

FINANCIAL STATUS OF THE RURAL ELDERLY WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA DURING POST-COVID-19

Abstract

Maharashtra—a state deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic—mirrors these challenges. With an estimated population of 125 million, 11.7% of whom are elderly (a figure projected to reach 15% by 2031), the state has been one of India’s hardest hit by COVID-19, reporting millions of confirmed cases and substantial fatalities. The pandemic has further exacerbated mental health struggles, social isolation, and economic instability among the elderly, intensifying existing inequities and barriers to financial security.

This study focuses on the rural elderly women of Maharashtra, examining the interplay between socio-demographic factors (age, caste, education), economic indicators (family income, personal income, pensions, employment), and participation in self-help groups. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 9,253 respondents, it investigates how age caste hierarchies and educational attainment influence family support, income levels, and employment. The analysis reveals significant associations between caste and financial support, age and reduced economic engagement, and education and enhanced earning capacity.

Key findings indicate that while generally common, family support diminishes with advanced age and varies significantly by caste and education. Employment opportunities are also tied to caste and education, with marginalized groups frequently trapped in low-income brackets. Notably, higher educational attainment correlates with improved income levels and a greater likelihood of self-help group participation—both critical levers for enhancing financial security and autonomy. Integrating these insights, the article highlights the urgent need for nuanced, multi-dimensional policy responses. Recommendations include expanding pension coverage, bolstering self-help group initiatives, tailoring interventions for marginalized castes, investing in adult education and vocational training, and designing age-sensitive work opportunities. By acknowledging the socio-psychological dimensions shaped by the post-COVID context—such as social isolation and mental health concerns—these interventions can help create a more equitable and supportive environment for elderly women in rural Maharashtra, ensuring that the state’s demographic future does not come at the cost of its most vulnerable citizens.

Key Words: Rural Elderly, Social Demography, Financial Status, Pension, Self-Help Groups, Sources of Income, Support System.

Introduction:

India is at the cusp of a profound demographic transformation. The country’s elderly population, which numbered approximately 104 million in 2011, is projected to reach about 173

41 million by 2026. This demographic shift, attributed to a sustained increase in life expectancy and
42 a decline in fertility rates, poses new social and economic challenges. Across India, elderly
43 citizens are confronted with issues such as limited financial security, inadequate healthcare
44 infrastructure, and insufficiently developed social welfare mechanisms. Gender disparities
45 further exacerbate these vulnerabilities, as elderly women often experience compounded
46 disadvantages due to lower educational attainment, restricted employment opportunities, and
47 constrained access to governmental support.

48 Despite an array of government initiatives aimed at improving geriatric care and
49 financial well-being, gaps persist. Many elderly individuals, especially women in rural regions,
50 remain economically vulnerable and socially marginalized. Changing family dynamics, coupled
51 with migration trends, have contributed to increasing social isolation, leaving elderly women
52 more susceptible to emotional distress and mental health challenges. The advent of the COVID-
53 19 pandemic has intensified these concerns: older adults have been disproportionately affected,
54 facing heightened health risks, reduced mobility, and compounded economic insecurities.
55 Maharashtra, the second-most populous state in India, exemplifies these complexities. With a
56 population estimated at 125 million, the state's elderly population already constitutes 11.7%—
57 surpassing the national average of 10%—and is projected to reach 15% by 2031. During the
58 COVID-19 crisis, Maharashtra emerged as one of the worst-affected regions, recording millions
59 of confirmed cases and a significant number of fatalities. In this fraught context, the state's rural
60 elderly women find themselves at the intersection of multiple stressors: escalating health risks,
61 shrinking economic options, and eroding social support networks.

62 Understanding the socio-economic and psychological ramifications for this demographic
63 is paramount. Against this backdrop, this study explores the nexus of socio-demographic factors,
64 financial stability, and mental well-being among rural elderly women in Maharashtra. By
65 analysing how age, caste, education, family income, employment, and self-help group
66 participation correlate with each other—and how they influence satisfaction and resilience—this
67 research offers critical insights to policymakers, social workers, and community organizations.

68 **Objectives:**

69 The main objective was to Examine Socio-Demographic Profiles and to assess Economic
70 Conditions and Financial Support Systems. Further to evaluate the Influence of Socio-
71 Demographic Factors on Economic Well-Being

72 **Literature review:**

73 The reviewed literature addresses various socio-economic and demographic challenges in
74 India, focusing on identification systems, food security, aging populations, labour participation,
75 and financial inclusion.

76 The *Unique Identification Authority of India* (UIDAI, 2012) highlights the role of
77 Aadhaar in providing every citizen with a unique identity, enhancing access to government
78 welfare schemes. Similarly, the Mumbai Controller of Rationing (n.d.) discusses the ration card
79 system's significance in ensuring food security and equitable access to essential resources for
80 vulnerable populations.

81 The challenges faced by older adults are addressed extensively. Age well Foundation
82 (2016) emphasizes aging populations' growing needs and vulnerabilities, particularly regarding
83 health, income security, and dignity. Bloom (2023) examines labour force participation among
84 older adults in India, revealing that economic necessity drives many to remain employed despite
85 health issues. Roy and Barua (2023) corroborate this, analysing recent data to highlight that a
86 significant proportion of elderly Indians continue to engage in low-paid, informal work due to
87 inadequate social security systems.

88 Financial inclusion initiatives are also explored. Hoffmann et al. (2021) analyse the
89 impact of self-help group (SHG) lending programs in rural India, showing significant relief from
90 exploitative moneylenders. SHGs improve financial autonomy and reduce dependency on usury,
91 particularly for women and marginalized groups. These findings underscore the importance of
92 community-based microfinance in promoting financial stability and empowerment.

93

94 **Research Methodology:**

95 **Study Design and Setting:** This cross-sectional, observational study was conducted between
96 April and December 2022 across rural regions of Maharashtra, a State distinguished by its vast
97 geographic and socio-economic diversity, as well as its pronounced vulnerability during the
98 COVID-19 pandemic. Given that Maharashtra's elderly population already represents 11.7% of
99 the total and is projected to reach 15% by 2031, the state provides a critical lens through which to
100 examine the socio-economic challenges confronting aging rural communities.

101

102 **Target Population:** The study focused on elderly women aged 60 years and above residing in
103 rural areas of Maharashtra. These individuals often face a spectrum of vulnerabilities, including
104 financial insecurity, reduced employment opportunities, and a heightened risk of social
105 isolation—conditions exacerbated by the ramifications of COVID-19.

106

107 **Sampling Frame and Size:** Out of the targeted 10,000 households, 9,253 completed interviews
108 formed the final sample after excluding incomplete responses. The sampling frame covered 34
109 districts and 358 talukas, each chosen based on criteria that included a significant elderly
110 population share (>10%) and diverse caste and educational profiles.

111

112 **Sampling Technique:** Proportionate random sampling with replacement was employed to ensure
113 a representative distribution across various socio-demographic strata. This approach allowed the
114 study to capture a broad range of factors influencing the financial and psychological well-being
115 of elderly women, including caste classifications, educational attainment, and differing age
116 cohorts.

