

Elders Helpline – Community based Intervention for Elder Abuse

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- Swati Bhandary

....“I am 80 year old. I have only one son. I am completely dependent on him. He has been forcing me to sell the house so that he can invest the money. But if I sell this house where will I go? Every day he keeps hurling abuses at me. I feel so helpless.”

....“ I am a senior citizen eligible to get government pension. I had applied one year back. Till now, I have not received any pension in spite of my repeated visits to Tahsildar’s office.”

....“I have three children but now when I have health issues, none of them want to help me out. I wonder why I am alive to see such days ...”

These are some of the calls received at Elders Helpline – a toll free Helpline for elderly in distress run as a joint programme of Bengaluru City Police and Nightingales Medical Trust - a Not-for-Profit Organization engaged in Age care since 1998. The Helpline is also partially supported for the Department for the Empowerment of Differently-Abled and Senior Citizens. The Elders Helpline was initiated in 2002 to reach out to elders in distress. With a toll free number 1090 / 100 all services of the Helpline are free. The objective of Elders Helpline is to provide prompt service to elders in distress. Since its inception in 2002, the Elders Helpline has received more than 2,26,000 calls from senior citizens. A total of 11258 complaints have been received and 6398 have been resolved successfully. More than 40,000 counselling sessions have been taken up at the Helpline. Every day the Elders Helpline receives more than 40 calls and visitors.

Today **1** senior citizens have to face a lot of problems in every sphere of their life. The social structure of Indian communities is changing rapidly, influenced by globalisation, urbanisation, migration, a changing work culture and the shift towards nuclear families. This has shrunk the social life of the elderly, imposed limitations on their societal roles and vitiated the quality of life that is essential for them. The priorities of the young seem to be replacing the needs of the elderly. At home, they are slowly losing the respect they had once commanded. Elders are faced with lack of family support, deprived of self-respect and live lonely lives. Due to spiraling cost of living, they face financial insecurity.

Elder abuse is a serious problem which largely remain within four walls of the homes and rarely gets reported. Due to their frailness and inability to protect themselves, elderly are an easy target for violence & crime. Many elders are harassed by their own family and deprived of their legitimate rights. Older persons who are abused, rarely come out and share their problems with those outside their family environment. As many of them are dependent on the family for physical and financial support, they don't take the risk of sharing their problems and exposing their vulnerabilities. Cultural norms prevent

them from talking about what they are going through and they are forced to suffer silently. In most cases, the abusers are their own close, trusted family members. It is rather surprising that elder abuse and our cultural values that emphasizes respect for elders co-exist in our society.

Seeing elder abuse as a growing concern, the Elders Helpline intervention was established to provide a strong and reliable support system and redressal mechanism to provide relief to elders in distress. The Helpline also provides verified and reliable information for services required for elderly and guidance for various government services and schemes for the benefit of senior citizens. The Elders Helpline is manned by trained team of counsellors, social workers, legal experts and volunteers. Police staff are also deputed to attend calls and to do home visits. A systematic methodology is followed for resolution of complaints received. Complaints are categorized as verbal or written complaints based on the severity of the issue. All cases are well documented and step by step procedure is followed to resolve the cases within acceptable timelines. Home visits are done to help elders who are in trouble and are unable to come to Helpline office or to verify information given in certain cases.

For written complaints received from the elderly, call notices are sent to opposite party and they are advised to come and share their response to the complaint. As the Helpline is located in the police station, this helps to put moral pressure on the opposite party and they usually respond to the notice issued. For many cases, a joint counselling session is conducted and efforts are made to resolve the issues between the senior and the opposite party in an amicable manner. Although all possible efforts are put in to resolve the issues, the success rate of the Elders Helpline is about fifty to fifty-five per cent. At times cases are already filed in court of law and as such cannot be further addressed at Helpline. Such cases are marked as unresolved and closed. In some rare situations, due to repeated refusal of the opposite party to come forth for counselling, cases have been closed with advice to seek legal route through Judiciary. Elders Helpline does not have statutory powers to enforce an action and this becomes a disadvantage.

The Helpline also conducts awareness programmes for various stakeholders on the rights of elderly. Elder Abuse Awareness day is observed by the Elders Helpline but conducting special awareness events such as street plays, rallies and roadshows to highlight the cause.

The nature of complaints received at the Elders Helpline have over the years been witness to a slow but steady breakdown of the social fabric of urban communities. Some of the complaints frequently received at the Elders Helpline include property issues wherein the senior citizen who have been harassed by family members to gift their property, or would have been neglected and ill-treated by their children after property is bequeathed to

them. Family relationships are often strained due to property related misunderstanding,

Tenancy issues are also quite usual. The issues range from default in rent to non-payment of leased amount to misuse of rented property and refusal to vacate.

Financial cheating is also commonly seen. As safe investment instruments give very less interest, many seniors opt to invest in private chit funds with the hope of getting higher rate of interest – only to get cheated at times. Cases of cheating by builders and other service providers are also received.

