For elderly women, the concept of elder abuse must be understood within a gendered framework. Elderly women often experience abuse not only because of age-related dependency but also due to entrenched gender norms that devalue women's autonomy and contributions. Their suffering is frequently dismissed as a private family matter or as an inevitable aspect of ageing, thereby reinforcing silence and invisibility. This study adopts a broad understanding of elder abuse that includes emotional, psychological, economic, and neglect-based harms. Such an inclusive conceptualization aligns with the spirit of the MWPSC Act, 2007, which recognizes neglect and failure to maintain elderly persons as legal wrongs warranting intervention.

5.2 FORMS OF DOMESTIC HARASSMENT AGAINST ELDERLY WOMEN

Domestic harassment of elderly women within the family manifests in multiple forms, often subtle and normalized, making detection and intervention difficult. These forms of abuse are interconnected and collectively contribute to the marginalization and suffering of elderly women. An understanding of these distinct yet overlapping forms is essential for both empirical analysis and legal evaluation.

5.2.1 EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT

Emotional and psychological harassment is one of the most pervasive forms of domestic abuse faced by elderly women. It includes persistent verbal abuse, humiliation, threats, intimidation, ridicule, and deliberate isolation from family interactions. Elderly women may be subjected to derogatory remarks regarding their age, health, or dependency, which undermines their self-esteem and sense of worth.

Such harassment often occurs daily and may not leave physical evidence, making it socially and legally invisible. Continuous emotional abuse can result in anxiety, depression, loss of confidence, and a feeling of helplessness among elderly women. In many cases, emotional harassment is justified by family members as disciplinary behavior or dismissed as ordinary household conflict, thereby normalizing abuse.

5.2.2 NEGLECT AND DENIAL OF BASIC NEEDS

Neglect represents a serious form of domestic harassment and is particularly prevalent in the lives of elderly women. It involves the failure to provide adequate food, clothing, hygiene, medical care, emotional support, and safe living conditions. Elderly women may be denied timely medical treatment, assistance with daily activities, or even access to household resources.

Neglect is often passive in nature, arising from indifference rather than direct hostility. However, its impact can be severe, leading to deteriorating physical health, chronic illness, malnutrition, and emotional distress. In patriarchal households, elderly women's health needs are frequently deprioritized, reflecting their diminished social value.

5.2.3 FINANCIAL ABUSE AND ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

Financial abuse is a critical and gendered form of domestic harassment. Elderly women may be deprived of control over their pensions, savings, or other financial resources. Family members may forcibly manage or misuse their income, coerce them into signing property documents, or deny them access to money for personal or medical expenses.

Widowed elderly women are particularly vulnerable due to lack of formal ownership over property and limited legal awareness. Financial exploitation not only affects economic security but also reinforces dependency, leaving elderly women powerless to resist other forms of abuse. Such exploitation directly contradicts the protective intent of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

5.2.4 PHYSICAL ABUSE AND INTIMIDATION

Physical abuse, though less frequently reported, remains a serious form of domestic harassment. It includes acts such as hitting, pushing, restraining movement, or using physical force to intimidate elderly women. Physical abuse often coexists with emotional and financial harassment and is frequently concealed due to fear of retaliation and social stigma.

Elderly women may hesitate to disclose physical abuse due to concerns about family reputation, dependency on the abuser, or fear of being abandoned. Consequently, physical abuse often remains hidden until severe injury or health complications arise.

