I heard the story of Lakshamma from a couple of my friends who met her at the bus stop in Bangalore, South India. 'You know, she did not look comfortable when she approached us asking for money', my friend told me. 'She quickly added that she was not a beggar and she felt bad doing that.' Lakshamma told my friends that she had no choice because of her current situation. They gave her some money and asked if they could do anything else for her. First, she seemed both startled and grateful at this question. Then she told them her story. “My name is Lakshamma. I am 62 years old. I live in Shivajinagar, one of the neighborhoods in Bangalore, with my son and daughter-in-law. My son is a sales manager in one of the city malls and works long hours six days a week. A couple of months ago, my daughter-in-law who does not work and stays at home, started making every excuse to not have me at home as much as possible. She used to ask me to go to the neighbors or to the shop to get something and when I got back I found the door of the house locked. After unsuccessfully calling to my daughter-in-law to open the door, I had to sit and wait until the door was unlocked if my daughter-in-law was inside or until my son came home in the evening. I did not complain to my son because he came home tired and sleepy most of the evenings and went to bed right after the quick supper. Pretty soon the daughter-in-law told me not to stay near the house during the day but to go somewhere else, so the neighbors do not start talking. She never gave me any money or any food besides meager meal in the morning and that’s how I ended up at this bus stop asking people for money to survive until I have to go home in the evening.”
After hearing this story, I had a lot of unanswered questions at the time about this elderly woman whom I never met. What were the societal triggers that made it possible for Lakshamma to end up in this situation? Did Lakshamma’s son know about his mother’s situation? Did he pretend not to know and sided with his wife? What were the reasons for Lakshamma to be subjected to this treatment? Where else could she turn for help instead of just trying to get some money from the total strangers at a bus stop? How was she treated by the rest of the society? Those were among the questions that I hoped to answer some day doing this research work. During my previous work in Bangalore, I encountered an alarming number of women, especially elderly women, who were finding themselves even in worse daily situations than Lakshamma. They had been abandoned by their family members due to the economic instability of the family, the breakdown of the extended family system, and other reasons. They are thrown out of their homes, subsist on handouts, are exploited, and often are victims of street violence.

Traditionally, old age and women in India have been identified with the image of the multigenerational family, with the expectation that adult children will care for their aging parents. The family has been the most important social institution for the care of the elderly and has been expected to serve the role of primary care-giver, the principal source of support and security in old age. In stereotypical images, older adults in India are supposed to be perceived as wise, spiritually focused, and economically and socially stable (Nandan, 2007). However, as I came to increasingly appreciate during the course of this work, the capacity of the family to care for the elderly, as well as the availability and quality of support services, is dependent on the economic and social circumstances of the family, the overall political-economic environment, and changing economic conditions resulting from globalization and urbanization. During the last two decades, the decreasing family size, immigration and other changes in society have started posing challenges for care in India. The elderly can no longer solely depend on family to take care of them. Old age homes are filling the gap to a certain extent. But as of now, it is not a popular and affordable choice for most. Traditionally, old age homes were meant for the poor and destitute and hence mostly managed by charitable organizations, but in recent years, paid facilities have also emerged to cater to the needs of middle and upper middle-class older persons, who can pay for care in old age (Dutta, 2017).

The abandonment of elderly people in India and other places is not a new phenomenon. However, Salerno (2012) asserts that abandonment is central to modern times. He argues that while forms of abandonment and reactions to it vary from society to society, it appears to have taken on enormous social and cultural importance in modern life and characterizes not only our superficial relationships, but also many of our most intimate ones. As people’s life experiences are structured by wider societal relations, it is important to set the issue of abandonment of elderly within the larger historical, social and politico-economic contexts. In examining the issue of abandoned elderly women in India, my research focuses on identifying the linkages between the individual families and the wider structures and processes of society. As class and caste positions constitute the key social contexts essential to understanding the lives of women in all stages of life, I also examine what significance class and caste of abandoned elderly women have in shaping, sustaining and changing these women’s lives and experiences.

In this article I wish to focus on the abandonment-related experiences lived and told by the elderly women abandoned by their family members in Bangalore, South India. These experiences present alternate realities of powerlessness of the beggared and displaced faced by abandoned elderly in the society. They contrast with the official versions focused on the
power that elderly females gradually acquire within their families as they get older.

**Data and Methodology**

The data on which this analysis is based were obtained from the interviews with forty-seven abandoned elderly women over the age of sixty. All women were interviewed in the Old age homes where they reside now. The objective of the interviews was twofold; one the one hand, I was interested to understand the social and familial background of these women. On the other hand, I wanted to hear about their experiences of being elderly, female and abandoned in Bangalore city, their ideas about how societal changes affected them and other elderly people they know, including previous generations in their families, the major health issues they have, and their options and challenges regarding their access to health care and other relevant programs and services.

