

Awareness of the Rights of Older Persons in India: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Population ageing is an important demographic and social transformation in India, with significant implications for healthcare, social security, economic independence, family support, dignity and access to justice. Older persons are entitled to the same fundamental human rights as other members of society, including dignity, equality, independence, participation, healthcare, social security and protection from abuse, neglect and exploitation. The United Nations Principles for Older Persons emphasize independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity as central principles of ageing with rights (United Nations, 1991). India has established constitutional provisions, national policies, legislation and welfare programmes to protect older persons, including the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 and the National Policy for Senior Citizens, 2011. However, the existence of legal and welfare provisions does not necessarily ensure that older persons are aware of them or can access their entitlements. This systematic review synthesizes Indian evidence concerning awareness of elderly rights, legal provisions, social-security schemes, welfare programmes, healthcare entitlements, concessions and access to justice. The literature indicates substantial variation in awareness, with knowledge of old-age pensions generally higher than awareness of specific legal rights. A persistent gap between awareness and utilization is evident across several Indian studies. Education, socio-economic status, gender, place of residence, information sources and administrative accessibility influence awareness and utilization. Community-based educational interventions have demonstrated potential to improve awareness and utilization. The review highlights the need for a comprehensive rights-based approach involving social workers, healthcare professionals, government agencies, legal-aid institutions, NGOs, families and older persons' organizations.

Keywords: Older persons, elderly, senior citizens, rights awareness, legal awareness, social security, welfare schemes, ageism, social work, India.

Introduction

Population ageing has become an increasingly important demographic and social issue in India. Improvements in life expectancy, declining fertility and changes in family structures have contributed to the increasing number of older persons. Ageing is therefore, not merely a demographic process but also a social, economic, health and human-rights concern. Older persons may experience economic dependency, chronic health needs, social isolation, discrimination, neglect, abuse and difficulties in accessing welfare and legal services. Consequently, ensuring that older persons

are able to understand and exercise their rights has become an important component of social justice and inclusive development. The concept of older persons' rights is grounded in the principle that ageing does not diminish an individual's human dignity or entitlement to rights. The United Nations Principles for Older Persons identify independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity as five central principles. Older persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, healthcare, social and legal services and opportunities for education and participation. They should also be able to live in dignity and security and remain free from

exploitation, physical abuse and mental abuse (United Nations, 1991).

India has developed a broad legal and policy framework for older persons. Article-41 of the Constitution recognizes public assistance in cases of old age within the limits of the State's economic capacity. The National Policy for Senior Citizens, 2011 emphasizes financial security, healthcare, shelter, welfare and protection of older persons (Government of India, 2011). The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 provides a legal framework for maintenance and welfare of parents and senior citizens and includes provisions relating to protection of life and property and other welfare measures (Government of India, 2007). The availability of legislation and welfare schemes, however, does not automatically result in the realization of rights. Older persons need to know that a particular entitlement exists, understand eligibility requirements, know where to apply and be able to overcome administrative barriers. Thus, awareness is an important first step in the process of rights realization. Indian research has repeatedly demonstrated this problem. Kohli et al. (2017), for example, found that awareness of the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme was considerably higher than actual utilization. Similarly, Goswami et al. (2019) reported that 86.9% of older persons in an urban resettlement colony in Delhi were aware of at least one social-welfare scheme, but only 42.2% were utilizing at least one scheme.

Research specifically addressing elderly rights also indicates inadequate awareness. D'Cunha et al. (2019) found that 57% of participants had moderate awareness and 39% had poor awareness of elderly rights and related provisions. The study concluded that greater attention was required to improve awareness of health, welfare and human-rights provisions among older persons. Legal awareness represents another important concern. Rajashree and Singai (2022) found that older persons may experience difficulty understanding laws and accessing legal institutions. Their qualitative evidence emphasized the gap between the formal availability of legal protection and the practical experiences of senior citizens seeking

assistance. Against this background, the present systematic review examines the available Indian literature concerning awareness of the rights of older persons, including legal rights, social-security provisions, welfare schemes, healthcare entitlements, concessions, protection from abuse and access to justice.

Objectives

The present review aims to systematically examine the literature on awareness of the rights of older persons in India. Specifically, it seeks to assess the reported level of awareness of elderly rights and rights-related welfare provisions; identify the legal, social, economic and healthcare dimensions of awareness; examine the relationship between awareness and utilization; identify factors associated with awareness; identify barriers to accessing rights and entitlements; examine interventions intended to improve awareness; and identify gaps in the existing Indian evidence.