117

118 **Data Collection Tools and Procedures:**

119 A semi-structured questionnaire was developed in Marathi, incorporating both closed-
120 and open-ended questions. The questionnaire captured a spectrum of variables, reflecting not

121 only the direct economic conditions but also the broader socio-psychological landscape
122 influenced by the post-COVID context. Key parameters included: Socio-Demographic Factors;
123 Economic Indicators; Social and Financial Support.

124

125 **Pilot Testing and Refinement:**

126 A pilot study involving 100 participants was conducted prior to the main data collection.
127 Feedback from this initial phase informed refinements to the questionnaire's clarity, cultural
128 appropriateness, and sensitivity, particularly regarding discussions around caste identity,
129 personal finances, and mental well-being during the pandemic.

130

131 **Ethical Considerations:**

132 Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation,
133 confidentiality, and respect for privacy. Ethical approval was secured from the Poona Hospital
134 and Research Centre's Ethics Committee.

135

136 **Data Entry and Cleaning:**

137 Responses were coded and entered into a secured database. Data integrity checks,
138 including range and consistency checks, were performed regularly. Any discrepancies or missing
139 values were addressed through follow-up with field teams or by excluding incomplete cases
140 from specific analyses.

141

142 **Addressing COVID-19 Challenges:**

143 Data collection procedures were adapted to pandemic-related constraints. Trained
144 fieldworkers, adhering to safety protocols (use of masks, physical distancing, and sanitization),
145 conducted interviews to mitigate health risks while maintaining data quality.

146

147 **Statistical Analysis:**

148 **Software and Techniques:**

149 Data were analysed using Python libraries (Pandas, SciPy, Stats models), chosen for their
150 robust statistical and data handling capabilities. Descriptive statistics, frequency distributions,
151 and cross-tabulations provided initial insights into the socio-demographic and economic
152 profiles.

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154 **Inferential Statistics:**

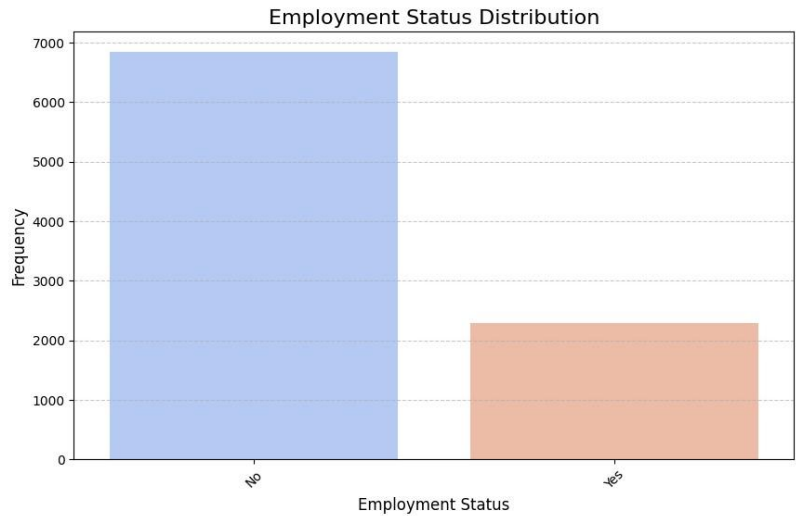
- 155 • **Chi-Square Tests:** Used to examine associations between categorical variables such as
156 caste and financial support, family income and educational qualification, or employment
157 status and caste.
- 158 • **ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis Tests:** Employed to compare continuous or ordinal
159 variables (e.g., wage levels across different caste groups or financial help from SHGs by
160 educational level).

- **Post-Hoc Analyses:** Following significant results, pairwise comparisons (e.g., examining how specific education levels differed in terms of financial support) provided greater granularity.

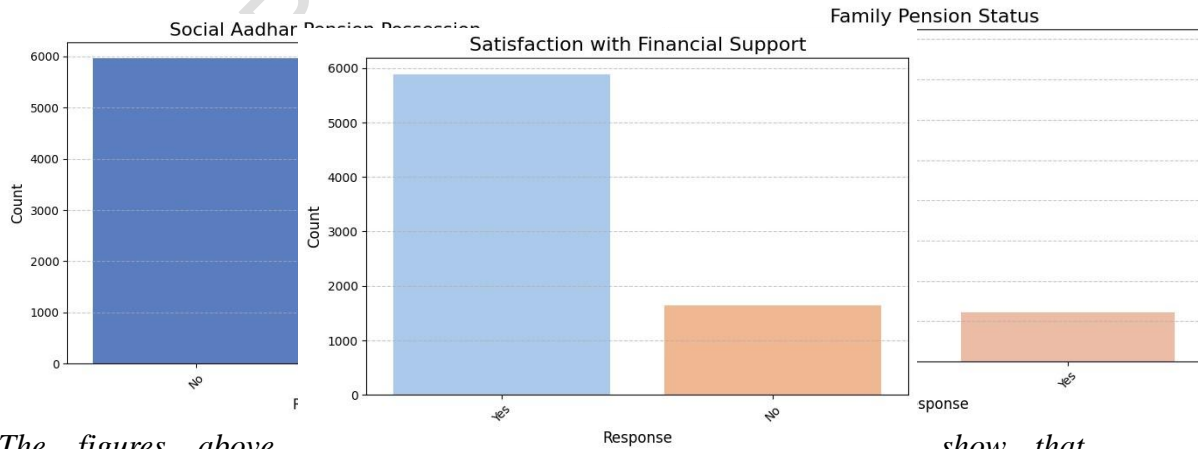
Rationale for Method Selection:

The chosen methodologies and analytical tools were well-suited to capture the multi-dimensional aspects of the elderly women’s experiences. By integrating both categorical and continuous variables, and employing a range of statistical tests, the study could robustly discern how factors like age, caste, and education intersected with income, employment, and participation in SHGs. This holistic approach ensured that the research could reveal not just broad trends but also the nuanced layers of vulnerability and resilience within the population.

Socio-Demographic Profile of the Elderly Women:



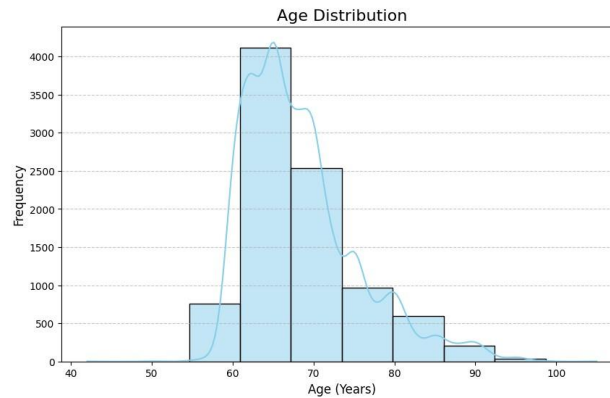
The figure shows the employment status of the women and it can be seen that most of the women surveyed were not employed.