The interviews focused on two broad topics, as follows:

1) **the issues that surround elderly abandonment:** The questions in this part addressed what happened after the women became alone: reason(s) that led them to live in that particular institution; the difficulties that they might have faced; individuals or groups that helped them; their knowledge of where to go for help; and possible instances of physical and other types of abuse. I asked if they knew any men who are/were abandoned by their families and whether they experienced their abandonment differently. Lastly, I asked them if they preferred to live somewhere else and why.

2) **the overall experiences of aging for these women and other elderly they know and the reasons that brought them to the institutions where they were staying:** Under this category, I asked participants about their marital status, the number of children and whether any of their children (and/or other family members and other relatives) visit them in the old age home. I also asked about how they viewed the experience of aging for their parents and other relatives compared to their own experience. To determine whether the women were dependent on their family, I inquired about pensions, property, and overall physical and financial dependency issues. I concluded this section by asking them what they thought about the current conditions of the elderly in India: whether and why they are different -- for better or worse -- from those of the past and whether and why they are different for men and women.

In addition to the individual interviews with the women, I conducted four focus groups with the medical, nursing, administrative, and other personnel of the same old age homes: one focus group per each institution. I conducted separate focus groups for medical/nursing personnel and for administrative staff in each institution, with different questions tailored to each group. Each focus group consisted of 5-10 people. The total number of the focus group participants was 23 participants. The rationale behind conducting focus groups rather than individual interviews with the staff members was to find out the answers from as many of the staff members as possible within the limited time that they had between their work, family and other responsibilities. Staff participation in focus groups was voluntary and was based on their availability from work at the times when focus groups were held.

Out of 23 focus group participants, 13 were female and 10 were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 64 years old. There were 4 doctors, 7 nursing staff members, 5 administrative staff, 3 social workers, and 4 maintenance staff workers. Most had worked with the elderly women for at least 5-10 years. All focus group participants had extensive knowledge of the family backgrounds and personal circumstances of the abandoned women interviewed in this study.

Focus group questions addressed the experiences of staff who work in institutions that house abandoned elderly women. The interviews addressed the following topics: 1) issues surrounding elderly abandonment; 2) services and programs for abandoned elderly in
and outside of the institution; and 3) options and challenges that abandoned elderly women have with regards to health care access and related programs. The main objective of these interviews was to elicit the information on these issues from the people who in different capacities work daily with abandoned and other elderly.

The current study is a qualitative research project that examines the conditions of abandoned elderly women currently in four Old Age Homes in Bangalore, South India. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the worlds visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, a naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.3).

There has been no qualitative research work focused on the voices and everyday experiences of the abandoned elderly women in India that examines their experiences through interrelationship of class, caste and gender in multidimensional ways. A qualitative research is an ideal fit for this research project because it asks the why and how questions. This paper employs qualitative research methods - a combination of individual in-depth interviews with focus group interviews - to gain insight into the why and how of the daily experiences of the abandoned elderly women in Bangalore. This study situates these elderly women within the positions of class, caste, and gender and looks at their experiences as influenced by these positions in their daily lives after being abandoned.

The abandoned women interviewed

The 47 elderly women come from four Old Age homes in Bangalore: two of them are located in Bangalore Urban and the other two in Bangalore Rural. The women range in age from 60 to 98 with a mean age of 71.5. Fifteen women reported to be currently married (these are those who said that their husbands left them, but they were not separated or divorced officially), 19 were widowed, 12 were single and 1 was officially separated. Out of 47 women, approximately half (23 women) had no children. Regarding their education level, there were 14 illiterate women, 1 had 2 years of formal schooling, 8 had finished primary education (the highest was 6th grade), 8 more women received middle and secondary (SSLC) education, 10 had bachelor’s degrees and 6 had master’s degrees. Regarding their class background¹, the numbers were similar for each class: 17 low-class, 15 middle-class and 15 upper-class women. Regarding their caste status, 16 women identified themselves as general caste category, 16 women identified themselves as Brahmin, 11 women reported that they belonged to Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) categories (including one woman who identified herself as a Dalit) and 4 were Other Backward Castes (OBC)².

¹ The class background of the women was based on self-identification in the survey as well as on the information given by them about the overall economic activities of the households from which they came.

² The castes in general category are there because they have historically enjoyed the privileges of being an upper class, for eg., Brahmans. SC/ST means Scheduled caste/Scheduled tribe.

In modern literature, the Scheduled Castes/Tribes are sometimes referred to as untouchables; in Tamil Nadu they are referred as Adi Dravida or Paraiyar; and in other states mostly referred as Dalits (Kumar, 1992). OBC stands for Other Backward Castes. It is a collective term used by the Government of India to classify castes that are socially and educationally disadvantaged.
Regarding their former occupation, almost half of the women (23) said that they stayed home while their husbands worked. More than half of such women (13) belonged to the middle and upper classes. Seventeen low-income women had worked as maids and child care providers, with a smaller number employed in tailoring, hotel maintenance, and agricultural work. Seven upper class women were previously employed as a doctor, a publishing house clerk, 2 primary school teachers, a dance teacher, a clerk in a governmental office and one was a nun. Only one of the 17 low-income women indicated that she received a pension from the government. Two of the 15 middle-class and four of the 15 upper-class women, only 2 and 4 women received pensions from the government.

