

## We need plans, policies for the elderly



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It is distressing that a sizable proportion of India's elderly people are suffering ill-treatment. Around 14% of them experience ill-treatment frequently, with over half of them suffering this once in two months, the Longitudinal Ageing Study of India (LASI), which was commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, has found. And Karnataka stands among the worst offenders in the country, with 10% of its elderly population reportedly being ill-treated. The state is second only to Bihar (12%) in this dubious distinction. The survey, the first in the country to systematically map the health as well as socio-economic troubles of senior citizens, provides insights into the many challenges the elderly face. In addition to ill-treatment, they suffer from disabilities, chronic health problems and challenges with daily living. Around 75% of India's elderly suffer from a chronic disease, 20% struggle with mental health issues, and 40% have some kind of disability. Around one in five of the elderly struggles to cope with daily activities.

The LASI survey underscores a fact that India refuses to accept: That many Indians treat their elderly shabbily. We have been in denial on this matter for decades, preferring to believe that our family system is benevolent and that our kinship ties are strong. While this may be generally true, family members are not always compassionate providers. Cases of children abandoning their parents and grandparents are growing. Many do not have the financial wherewithal, time, energy or inclination to take care of elderly relatives, especially if they are bedridden. When the elderly are perceived as a burden, their ill-treatment and abandonment follow. India needs to put in place support systems for the elderly. Helplines and long-term care facilities that are affordable must be set up. Costs of medical treatment for the elderly are an important source of friction in families. The government needs to step in robustly in this matter by reining in health insurance providers, who are brutal in their approach to the elderly.

As the life span of individuals rises, the proportion of the elderly population in India is growing. According to the 2011 census, senior citizens accounted for 9% of our population, and this figure is expected to rise to 20% by 2050. We need to plan for this. The government should begin to put in place policies and programmes that focus on the wellbeing of the aged. Else, when their numbers surge, we will not be up to the challenge of taking care of them.