The figures above show that most of the women surveyed had no social Aadhar pension or even family pension.

181 *The figure shows that most of the women surveyed were satisfied with the financial support given*
 182 *by their family.*
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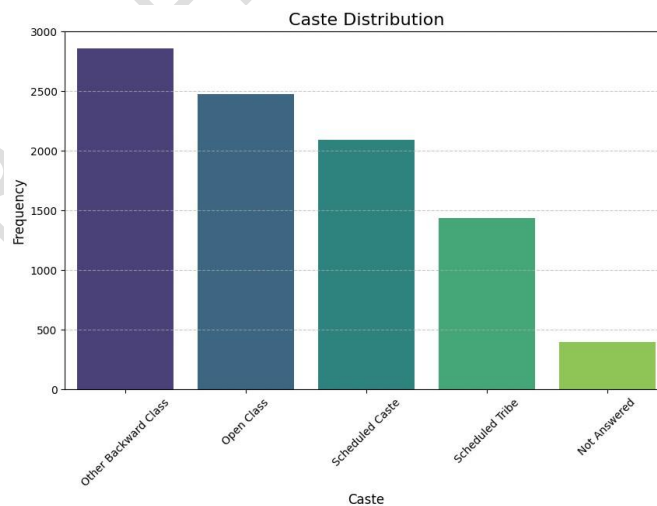
Age Distribution:



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 185 The study targeted elderly women aged 60 years and above. Within the sample of 9,253
 186 respondents, over half (52%) were in the 60–70 age bracket, 34% were aged 70–80, and 14%
 187 were 80 years or older. This distribution aligns with India’s broader demographic trends, where
 188 increasing longevity contributes to a growing cohort of “younger elderly” (60–70 years), who
 189 may still engage in income-generating activities, and an expanding segment of the “oldest old”
 190 (80+ years), who often face escalating health concerns and heightened dependency.

191 Older age groups (80+) also reported lower levels of financial support and employment,
 192 reflecting an age-related decline in both earning capacity and familial assistance. This calls for
 193 greater intervention required for them.

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 195 **Caste Composition:**

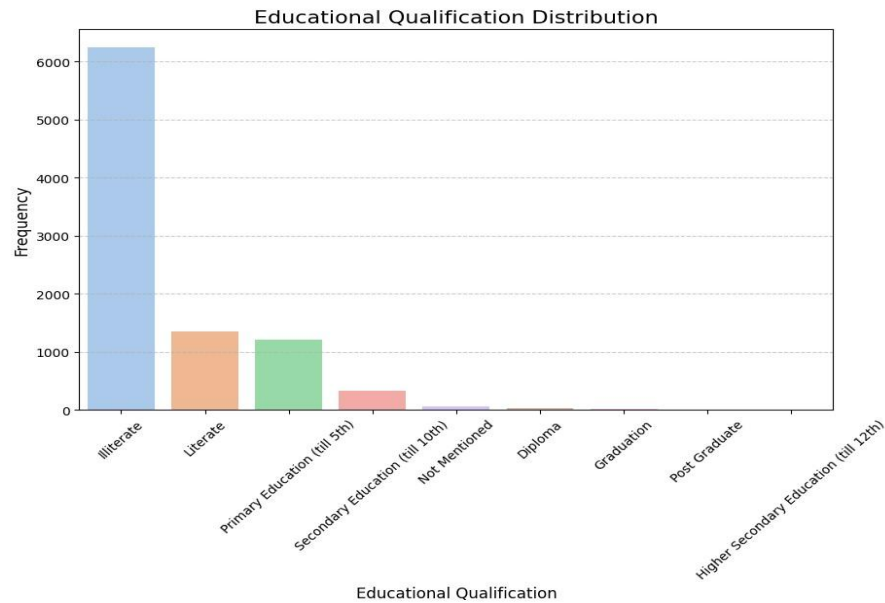


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 197 The caste composition included Scheduled Tribes (16%), Scheduled Castes (21%), Other
 198 Backward Classes (OBC, 30%), and Open Class (25%). These proportions are vital in
 199 understanding the socio-economic hierarchy. Historically marginalized groups, such as
 200 Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes, disproportionately occupy lower income brackets and
 201 exhibit reduced participation in employment and self-help groups. The data underscore that

202 caste is not just a demographic marker but a strong determinant of socio-economic status and
203 access to resources.

204 Chi-square tests revealed strong associations between caste and financial outcomes. For
205 instance, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were overrepresented in lower-income
206 categories and received less financial support from families in the absence of pensions or
207 personal income.

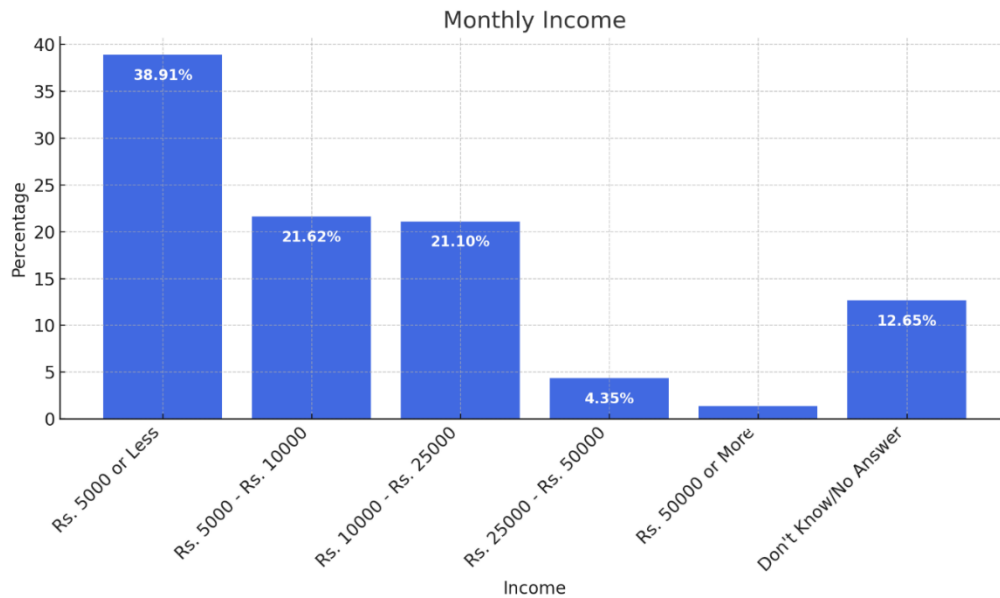
208 **Educational Status:**



209 Educational attainment among respondents was generally low. While 34% were illiterate,
210 25% had primary education, and only 8% attained post-secondary education. Education emerged
211 as a crucial factor in shaping economic prospects. Women with higher education levels generally
212 reported better income levels. This pattern indicates the transformative potential of even basic
213 education in enhancing financial stability and social engagement, particularly in a post-
214 pandemic context where traditional support systems have been strained.
215 Chi-square tests confirmed a significant association between education and family income (χ^2
216 = 607.529, $p=0.000$), as well as education and financial support.
217

218 **Marital and Household Status:** Over half of the respondents were widows, highlighting an
219 added layer of vulnerability. Widowhood frequently means loss of a primary financial provider
220 and limited involvement in decision-making processes within the household. With changing
221 family structures and increased migration of younger generations, many widowed elderly women
222 experience heightened social isolation and reduced family support—conditions worsened by the
223 pandemic’s impact on household incomes and care dynamics. Widowhood often correlates with
224 increased financial dependence on extended family or community networks. If these support
225 systems falter, elderly women may find themselves at the intersection of economic hardship and
226 social marginalization.