All of the women were abandoned persons who used to live with their families. Only seven of them said that they used to own either some land or a house before coming to an old age home. Forty women admitted that they were dependent on their children or other relatives before being abandoned by their family members. Even the women who still had jobs confessed that they had to give their income to the rest of the family and, therefore, did not have any independent source of money for their own needs. Seven remaining women said that they did not consider themselves dependent on anyone because they either had some earnings saved, received a pension or had family wealth to provide a safety net for them.

Besides having no contact with their family members, most women had no contact with their friends (32) and had no visitors after their admission to the Old Age homes (40). After being abandoned (as explained below), all low-class and caste and some of the middle-class and caste women ended up in the streets begging or looking for food and shelter. They were later admitted into the Old Age homes, mostly with the help of social workers and police (and very rarely by just ordinary strangers) who accompanied most of them (25, or almost 50%). All upper-class and caste women were brought to the Old Age homes by either their relatives or friends. Some of the women came by themselves because they had no one to accompany them. Some of the women were resistant (18) to their admission into the Old Age homes. The rest of the women (29) admitted that they were resigned to their situation by the time they ended up in these institutions. Also, at that time they thought that it was a better alternative for them to be in an Old Age home than being outside without food, shelter and money. These women’s stay at their respective Old Age homes ranged from as little as 1 week to a full 13 years with an average stay between 2-5 years.

**Abandonment-related experiences among elderly women in Bangalore, India**

“Why did this happen to me?”: The reality of elderly female abandonment in Bangalore

The stories of abandonment that the women told me were complex, diverse and tragic. Some women were abandoned by their husbands, others by their children, by the husbands and children together, or by other relatives and even by neighbors and friends. Although the paths and life trajectories that led to the moments when they were abandoned by their families were individual, at the same time they reflected common class, caste and gender experiences across these women. In conversing with my interviewees, I became impressed by the analytical abilities of the women from low-class backgrounds. Whether literate or not, these women were very articulate when they spoke about the experiences of their lives.

One surprising finding was that the low-class victims of abandonment were not reluctant to talk about how, when and why they were abandoned by their family members. Moreover, abandoned women themselves and the people who work with them talked about elderly abandonment in Bangalore as a common phenomenon. As one doctor described it:

“It is sad that our grandparents have to go through that [abandonment]. Daily I see many older people on the streets and I always wonder
about their family situations. I do not know if other younger people think of our older people in the streets and their lives, what they go through. I think about them. Maybe, because I work with elderly women in this condition [abandoned]. Unfortunately, I do not have time to find out about each and every one of them. …But recently when I encountered a couple of women who were thrown out of their homes, I brought them here."

Many low-income women and some of the focus group participants also recalled either knowing other people in similar situations, the majority of whom were women, or hearing many stories of elderly women being abused and abandoned by various family members. Although abandonment was a traumatic event for all these women, and many openly cried or were visibly emotionally distressed during the interview, they were not reluctant to talk about the circumstances and reasons of why they were abandoned. As one of them put it, “At this point I am beyond shame and sorrow and I want to tell my story”.

When I spoke to the upper-class women in the same situation, most of them said that they did not consider themselves truly abandoned because their children or other family members sent money to make sure that they were taken care of financially. However, many of the same women admitted that they felt truly abandoned because they had very little or almost no physical contact with their family members. For most of them, occasional phone calls, mostly around big holidays or other occasions, were the main instances of communication with their children.

The interviews revealed that the physical reality of abandonment, the reasons for it, and its diverse forms were different based on the women’s caste and class. My conversations with the upper-class women revealed that they viewed themselves abandoned when the children did not visit or call often. It is true that they received substantial financial support from their children that afforded them a comfortable life in one of the private nursing or Old Age homes in the city, including increased access to health-related and other services and programs. But most indicated that the feelings of abandonment stemmed from their not having more frequent contact with their offspring.

In contrast, in many cases low-class women were left to fend for themselves - both physically and emotionally - in an economic and social environment devoid of any reasonably functional welfare structures. One social worker in a focus group interview commented on one woman’s situation:

“Her family left her at the hospital after they brought her there for treatment. First, they showed up often to visit her but when they heard about more and more complications with her health, they stopped coming. When the doctors sent the aid to check on the address they gave for her, it turned out that it was a fake one. So, the doctors kept her in that hospital for a little bit but without a lot of treatment. I think they did it because they knew that no one will pay for her treatment. Then the hospital sent her here, to this Old Age home. I heard that it’s becoming very common to abandon seniors at the hospitals, but the streets are the most common place where the poor women always end up if their families do not want them anymore.”