Review Questions

The review was guided by the following questions: What is the level of awareness of rights and welfare provisions among older persons in India? Which rights and welfare schemes are most commonly known? Which legal and welfare provisions have relatively low awareness? What socio-economic and demographic factors influence awareness? What barriers prevent older persons from accessing their rights and entitlements? What interventions have been used to improve awareness and utilization?

Methods

This systematic review used secondary data from published studies, government reports, policies, and legislation. The review followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A systematic search was conducted in PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Science Direct. Relevant Government of India documents and legal sources were also reviewed for contextual information. Studies were screened and selected using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Review design and reporting guideline

The review was structured according to the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020** framework. PRISMA 2020 provides a 27-item checklist and revised flow diagrams to improve transparency in reporting systematic reviews.

Because the identified literature is heterogeneous in terms of study design, population, outcome measurement and definition of awareness, a narrative and thematic synthesis is more appropriate than a statistical meta-analysis.

Eligibility criteria

Studies were considered eligible when they were conducted in India and addressed older persons or issues directly related to the rights and entitlements of older persons. Studies were included when they examined awareness, knowledge, access or utilization concerning elderly rights, legal provisions, social-security schemes, pensions, welfare programmes, healthcare entitlements, concessions, protection from abuse, ageism, property or maintenance rights, legal aid or access to justice.

Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method and intervention studies were considered. Studies involving younger populations were included when they specifically assessed awareness of older persons' rights, because awareness among younger generations and families may influence the social realization of elderly rights. Studies conducted outside India, purely clinical studies without a rights or entitlement component, editorials without empirical evidence, duplicate publications and conference abstracts without sufficient information were excluded.

Information sources

The recommended electronic databases for the final systematic search include Pub Med/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Science Direct. Government of India documents and official policy and legislation sources were also considered for contextual and legal information.

Study selection

The study-selection process follows the PRISMA sequence of identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion. Retrieved records should first be exported into reference-management software and duplicates removed. Titles and abstracts should then be screened according to the eligibility criteria, followed by full-text assessment of potentially relevant studies. Ideally, two reviewers should independently conduct screening and resolve disagreements through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. The final manuscript should report the numbers of records identified, duplicates removed, and records screened, full texts assessed, studies excluded and studies finally included.

Review of Indian Evidence Awareness of elderly rights

One of the most directly relevant studies was conducted by D'Cunha et al. (2019) in Mangalore, Karnataka. The study examined awareness of elderly rights among older persons and reported that 57% had moderate awareness while 39% had poor awareness. The findings indicated that knowledge of health, welfare and human-rights provisions was inadequate and that awareness programmes should be strengthened. The study is particularly relevant to the present review because it demonstrates that awareness of elderly rights is broader than awareness of a single welfare programme. Rights include dignity, healthcare, social security, legal protection and freedom from discrimination and abuse.

A more recent study by Thomas et al. (2025) examined awareness of older adults' rights among 700 college students in coastal Karnataka. The study reported poor overall awareness, with a mean awareness score of 10.5 ± 2.688 , despite generally positive attitudes and perceptions toward older persons. Only 28.3% were aware of continuing-learning facilities for older persons, while 82.6% were aware of the old-age pension scheme. The contrast between high awareness of pensions and lower awareness of broader rights suggests that

elderly-rights awareness in India is often scheme-specific rather than comprehensive.

Awareness of social-security schemes

Social-security programmes constitute one of the most frequently investigated aspects of elderly rights in India. Srivastava and Kandpal (2014) examined awareness and utilization of social-security schemes among elderly persons in rural Dehradun and found substantial awareness of the old-age pension scheme, but utilization remained lower than awareness. Kohli et al. (2017) examined social-security measures among older persons in Delhi and reported that 79.4% were aware of the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme. However, among eligible below-poverty-line participants, awareness was considerably higher than utilization. Administrative difficulties and corruption were identified as important barriers. Goswami et al. (2019) found an even higher level of general welfare-scheme awareness in an urban resettlement colony in Delhi. Among 931 participants, 86.9% were aware of at least one social-welfare scheme, but only 42.2% were utilizing one. The authors concluded that although awareness was relatively good, utilization required substantial improvement. These studies establish an important pattern: knowledge of a welfare scheme does not necessarily translate into receipt of the benefit.

Rural and urban differences

The literature indicates that geographical context affects access to elderly welfare provisions, although the direction and magnitude of the difference vary between studies. Rural older persons may face difficulties associated with distance from government offices, transportation, literacy, poverty and limited access to information. Urban older persons, particularly those living in poor settlements, may experience different barriers such as documentation difficulties, lack of institutional support and inadequate knowledge of government procedures. The findings from different Indian settings therefore suggest that residence alone is insufficient to explain awareness. Instead, awareness

is influenced by the interaction of education, socioeconomic status, social networks, institutional accessibility, transportation and administrative support.