227 **Financial Status of the Elderly Women in Maharashtra:** The average percentage of
228 respondents across all income categories is approximately 16.67%. This indicates a general
229 tendency towards the lower-income categories, as seen from the high percentage in the lowest
230 income group. The median of 16.875% shows that half of the income percentages lie below this
231 value, and half lie above, giving a central tendency of the data that is slightly above the mean.
232 The standard deviation of approximately 9.09% indicates a moderate spread around the mean.
233 The variance of 82.62% shows how much the data is dispersed from the average percentage. The
234 range of 37.54% signifies a wide disparity between the lowest and highest income categories,
235 highlighting the significant difference in income distribution among respondents.



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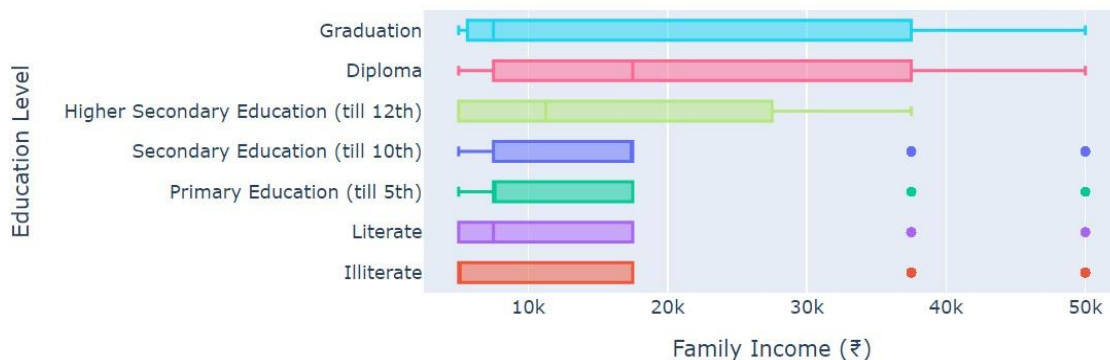
237 **Key Observations:** A significant proportion (38.91%) of respondents fall in the lowest income
 238 category (Rs. 5000 or less), suggesting a large portion of the population with very low income.
 239 Only a small percentage (1.37%) of respondents fall in the highest income category (Rs. 50000
 240 or more), indicating a limited number of high-income earners. The middle-income groups (Rs.
 241 5000 - Rs. 10000 and Rs. 10000 - Rs. 25000) together constitute about 42.72% of respondents,
 242 showing a considerable segment in these categories. A noticeable percentage (12.65%) of
 243 respondents either did not know or did not answer, which may impact the overall analysis.

244 This statistical analysis provides insights into the income distribution among the respondents,
 245 indicating a skewed distribution towards lower income levels with a notable percentage of non-
 246 respondents. By addressing these areas, policymakers and social organizations can work towards
 247 improving the economic well-being of the population and reducing income disparities.

248 **Influence of Education and Caste on Family Income:**

249 **Education:** Chi-square tests revealed a significant correlation between educational attainment
 250 and family income ($\text{Chi}^2 = 607.529, p=0.000$). Illiterate women were more likely to fall into the
 251 lowest income brackets (₹5,000–₹7,500), while those with higher qualifications (Diploma,
 252 Graduation, Post-Graduation) were better positioned to access relatively higher income
 253 categories. This suggests that even incremental education levels can open pathways to more
 254 stable financial conditions. As the education level increases- the % of families with higher
 255 income levels increases.

Family Income by Education Level



256
 257 *As illustrated in above Figure, the median family income varies by education level with*
 258 *Graduation and Diploma level people having higher family incomes.*

259 **• Caste:**
 260 Family income distributions varied significantly by caste ($\text{Chi}^2 = 213.238, p=0.000$).
 261 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were overrepresented in lower-income brackets,
 262 reflecting systemic inequalities and reduced access to higher-paying opportunities. Open
 263 Class respondents had a slightly higher presence in moderately better income brackets,
 264 aligning with historically greater access to resources.

Caste	Family Income				
	Below ₹5,000	₹5,000–₹10,000	₹10,000–₹25,000	₹25,000–₹50,000	Above ₹50,000
Not Answered	39.81	25.62	23.46	7.1	4.01
Open Class	37.81	29.35	22.45	7.78	2.61
Other Backward Class	48.82	22	23.94	4.29	0.95
Scheduled Caste	43.69	29.13	22.36	3.41	1.4
Scheduled Tribe	48.94	16.84	29.68	3.6	0.94

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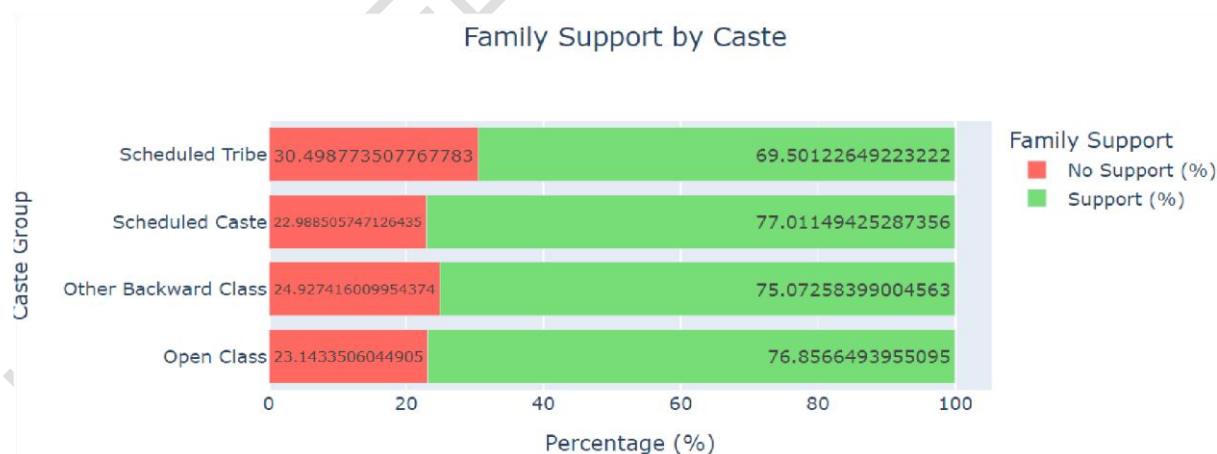
As illustrated in above Figure, the median family income varies by caste. OBC and ST women have the highest percentage of families with family income lesser than 5,000 rupees. And open has the most percentage of women with higher family incomes (more than 50,000 rs).