The most common reasons for abandonment cited by both the women and the focus group participants were as follows: childlessness, property ownership, migration of younger family members in search of employment, being a burden or unproductive within the family, poverty, and an illness or a disability. In many cases, women specified a combination of two or three of those reasons, rather than one specific reason, that led to their abandonment. Below I will examine those common reasons.

**Childlessness and old age**

According to Roy (1975), having a child changes the status of women in all classes of Indian society. “Becoming a mother, in fact, is not so much a change of status as it is the attainment of the status that a woman is born to achieve. No
woman is more unfortunate than one who is unable to bear a child.” Although this statement comes from a work published in 1975 (Roy, 1975), it still resonates with the words of most of the elderly women with whom I talked, many of whom were childless. One, 60-year old Meera, described her experiences with not having children:

“I was never able to bear children... I do not know the reasons. And I can tell you what it's like. It feels like living with a huge sore on your face. You are used to it and sometimes you forget or pretend that you forget about it. But everyone else still notices it when they look at you and they do not let you forget about it.”

Other women were less vocal on the issue, but I could hear the bitterness and sadness when they mentioned that they did not have children. Some of them attributed their abandonment by the family members directly to their not having children in general. In addition, most expressed their longing for grown-up children who could have taken care of them and provided security and protection for them in time of need.

“I see my sister’s and my brother’s children who live with their parents and bring home money and give them grandchildren to make them happy in their later years. I think my sister and my brother feel happy and secure. Bhagavan [God] did not give me children to make me feel happy and stable when I am old.”

These views contrasted with the narratives of women abandoned by their children, predominantly sons.

“I always cherished thoughts of being taken care of by my sons (I used to have 2 sons but one of them is no more,) when I am old. But my living son brought me to this Old Age home himself. He does not want me to live with them every day. He does not come to visit. He only comes and takes me to his house again when he needs to show me to the relatives again.”

“I used to think it is my house”: Property ownership among elderly women

Most of the women I interviewed shared a belief that if an elderly person accumulated power in some form (property, money, etc.) or were able to function semi-independently (although, in their opinion, it was less true for women than for men), they could receive respect and support from the family. However, the narratives also showed the opposite side of having property or money, as these quickly become incentives for abuse, displacement and abandonment by their relatives. As Janaki, age 65, puts it:

“My husband and I had a house to live in, but it was snatched by my brothers-in-law... really soon after my husband passed away. What am I to say? I do not have children to protect me in my old age. I tried to reason with them, but they said that I cannot live there now as their brother is not living anymore. What am I to do? Nobody listens to me, an old woman, the police, the neighbors will not do anything”.

Another woman, 70-year old thin and frail Asha, was barely holding back her tears while talking to me. A month before her older son left her in one of the local hospitals, he made her transfer the ownership of the house to him. She also admitted that before being abandoned she was abused and mistreated in other ways by her older son’s family with whom she lived.

“They almost never spoke to me and when I spoke up, pretended not to notice me. [wipes her eyes at this moment]. They took everything I had, and my daughter-in-law told me that because I am an old woman without a husband, I do not even need to wear nice clothes and jewelry no more.”

Inequality of access to resources persists in India despite constitutional steps taken to end gender-based discrimination. Although the Indian Government professes to strive for women’s equality, very few legislative initiatives
have been undertaken regarding women’s property rights. The major exception to this is the Hindu Succession Rights Act of 1956 (referred to as HSA hereafter) which legislates for cases of intestate succession among Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. Since one of its goals was to stop gender-based discrimination, women receive rights to a share of the property of their deceased father or husband. In 1956, when Hindu law was codified, the HSA was seen as the most crucial of reforms. The original draft, which attempted to do away with the concept of coparcenary 3 property, was vehemently resisted. Sita Ram Jajjoo of Madhya Bharat said, “Here we feel the pinch because it touches our pockets. We, male members of this House, are in a huge majority. I do not wish that the tyranny of the majority may be imposed on the minority, the female members of this House.” (Singh, 2013).

The HSA allows the wife, daughters and sons of a deceased senior male to claim an equal share in familial property. According to Bates (2005), the fact remains that widows do not claim their inheritance rights. By giving inheritance rights to the widows and daughters as well as the sons of a deceased senior male, the HSA proposes a radically different organization of the traditional patrilineal household, commonly referred to as “the Hindu joint family”. The goal of the Act was to empower Hindu women’s position in Indian society by giving them rights to property through inheritance. By doing so, the HSA also affects men’s access to inherited property and modifies brother-sister relationships in unexpected ways.

The inability of Indian women to inherit property, money or land without having to overcome enormous difficulties is crucial for understanding the current conditions in which many abandoned elderly women find themselves.

