



Ageing widows in India

54% of Indian women aged 60 years and older are widows. Many, particularly those who have health issues or do not live with family, turn to homes such as Madham for economic and social security. Martina Merten reports from Vrindavan.

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For the more on **India's ageing population** see https://india.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/20230926_india_ageing_report_2023_web_version.pdf

For the **Longitudinal Ageing Study in India** see https://www.iipsindia.ac.in/sites/default/files/LASI_India_Report_2020_compressed.pdf

For the **HelpAge India study**, see <https://www.helpageindia.org/documents/research/reports-journals/research-reports>

For the **study of the capacity of aged care facilities in India** see <https://www.tatatrusts.org/upload/pdf/report-on-old-age-facilities-in-india.pdf>

When asked whether she likes it here, whether she feels comfortable, a smile appears on Sashi Sharma's face. The 89-year-old's skin shines like that of a 20-year-old. She starts singing in a firm voice and her brown eyes flicker with joy. The yellow Tilak on her forehead stands out. She raises her hands in song, only to let them fall back into her lap seconds later.

Madham (which means "slow" in Hindi) is one of many homes dedicated to widows in Vrindavan in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, a city known as the birthplace of Lord Krishna, a place full of prayers and worship. What makes it different from other homes is that "we treat

the residents as mothers and make a concerted effort to help them to access their entitlements", Meera Khanna, Chairperson of Guild of Service, a non-governmental organisation empowering women based in Delhi, told *The Lancet*. Her predecessor, Mohini Giri, established Madham.

"We are a safe venue for our mothers", adds Manjeet Singh, coordinator of Madham, while pointing at the picture hanging above his desk of Giri. In a time when

"48% of older women have at least one chronic condition, while not having sufficient access to health care because of lack of any insurance."

widowhood in India was equated with neglect, marginalisation, and suppression, Giri (daughter-in-law of former President V V Giri) had the vision of a country in which women, especially those who had lost a husband, were given rights and security. For Sashi and the 18 others who live at Madham, Giri's vision became a reality: living on the spacious compound, with its three main buildings surrounded by trees and two temples and a small health-care facility.

India is facing the challenges of an increasingly ageing population. The percentage of males and females aged 60 years and older is predicted to grow from 10.5% in 2020 to 20.8% in 2050—equating to 320 million people. More than half of women aged 60 years and older are widows, according to the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI 2020). Many widows in India face economic and financial insecurity. The HelpAge India study

includes data from more than 7500 older women from 20 states and two Union Territories and five metro cities. Although 81% of older women included in the study live with their families, 19% live on their own or in care homes or ashrams. Some live on the street. Even if they live with family, the majority depend on their children for finances.

From a health perspective, 48% of older women have at least one chronic condition, while not having sufficient access to health care because of lack of any insurance. Only 21% of the LASI age-eligible households (with members aged 45 years and older) are covered by health insurance; the percentage decreases with age. Only 18.2% of people older than 60 years are covered, and only 16.9% of females are.

Sashi Sharma had little before coming to Madham. She has a married daughter in Mumbai, who had taken care of her, but she did not like the atmosphere at her daughter's house. Her brown, ever-smiling eyes become serious while talking about that period. But Sharma lacked financial and social security, she said. She had lost her identity card. "We are trying to apply for widow's pension for her", explains Singh. Through the Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme, the central government provides a monthly pension of up to 1000 Indian rupees, which is equivalent to £9.

For a long time in India, the lack of institutional support for older people in the form of care homes people and the lack of acceptance of such support structures have reinforced the value and importance of family structures. The family in India is considered more than just a place of origin, it is seen as



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Madham is helping resident Sashi Sharma claim her widow's pension



Mauna Merten

Sharda, 67 years old, moved to Madham after her daughter-in-law died

a core institution that ideally provides support within the frame of the kinship system, be it social, economic, emotional, or health. This mutual dependence between children and parents, especially in rural India, is still a lived normative reality.

However, times are slowly changing. Even though families are still the backbone of Indian society, the burden of caring, as in the case of many residents at Madham, occasionally becomes overwhelming for children. The idea of placing parents or one parent in an old age home is becoming more widespread. The Government's Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, passed in 2007, protects the rights and dignity of older people in India through providing maintenance and welfare, while also determining that there should be at least one state-run old age home for at least 150 people in every district.

The number of old age homes in India has increased since then; however, the majority are managed either by private organisations or charitable trusts. According to a study by Tata Trusts, Samarth, and the United Nations Population Fund, India was estimated to have around 1150 senior living facilities with a capacity to house around 97000 people in 2018.

Kerala had the most (182), followed by West Bengal (164), Tamil Nadu (151), Maharashtra (133), Andhra Pradesh (114), Karnataka (91), and Gujarat (77).

Sharda, a 67-year-old resident of Madham, is shivering. Her health has deteriorated over time, "I also have back issues", she tells *The Lancet*,

"Even though families are still the backbone of Indian society, the burden of caring, as in the case of many residents at Madham, occasionally becomes overwhelming for children."

sitting on the floor of the main hall. Sharda's husband died in 1992; they have two children. Before coming to Madham, she stayed with both. Typically in India, when the daughter marries, she moves into the house of her in-laws. The son remains in the house of his parents. Shortly after Sharda's daughter-in-law died, her son—concerned that he could not care for Sharda himself—suggested that his mother move into an ashram.

At times, the burden of caring for relatives leads to neglect of aged women, especially widows. 16% of participants in the HelpAge India study reported having faced elder abuse in the form of disrespect, physical

abuse, and emotional abuse—mostly practised by their own son, other relatives, or the daughter-in-law. 50% of study participants consider elder abuse to be prevalent. In some cases, widows without any children find themselves in a challenging situation if their health worsens. Care is neither available nor affordable for most of them. "The situation is that they have nobody to care. If they are able to work outside in the world, they do and earn some money. When they are no longer able to work, they come here", said Vida Olivera, a medical doctor working at St Josephs Prashant Nivas old age home in Mangalore—a city in the southwestern part of India with a relatively high number of care homes due to its considerable number of older people.

Parvati tried hard to manage on her own after her husband died 30 years previously. The 65-year-old still remembers this moment vividly. "When he died, I felt alone in this world." To survive, she sold the few belongings they owned. She helped in the households of her cousin and her sister who lived nearby to make ends meet. However, when her health got weaker—around 10 years ago—there was nothing she could offer to them to justify her stay. Parvati has tears in her eyes. "I had to come here because of my back issues. It was hard at first." Daily routines like breadmaking, chanting, or simply sitting with others helped her to adjust to the new environment. Now, she says, she wants to be here. And stay here: "it's like family".

It is 7pm in Vrindavan; most of the women at Madham are sitting around one wooden table. Dinner is due to be served soon. A gong sounds and they rise, starting to chant, palms pressed against each other's, eyes closed. These moments of chanting, praying, and being together give them joy, says Sharda. Life stops for a moment, they go slow, easy.

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