Family Financial Support:

For many elderly women, family support functions as a financial lifeline, particularly in the absence of personal income or pensions. On average, about 75% reported receiving some degree of financial assistance from their families, although this share decreases with age and varies substantially by both caste and education.

Caste and Family Support:

- Chi-square analysis (including all data: $\text{Chi}^2 = 131.595$, $p=0.000$; excluding “Not Answered”: $\text{Chi}^2 = 27.642$, $p=0.000$) confirmed a significant association between caste and whether the family provides financial support. Scheduled Castes faced greater difficulty securing consistent family-based assistance, hinting at more fragile intergenerational support systems. But Scheduled tribes had the highest amount of people with family support. This may hint at more complex value systems that lie beneath this.

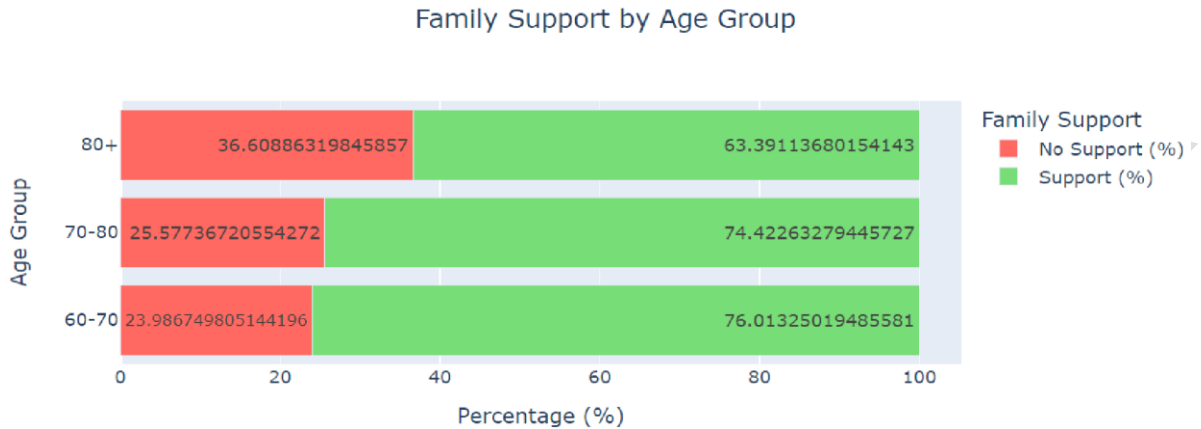


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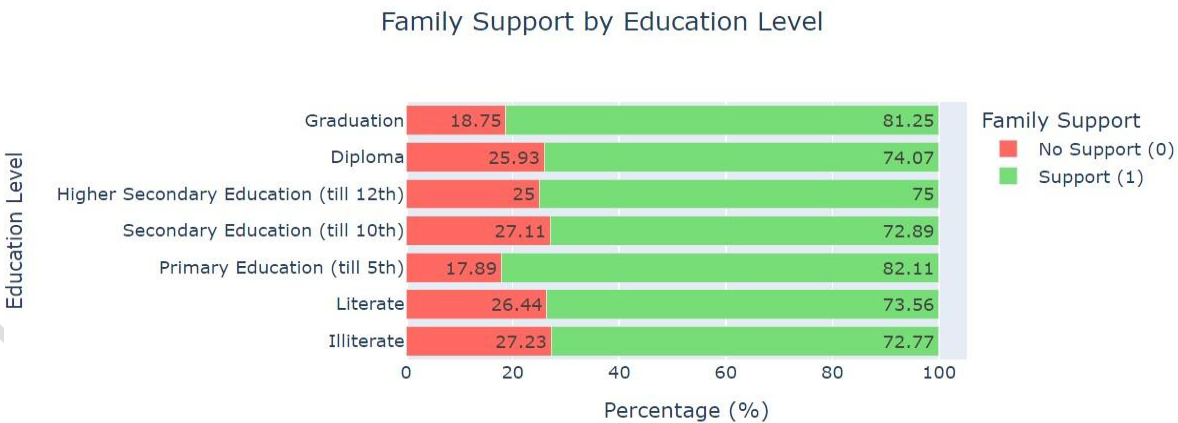
Age and Family Support:

- While younger elderly groups (60–70 years) reported the highest levels of familial assistance (76%), support declined to 74% for those aged 70–80 and plunged to 63% in the 80+ bracket ($\text{Chi}^2 = 40.028$, $p=0.000$). This trend reflects a possible erosion of

291 reciprocal care within families as the physical and economic demands of supporting
 292 older relatives increase with advancing age, and household resources are stretched
 293 thinner—especially in the pandemic’s aftermath.
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 297 **Education and Family Support:**
 298 • Educational qualifications also significantly impacted the likelihood of receiving
 299 financial support from family (Chi2 = 44.367, p=0.000). Comparisons revealed that
 300 lesser educated women often depended more on family, while those with higher
 301 education levels showed slightly reduced dependence, suggesting that better-educated
 302 women may tap alternative income streams or navigate welfare schemes more
 303 effectively. However, women with primary education also broke the trend and had the
 304 lowest percentage of women with family support. So this relationship may not be as
 305 straightforward as we expect it to be.
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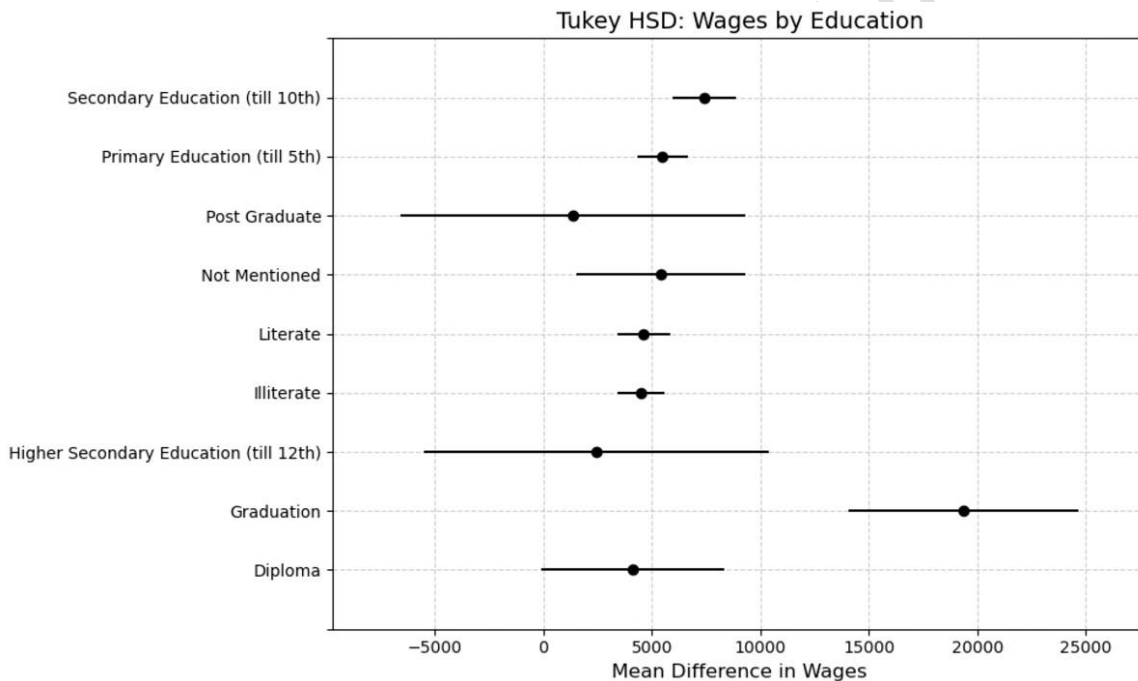