**Migrations**

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1. Joint inheritance or heirship of property. Also called *parcenary*.

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All focus group participants voiced similar sentiments regarding the link between migration and abandonment of the elderly. As one stated, “Nowadays more than ever a lot of younger family members move to other places in search of employment and better lives leaving the elderly behind, in many cases, with no one to provide for their basic needs and take care of them.” They talked about the impact of migration of various family members on the lives of the women with whom they worked and the resulting abandonment of those women. They also related the experiences of their relatives and friends who left their elderly behind when they were forced to move for unemployment and other reasons.

In response to my question: “How did you come to live in this institution?” many women talked about how their lives were affected by the changes in society, in particular poverty and lack of jobs for their children. Narratives about the migration of younger generations to the city and leaving the elderly behind in the village as a common occurrence in India were repeated by both women and the Old Age homes staff members.

The fate of many women from poor families, whose children migrated in search of better lives, is very similar to the description of the experiences by another abandoned woman: “My son told me just before he left home that he was leaving to look for a job in the city. I was unaware of his decision until the last moment when he told me. He did not have work here, in our village, so he left. He told me that he will come and bring me to leave with him after he finds work and settles somewhere in the city. He sent messages for me first, but gradually I stopped receiving news of him...[She taps at her eyes with the *pallu* of her sari]. He is somewhere

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in the city, but I do not know where he is and what he does. Maybe, he is struggling too and that is why he is not able to take care of me. Of course, I do not want to be a burden for him...

[After some silence]. My former husband’s relatives brought me here and left me in the streets of Bengaluru. They said that it was my son’s responsibility to care for me, so I should try to find him here. It was hard to live outside because I had to beg and scavenge until police picked me up and brought me to this Old Age home. I wish I could let my son know where I am now, so he can come and visit if he changes his mind... I do not want him to take me to live with him but just for him to visit me here, even once...

Most upper and middle-class women abandoned by their families had children working outside of India. Most related that their children lived and worked abroad. Only a few of them had children who lived and worked in India, in places other than Bangalore. One shared that she was proud of her son working in the United States but when I asked her how often her son contacted her, her reaction was different. She sighed:

“This is when I start thinking about being alone and abandoned. When my son does not call me... [sighed again]. Oh, of course, I know that he must be busy with his work and his own family, but I do not think I will demand a lot if I can hear his voice at least once a week. But I can’t hope for this to change... And my grandchildren are also big enough to call me, but they have not done it even once.”

Another woman added that “a phone call from her children was usually a highlight of her entire week or a month, depending how often they called.”

According to Joshi (2011), people migrating in search of employment has emerged as a one of the major problems in desertion of old parents. Starting with the problems caused by the high level of migration in the northern hill state of Himachal Pradesh, state after state has been enacting laws to secure maintenance for ’deserted’ old parents and now a central law is being enacted on similar lines (see the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007). In a society that prided itself on its strong joint family systems, the necessity of enacting such laws underlines the magnitude of the problem. The right of parents without any means to be supported by their children who have sufficient means has been recognized by section 125(1) (d) of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, and section 20(3) of the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956. Evidently, the problem is getting more acute in the regions and sections of the society prone to migration in search of work and employment. Abandonment is no longer limited to the asset-less laboring class who cannot earn beyond their own requirements for survival, but also among the middle classes in whose case the tendency to neglect old parents may be due to the pressure of raising their own standard of living and securing a sunny future. The consequence of this has been an increase in the desertion of old parents and in their social and economic insecurity.

**Extended family, meager resources and elderly women**

Historically the multigenerational extended family has been the primary institution to take care of the elderly in India. Although the traditional large combined and extended families are giving way to nuclear families in urban India, most South Indians still reside in variations of the extended family, such as living with husband’s or wife’s parents and/or other relatives, living with the siblings or in other extended family arrangements. Ninety percent of my interviewees used to live within different types of such joint families at various points of their lives.

A common fear among the Indian elderly still at home is that they will become a burden to their families. Vatuk (1990) notes a widespread desire of many elderly women in India “to die ‘while my hands and feet are still able.’ The worst thing that can happen to someone, they say, is to become helpless in old age and to live as a burden to others and oneself.” All the women
interviewed spoke of this fear in various statements in relation to the reasons of why they were abandoned by their family members. “When I stopped bringing the money into the house, I think… this is when their [children’s] attitude changed. Even my younger son’s, who has always been a very kind and sweet child. It makes me sad to remember about it. I worked all my life as a housemaid and never felt as useless as when I stopped working.”

At the same time views like “Old Age has never been a problem for India where a value based, joint family system is supposed to prevail” (Soneja, 2011) are quite widespread in popular and media discourses. However, speaking of Sri Lanka, and generalizing to the Third World as a whole, Samarasinghe (1982, p. 174) dismisses the extended family system and the presumed socioeconomic security that it provides to the elderly as a “romantic myth,” because the resources to be shared are often meager. In fact, poor families, who must meet the needs of all dependents, “will increasingly be forced to make a choice between spending on their aged dependents and spending on the welfare of the so-called nuclear family” (Samarasinghe, 1982).