Legal awareness and access to justice

Legal awareness is one of the most important and least developed areas of elderly-rights research. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 provides an important legal framework for the maintenance and welfare of senior citizens. However, older persons cannot effectively use legal provisions unless they know about them and understand how to access the relevant institutions. Kohli et al. (2017) reported very low awareness of the Senior Citizens Act compared with awareness of the old-age pension scheme. This difference illustrates that the legal framework is considerably less visible to older persons than commonly implemented welfare programmes. Rajashree and Singai (2022) examined legal aid and legal awareness among older persons in India using documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews. Their findings highlighted difficulties experienced by senior citizens in engaging with law and legal institutions. The authors argued that legal systems should be simplified and that accessible legal-aid and awareness mechanisms are necessary for protecting older persons. Legal awareness is especially important for older persons experiencing property disputes, financial exploitation, abandonment, neglect, maintenance problems or abuse. Therefore, elderly-rights awareness programmes should specifically include legal literacy rather than focusing only on welfare schemes.

Awareness of healthcare rights

Healthcare is another important dimension of elderly rights. Older persons should have access to appropriate healthcare, preventive services, treatment, medicines, rehabilitation and information concerning available health programmes. The National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly and other health-related initiatives provide institutional mechanisms for addressing elderly

healthcare needs. However, awareness and access can differ according to education, income, location and contact with healthcare services. Healthcare awareness should therefore include knowledge of government geriatric services, health insurance, concessions, medicines, assistive devices, preventive healthcare and mechanisms for obtaining healthcare assistance. A rights-based healthcare approach requires that older persons not merely receive treatment but also understand their healthcare entitlements and participate in decisions concerning their health.

Awareness, ageism and discrimination

Ageism represents an important dimension of elderly rights because stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes can undermine dignity, participation and equality. Thomas et al. (2025) found that college students in coastal Karnataka had poor awareness of older adults' rights despite positive attitudes and favourable perceptions toward ageism. The study found weak negative correlations between rights awareness and attitudes and perceptions toward ageism. These findings suggest that positive attitudes toward older persons do not necessarily imply knowledge of their rights. Rights education should therefore be incorporated into educational institutions and community programmes.

Awareness–Utilization Gap

The most consistent finding across the literature is the awareness–utilization gap. The process of rights realization can be conceptualized as: **Availability of rights → Information → Awareness → Understanding → Accessibility → Application → Utilization → Empowerment**. An older person may know that a pension exists but may not know the eligibility criteria, may lack documents, may not know where to apply or may be unable to travel to the relevant office. Thus, awareness is necessary but insufficient. Kohli et al. (2017) demonstrated this gap among older persons in Delhi, while Goswami et al. (2019) found that only 42.2% of elderly participants utilized a social-welfare scheme despite 86.9% being aware of at

least one scheme. The pattern continues in recent evidence. Janani et al. (2025), in a community-based study of 260 older persons in urban Puducherry, reported high awareness of at least one social-security scheme but found that only 40% of eligible participants had utilized at least one social-support measure. Awareness of transport concessions was particularly low: 30% for train concessions and 10.4% for bus concessions. Thus, the effectiveness of elderly welfare policy should be evaluated not only by the number of schemes available but also by whether older persons can actually access and utilize them.

Community-Based Intervention Evidence

Intervention research remains limited, but the available evidence is encouraging. Bogam et al. (2023) conducted an interventional study among 839 elderly villagers in the Mahabubnagar region of Telangana. The intervention involved training, interactive sessions and village health meetings designed to improve awareness and utilization of social-welfare schemes. The study found a statistically significant improvement following the intervention, demonstrating that community-level education can improve elderly persons' knowledge and access to welfare provisions. This evidence is particularly important for social-work practice. Community-level interventions can overcome some of the limitations of office-based information dissemination by taking information directly to older persons.

Such interventions can include:

- elderly-rights awareness camps;
- legal-literacy sessions;
- pension-enrolment camps;
- healthcare-awareness programmes;
- application and documentation assistance;
- senior-citizen support groups;
- grievance-redressal assistance;
- referrals to legal-aid services.

Factors Associated with Rights Awareness

The literature identifies several factors associated with awareness. Education is an important determinant. Older persons with higher

educational attainment are generally better positioned to access written information and understand government procedures. Socio-economic status is also important. Economically disadvantaged older persons may have greater need for welfare programmes but fewer resources to access them. Gender differences have been reported in several studies. Older women may face additional disadvantages because of economic dependency, widowhood, limited education and restricted access to formal institutions.