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 309 **Employment Status and Earnings**
 310 **Employment Rates:**
 311 Only 22% of respondents reported being employed, with the vast majority engaging in
 312 low-paying, labour-intensive activities such as agricultural work. Employment rates declined

313 sharply with age—27.29% in the 60–70 age group versus just 10.14% among those 80+.
 314 Employment was also strongly associated with caste and educational attainment (Chi2 for Caste
 315 = 148.443, p=0.000; Chi2 for Education = 53.503, p=0.000), illustrating that systemic inequities
 316 and skill deficits limit upward mobility and economic agency for many elderly women.
 317

318 **Wage Differences:**

319 While ANOVA tests showed that wages did not differ significantly by caste (F=2.019,
 320 p=0.089) or age (F=2.264, p=0.104), education did emerge as a significant factor (F=10.319,
 321 p=0.000). However, because of the low participation of postgraduates there was no clear trend
 322 that higher education fetched higher wages. The pandemic’s ripple effects—such as market
 323 closures and reduced labour demand— may have further constrained these women’s capacity to
 324 secure stable, dignified employment.
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 328 *As the above figure demonstrates, Graduates fetched the highest wages by far although*
 329 *the overall earning levels remained modest. And as the education level increased the variability*
 330 *of wages increased. However, there is no clear trend linking higher wages with higher wages.*
 331 *However, we must keep in mind that older women may not want to work at all unless*
 332 *circumstances force them.*
 333

334 **Pension Coverage:**

335 Pension schemes, including Social Aadhar, represent an essential income buffer for
 336 elderly women lacking personal savings. However, coverage remained low, with just 38%
 337 receiving any pension. While pensions offer a baseline safety net, their amounts and reach

338 remain limited. Ensuring wider coverage and increasing pension amounts could play a vital role
 339 in mitigating economic insecurity, especially for the oldest and most marginalized segments of
 340 the population.

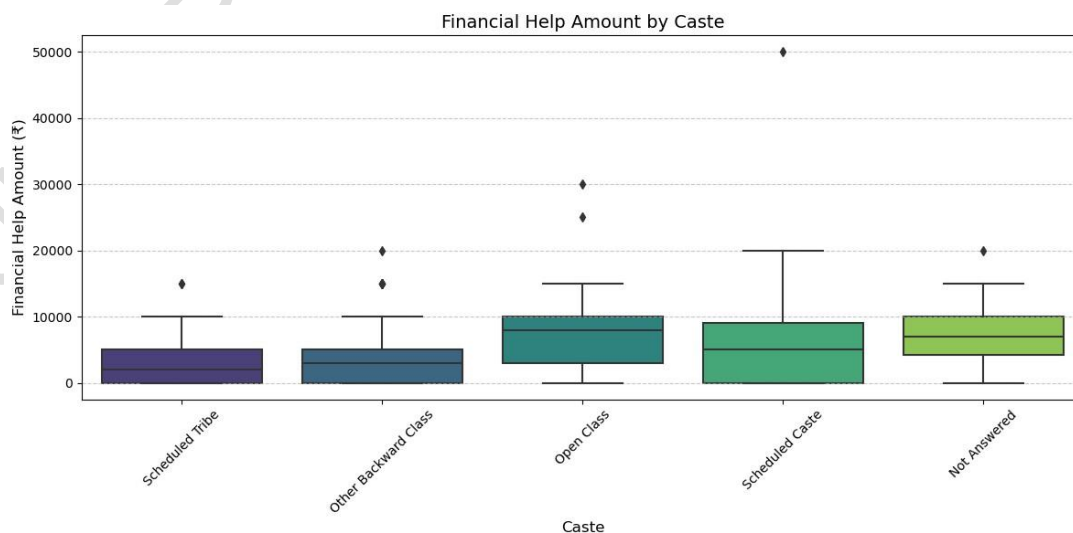
341 **Self-Help Groups and Financial Support Networks**

342 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can empower elderly women by providing access to credit,
 343 fostering social solidarity, and building financial literacy. However, overall participation hovered
 344 at around 10% and was strongly influenced by caste, education, and age. Older women had
 345 substantially lower participation rates. Open class and more educated individuals (anyone who
 346 went for formal education) were more likely to join SHGs, thereby gaining a platform to
 347 supplement their incomes or seek financial help. Caste-based disparities in SHG participation
 348 ($\chi^2 = 149.340, p=0.000$) and financial support (ANOVA: $F=8.006, p=0.000$) highlight the
 349 need for inclusive outreach strategies targeting those who stand to benefit most but remain
 350 outside these networks.

Self-Help Group Participation by Educational Qualification



351 *As illustrated in the above Figure, the Self-help group participation varies by education*
 352 *level, with Literates and Illiterates receiving comparatively lower rates. Hence these*
 353 *individuals would not get an additional platform to supplement their income.*



356

357 *As illustrated in above Figure, the median financial help amount varies by caste group,*
 358 *with Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes receiving comparatively lower*
 359 *amounts. This visualization supports the statistical findings that marginalized*
 360 *communities face greater economic constraints.*
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362 **Satisfaction with Family Support:**