Describing a similar family situation, one of the focus group members gave a poignant example of an account of one female patient: “Once she couldn’t contribute to the family’s income anymore and even worse, she was still eating that family’s food, the relatives kept her locked in her room and were giving her meager leftovers for years. Finally, they stopped doing even that and one day she was taken to the city and just left at the side of the road to fend for herself.”

**Illness or disability**

Health problems leading to abandonment came up as one of the most common problems faced mostly by elderly women from low-class and middle-class backgrounds. The women noted various serious medical conditions such as heart diseases, diabetes, cancer, physical disabilities and mobility issues. Among the poor women, the overall agreement was that those women who were in need of medical assistance or those with serious health issues that required spending a lot of money were the most vulnerable to abandonment because they had “no income” and “were dependent on spouses or children for everything”.

All women, regardless of caste and class, mentioned that they had to minimize and, in many cases, dismiss their health issues so they did not bother or inconvenience family members who would need to take them to the doctor and/or spend money for transportation and consultation fees as well as medicines and/or other medical treatment. Many women even admitted that they lived in constant fear that their health issues would be discovered by their family members and this would complicate daily lives for them more than their conditions. Their reasoning was that their relatives neither had enough money nor time to take care of them if they had to maintain a chronic condition. The widows further voiced that their situation was worse because they were dependent on children for their care who solely “decided whether the mother needed doctor’s help or not” even if she said she did.

The women who did not have any children shared that they had to rely on the mercy of other family members and even friends, which for the most part happened only in emergency cases. Most of them confessed that they had to ask for health-related help and/or money at least once. All of them admitted that they were ashamed of doing that because they were afraid of being reprimanded that they faked their conditions and/or called “undeserving of being helped or of spending money on them”.

**Experiences of care within the family**

In addition to being shaped and channeled by the divisions of class, caste and gender, the experiences of aging are also biologically generated. This means that care options that the elderly persons have within the context of governmental services, neighborhoods, and the caregiving capacities of the families need to be examined.
In Gibson’s (1988) study *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School* the participants admitted that Indian parents value sons for two main reasons: 1) the status and wealth that they will likely contribute to the family; and, 2) the prospect that they will care for parents in their elder years. In her study Gibson provided the statements of the research participants supporting those two reasons. Manjula’s 84-year-old father “will never be placed in a retirement home.” “The sons have to take care of the parents,” Manjula says. Whatever happens, “[an elder son] cannot throw the parents out.” Pramod agrees, adding, “In India, parents live with the son when they get old. There are no nursing homes.” Ahmed’s (1999) review of the research on gender socialization in Indian families supports the perspective captured by Gibson and her immigrant research participants: Boys are perceived to be the future caretakers of parents in their old age and prized as such. Girls, on the other hand, are understood to be temporary members of their own families — their primary roles and responsibilities will be as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers in the families that they are married into (p. 40).

The testimonials of most women and focus group participants tended to agree with the above statements. They talked about their sons as primary breadwinners and caretakers. Those women who did not have children expressed regret that they did not have male children who could potentially take care of them in their old age. The only people who disagreed with this perspective were a few childless women and a few younger women, focus group participants, who stated that in their experiences women were the ones who took care of all the physical and some of the financial needs in their families and in many other families they knew.

While it is stereotypically considered that sons are the primary caregivers for the elderly in India, it is daughters and/or daughters-in-law who usually take over this role. In many cases, when people say that the family takes care of the elderly within it, it is merely a euphemism for women who shoulder the main burden of caring for the elderly (Sijuwade, 2008). The reality that female family members provide the most enduring and substantial support has been consistently documented. Kitazawa (1996) states that women must live through old age three times in their lives, a sentiment that seems to apply to the experiences of the women interviewed here, regardless of their class and caste. First, each has to take care of her or and her husband’s parent(s) in their old age, then her husband in his old age, and finally herself in her old age. Single women, who did not have to take care of a husband, in many cases had to look after the elderly relatives in the family other than their own parents (e.g., aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters-in-law and even their own siblings).

All interviewees without exception stated that it is the children’s responsibility to care for their parents in their old age. However, when I talked to the poor women of their preferred living places, comments like “I was abandoned by my son and his family. Why should I go back and live with them? They do not want me there.” and “I am happy here, at this Old Age Home. I am provided with everything here” were ubiquitous. At the same time, all stated that they would have preferred to live somewhere else, although none ever mentioned any specific place. The women from the upper-class background, except a couple of them, all preferred to be back at their

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4 This statement reflects the general stereotypes that most of the population had about the nature of the old age homes that existed in India and mostly catered to the poor elderly populations. During the last two decades, various types of old age homes became the solution to the lack of family care and almost non-existent state of the social security among Indian elderly.