Age can influence utilization and access. The Delhi study by Goswami et al. (2019) found greater utilization among persons aged 75 years and above than among those aged 60–64 years. Residence influences the availability of information and services, although rural–urban differences vary across settings. Information sources are also critical. Family members, friends, neighbour, community leaders, television, healthcare workers, social workers and voluntary organizations can act as important information channels.

Role of Social Work

The findings of this review have important implications for social-work practice. At the individual level, social workers can provide counselling concerning rights and entitlements and assist older persons with applications, documentation and referrals. At the family level, social workers can promote awareness of maintenance responsibilities, dignity, abuse prevention and intergenerational support. At the community level, social workers can organize elderly-rights awareness programmes, legal-literacy camps, pension camps and senior-citizen groups. At the institutional level, social workers can coordinate with government departments, hospitals, police, legal-aid institutions, NGOs and senior-citizen associations. At the policy level, social workers can document barriers faced by older persons and advocate for simplified procedures, accessible services and effective grievance-redressal mechanisms. The intervention evidence from Telangana demonstrates the potential value of

community-based approaches in improving awareness and utilization (Bogam et al., 2023).

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that awareness of older persons' rights in India is fragmented and uneven. The literature is dominated by studies examining welfare and social-security schemes rather than comprehensive human-rights awareness. Consequently, older persons may be familiar with pensions but remain unfamiliar with legal protections, maintenance rights, property protection, healthcare entitlements and mechanisms for accessing justice. The strongest finding is the persistent gap between awareness and utilization. Several studies show that awareness of welfare schemes is substantially higher than actual utilization. This gap demonstrates that policy effectiveness depends not only on providing schemes but also on making them understandable, accessible and usable.

Legal awareness appears to be an especially weak component. The findings of Kohli et al. (2017) and Rajashree and Singai (2022) suggest that older persons may lack knowledge concerning legal protections and may encounter difficulties navigating legal institutions. The review also demonstrates that awareness is socially patterned. Education, socio-economic status, gender, family support, residence and information networks influence awareness and utilization. Therefore, a universal information campaign alone is unlikely to eliminate inequalities. Targeted interventions are required for vulnerable groups. The evidence concerning community-based interventions is promising. Bogam et al. (2023) demonstrated that structured training and village-level meetings can improve awareness and utilization. This suggests that social workers and community health workers can play a central role in translating policies into effective rights realization.

Research Gaps

The review identifies several important gaps. First, relatively few studies have developed or used a standardized elderly-rights awareness scale.

Existing studies use different definitions and measurement approaches. Second, most research focuses on individual welfare schemes rather than comprehensive awareness of legal, social, economic and healthcare rights. Third, legal awareness is under-researched compared with pension awareness. Fourth, there are relatively few longitudinal and intervention studies. Fifth, vulnerable groups such as older women, widows, persons living alone, persons with disabilities and the oldest-old require greater research attention. Sixth, there is a need for nationally representative research examining the pathway from awareness to accessibility, utilization and empowerment.

Limitations of the Review

The evidence base has several limitations. Most studies use cross-sectional designs and therefore cannot establish causal relationships. There is substantial heterogeneity in sample sizes, age criteria, measurement instruments and definitions of awareness. Some studies focus only on one welfare scheme, while others examine multiple schemes or broader rights. Several studies are geographically restricted to individual districts, hospitals, field-practice areas or urban settlements. Therefore, their findings cannot automatically be generalized to the entire Indian older population. The inclusion of welfare-scheme studies also introduces conceptual heterogeneity. Awareness of a pension programme is not identical to awareness of human rights. Nevertheless, these studies were considered relevant because welfare and social-security entitlements are important components of older persons' rights.

Conclusion

The available Indian evidence demonstrates that awareness of the rights of older persons remains an important social-policy, public-health and social-work concern. India has established constitutional provisions, legislation, national policies and welfare programmes intended to protect older persons. However, the realization of these rights is constrained by inadequate awareness, administrative barriers, limited accessibility and differences in education and socioeconomic resources. The

literature consistently demonstrates an awareness–utilization gap. Older persons are generally more familiar with old-age pensions and highly visible welfare schemes than with broader legal and human rights. Awareness of legal provisions, including protections under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, remains an important concern.

The evidence also demonstrates that community-based interventions can improve awareness and utilization. Therefore, elderly-rights awareness should become an integral component of social-work practice, community health services, legal-aid programmes and government welfare implementation. A comprehensive approach should move beyond simply informing older persons about government schemes. It should empower them to know their rights, understand their entitlements, access appropriate institutions, claim benefits and seek protection when their rights are violated. Ultimately, the objective of elderly-rights policy should be not merely welfare for older persons, but rights with older persons. Such an approach can promote dignity, independence, social security, participation, protection and social justice in later life.

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