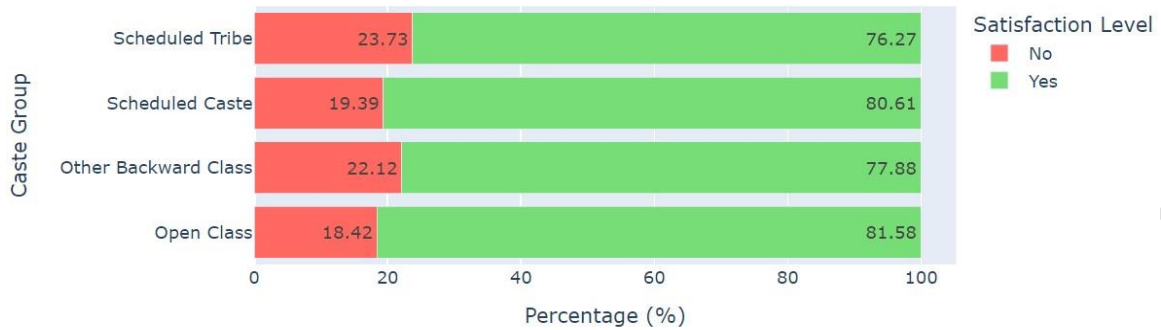
363 While financial assistance from families is integral to many elderly women’s livelihoods,
 364 satisfaction levels vary by both education (Chi2 = 31.768, p=0.000) and caste (Chi2 = 138.766,
 365 p=0.000). For instance, satisfaction with family support reached 100% among those with higher
 366 secondary education compared to 50% among postgraduates, indicating that expectations and
 367 standards for adequate support may rise with education. Similarly, satisfaction levels were
 368 higher among Open Class (81.58%) and Scheduled Castes (80.61%), reflecting nuanced social
 369 dynamics and possibly differing benchmarks for evaluating familial contributions.
 370

Satisfaction with Family Support by Educational Qualification



371 *As illustrated in above Figure, the satisfaction with family support varies by education*
 372 *status, with Post Graduates being significantly more dissatisfied. It points to higher expectations.*
 373 *But we must keep in mind post graduates are highly underrepresented in the older women.*
 374 *Hence, we have too few observations to make any strong statements about this.*
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Satisfaction with Family Support by Caste



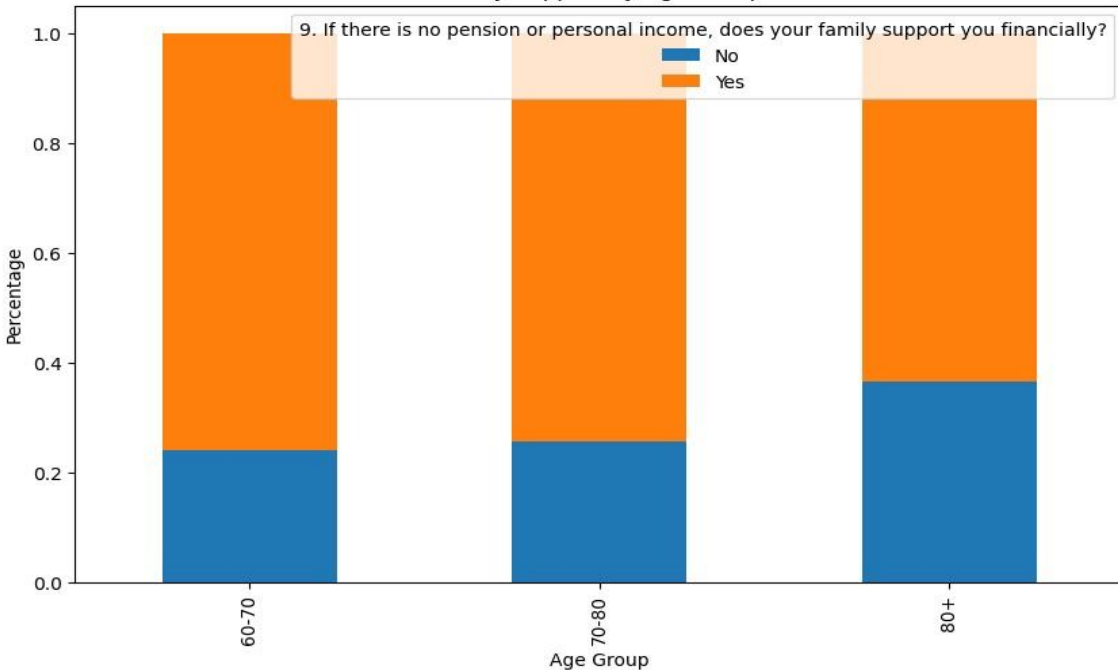
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As illustrated in above Figure, the satisfaction with family support varies by caste, with Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes being significantly more dissatisfied. Open and Scheduled Castes are more satisfied pointing to nuanced social dynamics.

Findings:

The analysis of socio-demographic and financial parameters among rural elderly women in Maharashtra reveals a complex interplay of age, caste, education, employment, and financial support mechanisms. These elements do not exist in isolation; rather, they collectively shape the economic landscape and overall well-being of this vulnerable demographic, especially in a post-COVID-19 environment marked by heightened uncertainty and social isolation.

Family Support by Age Group



390

391 *Figure visually demonstrates the decline in family-based financial support as age*
392 *increases. While the majority of 60–70-year-olds receive family assistance, this proportion*
393 *diminishes among the 80+ cohort, corroborating the statistical trends previously noted.*
394

394

395 **Key Observations**

396 **1. Significant Socio-Demographic Disparities:**

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- 397 ○ **Age-Related Vulnerabilities:**

398

398 With 52% of respondents aged 60–70, this “younger elderly” cohort had a higher
399 employment rate and higher levels of family support on average. However, these
400 advantages diminished markedly among older groups. Women 80+ years faced
401 pronounced financial dependency as most of them were not employed, and lower
402 familial assistance, underscoring that advancing age intensifies economic strain
403 and social isolation.

404

- 404 ○ **Caste-Based Inequalities:**

405

405 The data consistently showed that Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
406 struggled with the lowest incomes and least stable forms of support. Conversely,
407 Open Class respondents, though not uniformly affluent, were more likely to
408 secure moderate income brackets and exhibit higher satisfaction with family
409 support. This pattern highlights enduring structural inequities that perpetuate
410 economic disadvantage among historically marginalized groups.

411

- 411 ○ **Education as an Economic Lever:**

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412 Education emerged as a critical differentiator. Even rudimentary levels of literacy
413 correlated with better employment prospects, increased likelihood of joining
414 Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and access to slightly higher wage levels. Among
415 illiterate women, financial dependency and low family incomes were prevalent.
416 In contrast, those with secondary or higher education displayed reduced reliance
417 on family support, improved economic resilience, and a greater sense of
418 satisfaction regarding their financial circumstances.

419

419 **2. Family Support and Its Limitations:**

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420 While family support remains a cornerstone of survival strategies, its reliability is
421 uneven. Age and caste influenced whether families provided financial help when
422 personal income or pensions were absent. Younger elderly groups and women from
423 relatively privileged castes received more consistent familial aid. Yet, as women aged,
424 this support tended to wane—a finding particularly alarming given the rising healthcare
425 and daily living costs that accompany older age.

426

426 **3. Constrained Employment Opportunities:**

427

427 Employment participation was a modest 22% overall, with most engagements confined
428 to low-wage agricultural labour. The stark decline in employment rates among the oldest
429 age groups, combined with limited wage differentials by caste or age, underscores the
430 systemic barriers preventing older women from achieving even minimal economic

430

431 autonomy. Educational attainment offered a modest wage advantage, but the overall
432 landscape remained challenging, especially under pandemic-induced market disruptions.