5 Recognition of this reality also emerges in policy makers’ concerns that, with the women’s increasing participation in the paid labor force, the critical pool of unpaid female family caregivers may diminish. For example, this concern is directly expressed as a directive no. 11 in the National Policy for Older Persons (1999).
homes. Unlike the women from low-class families, they did not say openly that they were rejected by their family members.

All women, regardless of their background, voiced nostalgic memories about how the elderly people were treated by the families and the society at large in the past versus nowadays. Nearly all of the women testified to significant changes in the relations between the generations both in the community and in their own family histories. However, the actual experiences of the elderly in their accounts differed according to their class and caste positions. The women from the upper classes and castes talked about the elderly, both women and men, being in the forefront of the family and community affairs and decision-making. According to Kamala,

“Both my father and my mother seemed to become more important, both in the family and outside of it, with age. They had a final say on a variety of things within the family and outside it for the younger generations. They [their decisions] were not always accepted easily by the children but they were still accepted and rarely questioned or challenged.”

Another woman’s words support Kamala’s statement above: “In my family the elderly’s words were always the law.”

The women from the lower classes and castes mostly talked about how in the past their elders’ needs, both physical and emotional, were met by the family members and occasionally neighbors.

“We lived in the village near Mysuru. We had a big joint family where almost every male adult was working in the fields. Women stayed at home and took care of the young and the elderly. We did not have a lot of money, but I always saw that my taata and ajji (grandfather and grandmother) had food to eat.”

Some of the women also mentioned that the older people in their families were many times asked to give their advice on a number of issues, especially in a possibility of a conflict situation. “The elderly provided advices to various family members on what to do when in difficulty and in other situations, including what to do when they were away from their homes.”

Experiences of care in Old Age homes

For this study, I did not specifically focus on the care that women received in Old age homes where they stayed. However, most women voiced their opinions, regarding aspects of their lives in those institutions. The women told me that despite the fact that they had their lives provided for, much of the Old age home environment was not comfortable for most of them. However, some merely reconciled to being here because there was nowhere else where they could go when they became alone. Others still preferred the Old age home because it was less hostile than the home environment. As one woman put it, “My children do not visit me here. The Old age home takes care of me better than the care I had at my home.”

Other comments that women and focus group participants made supported the above and included the following:

“When family members abandon the elderly in the streets that leads to the problems of destitution and deterioration because these women cannot take care of themselves there. They do not have food, shelter and other resources to do so. They are ashamed of themselves because many times they blame themselves for being abandoned before they realize that it’s not necessarily their fault. When they are here, we provide for them and take care of their physical and emotional needs.”

“I would like to be at this Old age home because there is nobody to take care of me at home. What am I going to do there?”

“In some cases, I do not think elderly are always totally abandoned. Relatives could be around, but they may just be too busy with their own lives to care about the health and overall well-being of their elderly parents.”

The key issue is that despite the lack of comfort, at least the elderly women were free to live their lives with others as best as they could do it under
these circumstances. While back home, their own families deprived them of shelter, food and other help. Obliterating these women both physically and mentally from their families, their relatives left them on their own, to face social isolation and in many cases physical death.

On the other hand, the interview narratives and my observations showed that the Old age homes were class-based institutions that catered to those who were able to pay and those who were not. The Old age homes that housed abandoned women from poor backgrounds provided them with the very bare minimum of care and the very basic medical services. They were also not equipped for taking care of those with serious physical or mental conditions. As one participant put it, “None of these places will take people who need serious care or who are really demented. What is available is basic shelter, with the security of getting food at a certain time and you do not have to be out in the sun and rain and you have a place and a bed there.”

Further she talked about the usual fate of those who ended up getting seriously ill while staying in the Old age home, “If these people need Hospice, there is no such thing. People just wait for them to die. And they just lie there, waiting to die. If they need nursing, they get it if those places are organized enough for them to get it. Most have some medical personnel come.”

**Dying and death because of abandonment**

In the interview narratives of the women and focus group participants, the issue of death came up several times, mostly in relation to women’s life in the streets. Talking about what elderly women face alone in the streets, a participant told me, “I have known many cases of women just going to die and dying after they were abandoned by their family members.” She then added that many of them chose to quietly die, rather than struggle to survive on their own without access to food, clothing and shelter. Instead of begging, some tried to find some kind of employment, for instance, sweeping the temples, washing dishes, and others, which would have paid them with a little bit of money or some food. But many times, finding any kind of paying work was an almost impossible task for the women, due to their diminished physical capacity and the overall patronizing and dismissive attitudes in society towards elderly women.

