

# ABSTRACT

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The study explores and focuses on the effects of socio-economic status and social class on the life of elderly women through a comparative study between the elderly women belonging to two different social classes (i.e. middle class and poor families). The study aims to explore and comparatively study the various dimensions of their life which includes their (a) Economic status: Nature and extent of their economic problems and the ways through which they solve these problems and adjust themselves in the family are comparatively assessed. (b) Social status: Changes in the status of the elderly women of these two classes, effect on their roles, how and to what extent their loss of roles affects them are studied comparatively. Their perception as being felt by their family members, the nature of their participation in social roles, their social acceptance in the family and outside it; and their various needs are also investigated simultaneously. (c) Health care and support: Nature and extent of care and support extended to them by their family members are also probed into and comparatively assessed. The present study attempts to view these factors in the light of the Activity theory of ageing. Limited study in these areas and its greater significance in government's policy formation are the main motivations for undertaking the study.

The Municipality area of Siliguri, subdivision of the Darjeeling district, West Bengal is the area chosen for the study. The sampling unit for the investigation are, women aged 60 years and above. A total of 100 samples are drawn, with equal number of samples (i.e. 50) from both the categories. Samples from each category are selected purposively on the basis of their Class, Marital status, Age Group, Educational status, Pattern of Living arrangements, Physical condition, Participation in work and Economic status. Necessary data and information are collected through direct contact with the target group, through intensive field work, home visits and personal interview with the respondents with the help of interview schedule and observation. Poor elderly women, suffer more from economic problems, inspite of their higher participation in work force and inspite when having a source of income. The frequency of meeting their needs with priority, fulfillment of their needs and satisfactory monetary support received by them are highly dependent on having a source of income and their participation in work. The middle class elderly women on the other hand continue to enjoy the above factors at a higher frequency,

inspite when they are non-earning or are non-working. Besides these, unlike the middle class, participation in work force and having a source of income is responsible for the lesser dependency of the poor elderly women on their family members for meeting most of their expenses and needs. Although, as compared to their middle class counterparts, a significant number of poor elderly women, inspite when working report absence of satisfactory monetary support and lower frequency of meeting their needs with priority by their family members.

Middle class elderly women continue to enjoy a higher level of importance and acceptance from their family members. Most of these elderly women are still consulted by their family members on issues of decision making and management of the household, as compared to their poor counterparts. This indicates higher acceptance of the middle class elderly women among their family members than those belonging to the poor families. Higher social acceptance of the middle class elderly women can also be confirmed by the diverse and wider range of activities performed with their children/ grandchildren and spouse, unlike their poor counterparts. On the other hand, social networks of the poor elderly women are found to be much wider. Their active participation in these leads to their higher level of social acceptance outside the network of their family and kins. This in turn proves to be much helpful in providing them a large extent of financial, social and health care support, for which the middle class elderly women most often depend on their kins and family members.

Moreover, a higher proportion of middle class elderly women show adjustment regarding their loss of job and their changing status and importance in the family. Their satisfaction with regard to the fulfillment of their needs and priority assigned to the same, care taken by their family members, amount of time spent with them by their family members and the changes experienced in their social relationships are also higher than their poor counterparts. Moreover, unlike the poor elderly women, a positive perception towards younger generation and towards the changing social systems is also reflected in case of those belonging to the middle class. The company, love, care and support of their children however, are the primary needs of the elderly women at this age, irrespective of their class. This is followed by the need for some financial support, especially for medical expenses. Besides these, socialising and travelling to relatives and friends, need for security, need for physical rest, need for mental happiness, enough money to spend on themselves are some of the needs that they express.

Dependence on family members for medical expenses and assistance sought at the time of illness is found more, among the middle class elderly women, On the other hand, the poor elderly women are found to depend more on self-income for meeting these expenses. Besides this, a higher reliance on friends and neighbours for meeting these needs, in case of poor elderly women are also found. Role of daughters are also found to be highly significant in these issues, irrespective of their class.

Activity theory of ageing, is not found to be fully relevant for the study, as having a source of income and not only participation in work is found to determine their fulfillment and priority assigned to their needs; and their status and acceptance in their family. Besides these, their class, educational status, marital status, earning status of their husband and their living arrangements are also found to have a significant impact on the above factors.