5.2.5 SOCIAL ISOLATION AND EXCLUSION

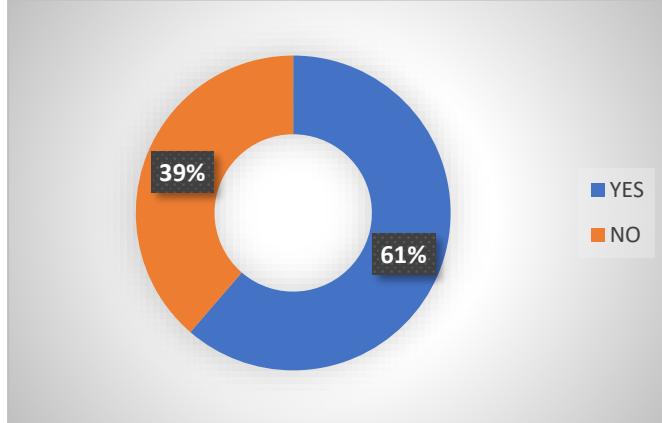
Social isolation constitutes a significant yet under-recognized form of domestic harassment. Elderly women may be deliberately excluded from family gatherings, decision-making processes, and social interactions. Restrictions may be imposed on their movement, communication with relatives, or participation in religious and community activities.

Such isolation intensifies feelings of loneliness and abandonment and increases psychological dependency on the abuser. Social exclusion also limits access to external support systems, thereby perpetuating abuse and silencing victims.

6. DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS

A. Have you experienced any form of harassment or ill treatment within your family after attaining the age of 60 years?

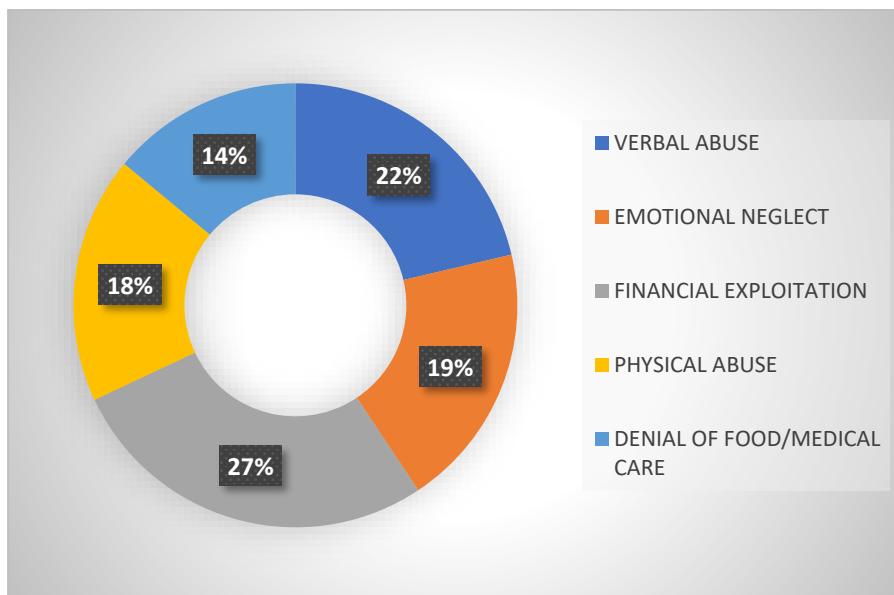
YES	92
NO	58



Out of the 150 elderly women surveyed, 92 respondents (61.33%) reported experiencing some form of harassment or ill-treatment within the family after attaining the age of 60 years, while 58 respondents (38.67%) reported no such experience. This indicates that domestic harassment of elderly women is a significant and prevalent concern within family settings.

B. What types of domestic harassment or neglect have you faced?

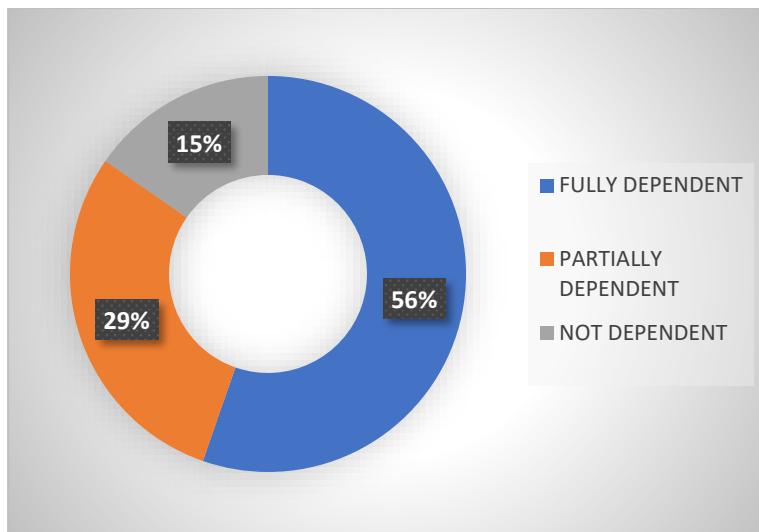
VERBAL ABUSE	32
EMOTIONAL NEGLECT	29
FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION	41
PHYSICAL ABUSE	27
DENIAL OF FOOD/MEDICAL CARE	21