When abandoned elderly women become increasingly unable to take care of themselves in basic ways and when medical care cannot be accessed when they are on the streets, then the question is how does dying and death occur? What to do when abandoned women die on the streets? And who is responsible for taking care of the mortal remains of such a person? I did not focus on getting more information on the topic because it would require a different category of people to interview. However, this information is necessary to draw attention to the issue of abandonment of elderly women and its consequences and to eliminate the so called “information deficit”, a serious lack of information on people who live on the streets – the destitute who age and die under very dismal conditions – which ultimately results in the underreporting of their deaths. (Chatterjee and Sengupta, 2017)

**Gender, class, caste and health**

These categories were expressed by the elderly women, both explicitly and implicitly, in their responses to a variety of interview questions. Women from all class and caste backgrounds talked equally willingly about what it meant for them to be a woman within the family, in their working lives and in other aspects of their daily lives. One important finding here is that the women talked more openly about their belonging to a specific class than to a specific caste. They talked about being poor or being well-off and how their lives depended on to which class they belonged, but very few of them explicitly mentioned how their caste determined their circumstances and experiences. Despite the women’s less explicit acknowledgement of the influence of their caste on the circumstances of
their abandonment, some of the interview narratives still reflect that influence. For instance, one of the participants told a story of an elderly woman who was left on her own in the village. Her son's family does not want to take her to live with them in Bangalore because the daughter-in-law belongs to a higher Lingayat caste than her mother-in-law who is Dalit. When the mother became sick, the son had to go back to the village to put her in the hospital because his wife did not want to take her and to take care of her at their house.

Gender differences figured explicitly in women's responses when I asked women if they knew of any elderly men who were in the same situation of being abandoned by their families as they were and whether and how those experiences and resulting consequences were different for them. Very few of them mentioned that they knew of any men who were also abandoned by their families. Some women put it this way, “I don’t think I know of any men who are in the same situation as many of us, women, here. My own older brothers (as all the other men in my family who reached old age) were taken care of by their wives, most of whom were younger than the husbands... But not necessarily healthier... Anyway, they had to take care of the men regardless of their own health issues.”

“I can’t imagine any woman who could throw her husband out of the house... Well, unless he was behaving kind of really bad towards her and if she dared to do that. But I think many men die before we, women, do. But I know of many men who threw their wives out.”

The Old age homes personnel also could only point me to very few such men who resided there. As one staff member said, “Because more men have jobs and they do not necessarily spend all the money on the family needs unlike women who have to give their earnings to their husbands and sons, they usually have more independent sources of income and financial resources as well as spousal and children support to enjoy a comfortable life in their older years. Besides, usually the fathers also own the house in the majority of cases, so their children depend on them to have a roof above their heads, if they live in the same household, and usually show more respect.”

These statements reflect the different possibilities of later life for men and women within the same class which are determined by lower levels of education for women, gendered productive and reproductive roles, lower pay, fewer enforceable rights in property and other assets, and lower (if any) independent pensions, coupled with women’s greater longevity and morbidity in old age. In the context of India, where many find it difficult to meet their daily nutritional requirements and public provision of social pensions and healthcare falls significantly short of need, the poor are forced to live a hand-to-mouth existence, irrespective of age and gender. In these circumstances, and due to the age differences between spouses and the low levels of widow remarriage, men are more likely than women to end their lives having had the financial support and care of a spouse.

Conclusion
Most of the women I interviewed saw themselves and everyday experiences of their lives circumscribed by societal customs, with clearly laid down patterns, and with few opportunities for change. They clearly saw that there were problems in their own lives, in those of their families, their neighbors and friends. However, while they cited various examples of systemic injustices they faced and were truly unhappy in their situations, few questioned the system in which they were raised—the class and caste backgrounds of their families, their position as women, arranged marriages, patriarchy, and other issues. At the same time, many of the women, especially those from the poor family backgrounds, were very articulate regarding their experiences related to their abandonment and attempted to make sense of a rapidly changing situation around them.
Abandoned elderly women in Bangalore are prime exemplars of the ways in which the destinies of the poorest, the sickest and the weakest are determined by the structure of our society. The experiences of these women are shaped and constrained by India’s increasing class, caste and gender divides, dysfunctional public health system, and inadequate safety net, among other reasons. The problems of old people have traditionally been taken care of by the family network. Old-age and retirement homes were until recently uncommon in India as old people were expected to live with their children’s families. This study also found that elderly Indian women who are cut off from support from their extended family receive minimal support outside it. There is a real need for changes that will ensure support and assistance to elderly women living without their families to maintain their dignity and quality of life. As forces associated with globalization undermine the traditional systems of extended living arrangements and support for older parents by their children and otherwise adversely affect the welfare of the elderly, they raise the need for social welfare programs to take their place. The biological determinism of ageing need not be accompanied by a parallel structural determinism. Can we perhaps be optimistic about the opportunity to resist the more oppressive features of the politico-economic construction of ageing?

References


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