Neglect and harassment, leading to complete breakdown in familial relationships have increased steadily in recent years. More than one third of the complaints raised by the elderly are against their own family members and relatives. Elders seeking to live separately from their children and requesting for sustenance support is on the rise. The Maintenance of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007 made it mandatory for children and legal heirs to provide maintenance to elderly parents. The Act has the provision for cancellation of deed of property gifted by parents in the event that the children neglect their parents. Elders Helpline was instrumental in advocating for the establishment of this Act and has strived to promulgate it for the benefit of senior citizens.

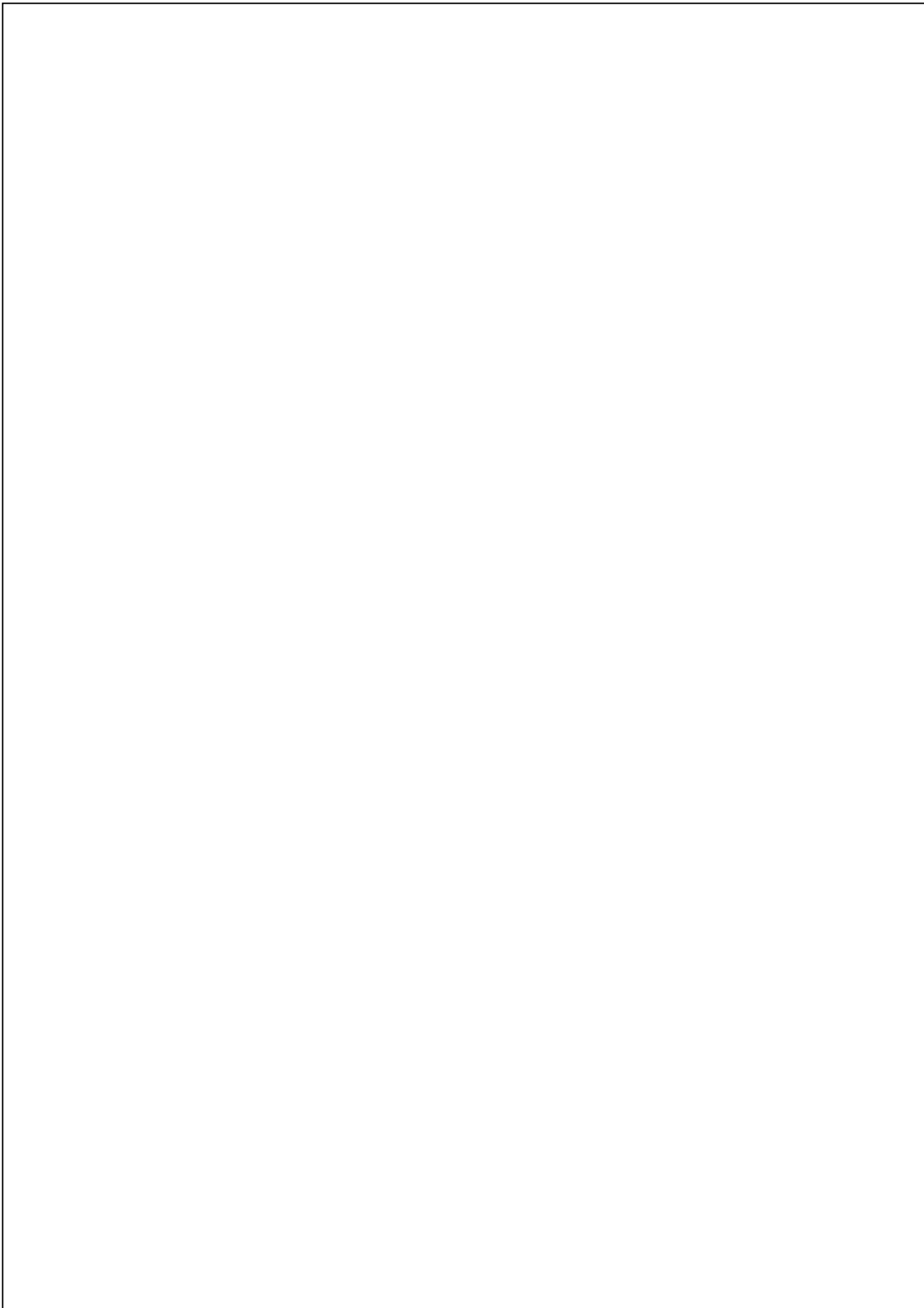
Rescue and rehabilitation services have also been an important service by the Elders Helpline. Elders found abandoned on streets referred by public are rehabilitated in care homes for destitute elderly. Many a times elders with dementia who have strayed from their homes have been found through good networking with police stations.

Nightingales Medical Trust has been advocating replication of such services and through its sustained advocacy efforts, the Elders Helpline services were set up in all districts of Karnataka. Inspired by such interventions and the direct touch it has with the elderly for resolution of their concerns, the Ministry of Social justice and Empowerment, Government of India is soon launching a National Helpline for senior citizens.

This most effective approach would help to foster networking of diverse stakeholders and provide timely interventions for elderly in distress across the country. In the long run, it would help in providing a voice for the elderly, their say in shaping schemes for empowering them and ensure that the much needed momentum for the care of the elderly is reached, their rights are preserved and a dignified and fulfilling life becomes theirs to claim.

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