The findings show that elderly women face multiple and overlapping forms of domestic abuse, with financial exploitation being the most prevalent, alongside significant instances of verbal abuse, emotional neglect, physical violence, and denial of basic care reflecting a serious erosion of dignity and security within the family.

C. Are you financially dependent on your family members for daily living and medical needs?

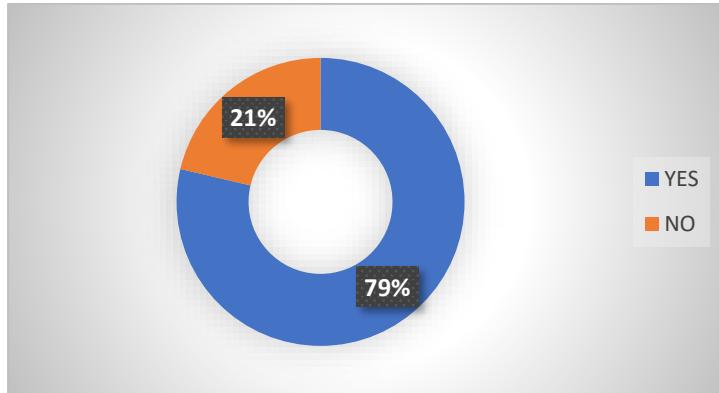
FULLY DEPENDENT	77
PARTIALLY DEPENDENT	50
NOT DEPENDENT	23



The findings indicate that a majority of elderly women are financially dependent on their families, with 77 respondents being fully dependent and 50 partially dependent, while only 23 respondents reported financial independence. This high level of dependency significantly contributes to their vulnerability within the household.

D. Do you believe that financial dependence increases the vulnerability of elderly women to harassment and neglect?

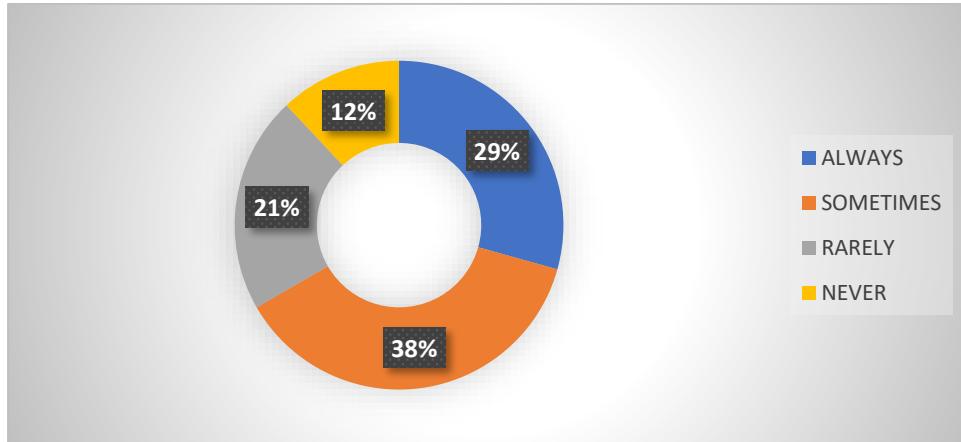
YES	118
NO	32



The data shows a strong consensus among respondents, with 118 elderly women affirming that financial dependence increases vulnerability to harassment and neglect, while only 32 respondents disagreed. This highlights the widely perceived link between economic dependency and heightened risk of abuse among elderly women.

E. Do you receive adequate care in terms of food, medical treatment, and emotional support from your family?

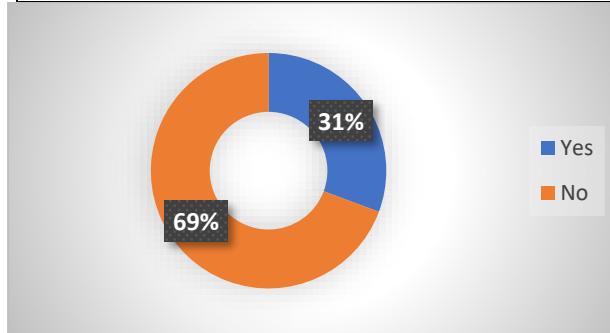
ALWAYS	44
SOMETIMES	56
RARELY	32
NEVER	18



The responses indicate that only a minority of elderly women (44 respondents) consistently receive adequate care, while the majority experience irregular or insufficient support, with 56 reporting "sometimes," 32 "rarely," and 18 "never." This reflects significant gaps in consistent family care and emotional support for elderly women.

F. Are you aware of your legal rights as senior citizen under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007?

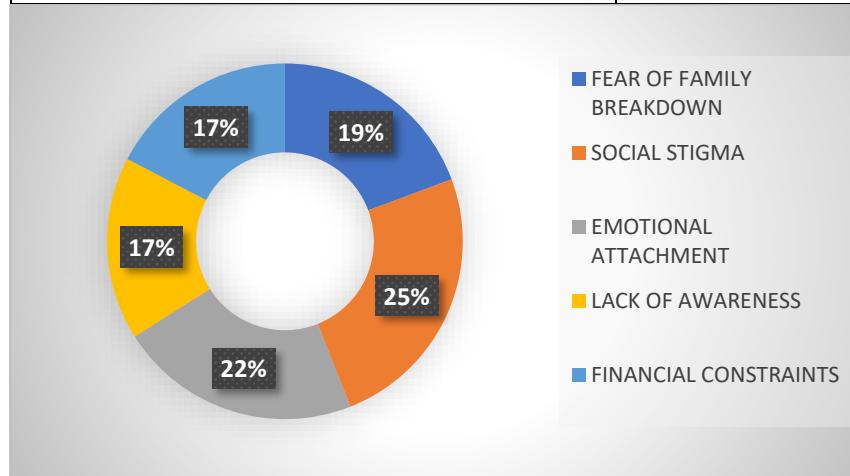
YES	46
NO	104



The findings reveal a significant lack of legal awareness among elderly women in the Ambala region. Out of 150 respondents, 104 women reported that they are unaware of their rights under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, while only 46 women were aware. This gap in awareness may prevent elderly women from seeking legal remedies against domestic harassment or neglect, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation and inadequate care. It underscores the urgent need for legal literacy programs and outreach initiatives to empower senior citizens.

G. What prevents you from seeking legal remedies against domestic harassment or neglect?

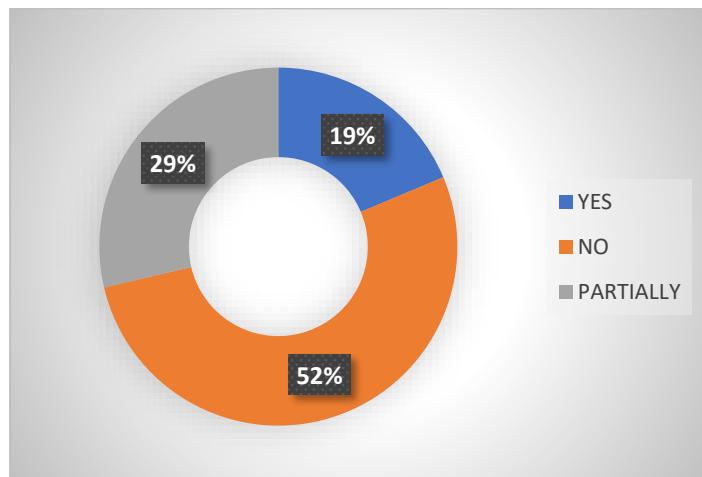
FEAR OF FAMILY BREAKDOWN	29
SOCIAL STIGMA	37
EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT	33
LACK OF AWARENESS	25
FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS	26



The responses indicate that elderly women face multiple barriers to seeking legal remedies. Among 150 respondents, the most cited obstacle was social stigma (37), followed by emotional attachment to family members (33) and fear of family breakdown (29). Other significant barriers include financial constraints (26) and lack of awareness about legal remedies (25). This demonstrates that both social pressures and practical limitations prevent elderly women from asserting their legal rights, keeping many silent despite experiencing harassment or neglect.

H. Do you think the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 is effectively implemented to protect the elderly women?

YES	28
NO	79
PARTIALLY	43



The findings reveal that the majority of elderly women perceive the MWPSC Act, 2007 as ineffective in practice. Out of 150 respondents, 79 women (52.67%) believe it is not effectively implemented, while 43 women (28.66%) feel it is partially effective, and only 28 women (18.67%) consider it fully effective. This highlights a significant gap between the legislative intent of protecting senior citizens and its actual enforcement on the ground, indicating the need for stronger implementation and awareness initiatives.

7. CONCLUSION

The present study on "Silent Suffering in the Home: An Empirical Study on Domestic Harassment and Neglect of Elderly Women in the Ambala Region" reveals a deeply concerning reality regarding the experiences of elderly women within their family environments. The findings indicate that a substantial number of elderly women face some form of domestic harassment or ill-treatment after reaching the age of sixty. The abuse is multidimensional, encompassing financial exploitation, verbal abuse, emotional neglect, physical mistreatment, and the denial of basic necessities such as food and medical care. These patterns reflect not only a breakdown of familial care but also the persistence of deeply ingrained social and gender norms that marginalize older women within domestic spaces.

A significant factor contributing to this vulnerability is financial dependence. Many elderly women rely on their family members for daily sustenance and medical support, which limits their autonomy and increases their exposure to neglect or exploitation. The study further illustrates that inadequate care is not limited to material needs; emotional and psychological support is often inconsistent or absent, leaving elderly women feeling isolated and undervalued despite living within their own families. This highlights a fundamental gap between the expectation that families will provide care and the reality experienced by aging women, showing that the home, often assumed to be a safe and nurturing space, can instead become a place of neglect and silent suffering.

Legal awareness emerges as another crucial dimension of vulnerability. Despite the existence of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, a large portion of the respondents remain unaware of their statutory rights. Even among those who are aware, a combination of emotional attachment, fear of family disruption, social stigma, and financial limitations prevents them from seeking legal remedies. These findings indicate that awareness alone is insufficient; societal pressures and deeply rooted familial obligations play a substantial role in limiting the effective utilization of legal protections. This underscores the reality that law, in isolation, cannot safeguard elderly women unless it is complemented by social support, legal guidance, and mechanisms that empower them to act without fear of reprisal or isolation.

Furthermore, the study highlights the disconnect between legislative intent and implementation. While the MWPSC Act is designed to protect senior citizens from neglect and harassment, its effectiveness is hindered by inadequate enforcement, limited accessibility, and lack of proactive awareness campaigns. Elderly women's perceptions of the Act's partial or ineffective implementation reinforce the need for systemic reforms, including strengthened monitoring, expedited legal processes, and community-based support systems that facilitate reporting and resolution of grievances.

In conclusion, the research confirms that silent suffering among elderly women is a pervasive and multifaceted issue in the Ambala region. It is shaped by structural vulnerabilities, socio-economic dependency, insufficient familial care, and limited awareness of legal rights. Addressing this challenge requires a holistic approach, combining legislative enforcement with social and educational interventions. Legal literacy programs, family counseling initiatives, and social support networks are critical to ensuring that elderly women can live with dignity, security, and respect. Ultimately, transforming the experience of aging women from one of vulnerability and neglect to one of protection and empowerment demands coordinated action from families, communities, and the state.

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