433 4. Patchy Coverage of Social Safety Nets:

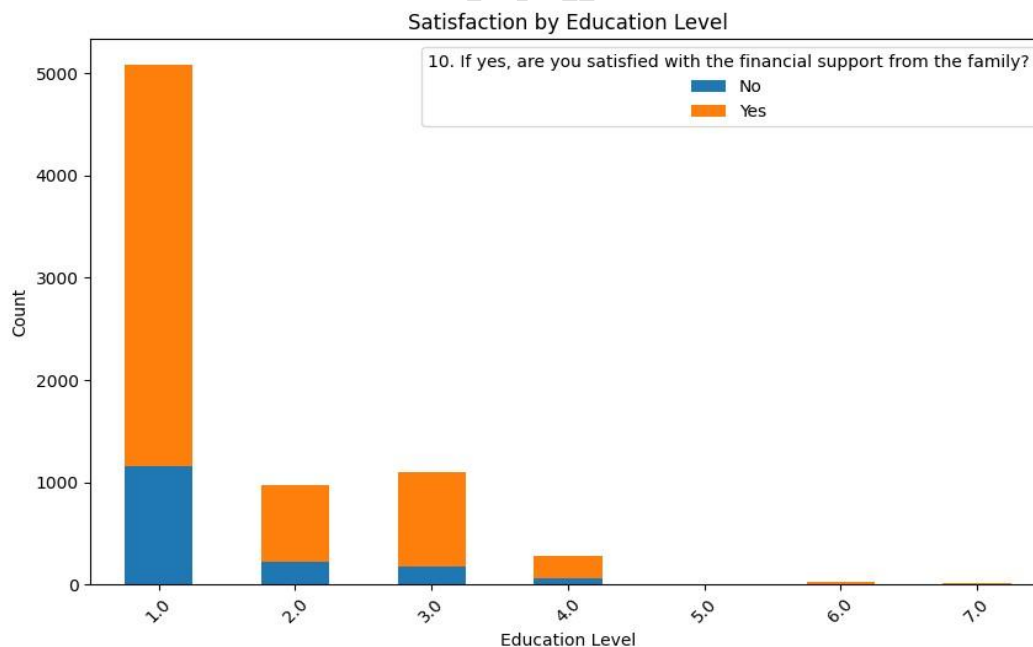
434 Pensions and SHGs represent potential avenues for reducing financial vulnerability.
435 However, only 38% had pension coverage, and just 10% participated in SHGs.
436 Marginalized castes and less educated women were notably underrepresented in these
437 protective mechanisms. When SHGs and pensions did deliver benefits, they often
438 reinforced the positive effects of education and caste advantage rather than bridging the
439 gaps for the most disadvantaged.

440
441

442 5. Varying Levels of Satisfaction and Well-Being:

443 Satisfaction with family support and the overall sense of financial security varied widely.
444 Differences by caste and education suggest that social identity not only affects material
445 conditions but also shapes perceptions of adequacy and fairness. Women who had
446 achieved even moderate educational qualifications tended to have higher expectations—
447 and often greater dissatisfaction—if their needs were not met, while those with minimal
448 schooling sometimes reported higher contentment with modest support, possibly
449 reflecting differing normative standards or adaptive coping mechanisms.

450



451
452 *Figure shows a clear relationship between education and satisfaction with family*
453 *support. While less-educated women appear satisfied with modest financial help, those with*
454 *secondary or higher education hold different expectations, influencing their reported satisfaction*
455 *levels.*

456

457 **Integrated Insights**

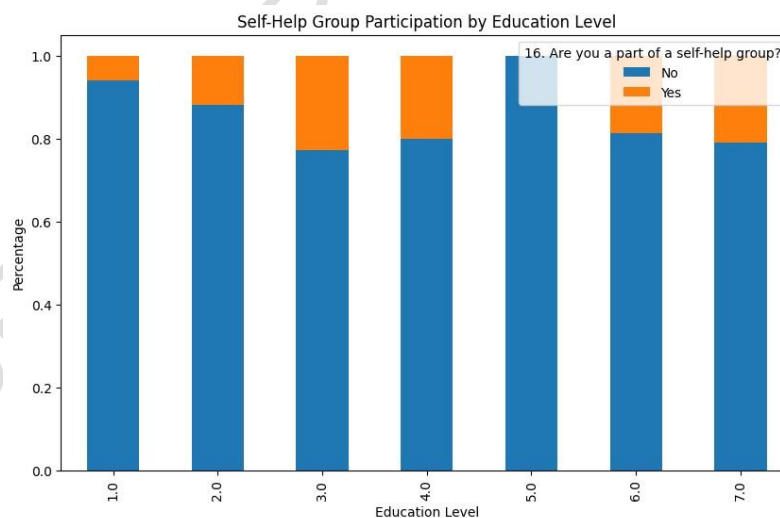
458 Collectively, these findings present a portrait of elderly rural women in Maharashtra
459 whose economic lives are constrained by intersecting factors of caste, education, and age. The
460 COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities, straining already fragile family
461 safety nets, limiting employment opportunities, and intensifying social isolation. While some
462 measures—like pensions, SHGs, and educational interventions—offer pathways toward
463 improvement, their uneven uptake and limited reach mean that many elderly women remain
464 locked in cycles of dependency and insecurity.

465 These realities underscore the need for multi-layered interventions that acknowledge the
466 complexity of socio-demographic determinants. Addressing structural inequalities linked to
467 caste, investing in adult education and skill development programs, expanding coverage of
468 pension schemes, and promoting more inclusive SHG policies can create more resilient support
469 systems. In doing so, policymakers and stakeholders can help these women navigate the
470 uncertainties of late life with greater dignity, autonomy, and financial stability.

471 **Economic Dependence and Income Sources**

473 Economic dependence among rural elderly women in Maharashtra emerges as a
474 multifaceted issue, influenced by a matrix of socio-demographic variables and exacerbated by
475 the post-COVID environment. While some women sustain themselves through personal
476 earnings, pensions, or self-help group engagements, many remain reliant on family members
477 and community networks—especially when their own sources of income are limited or absent.

478



479 *As shown in Figure, SHG participation rates increase with educational attainment.*
480 *Illiterate women exhibit minimal engagement, while those with higher education levels are more*
481 *likely to leverage SHGs as financial and social support mechanisms.*

483

484 **The Nature of Economic Dependence**

485 **1. Family as the Primary Support Mechanism:**

486 A significant majority of respondents reported that, in the absence of personal income or
487 formal pensions, their families provided financial aid. However, the extent and
488 consistency of this support varied considerably. Age played a pivotal role; younger
489 elderly women (60–70 years) experienced higher rates of family support, while those
490 aged 80+ were increasingly left without reliable assistance. Caste and education also
491 shaped this dependency, with historically marginalized groups (Scheduled Tribes and
492 Scheduled Castes) and illiterate women finding themselves in more precarious positions.

493 **2. Over-Reliance on Low-Wage Labor:**

494 For the 22% of respondents who were employed, agricultural labour dominated as a
495 source of income. This labour, however, is often seasonal, physically demanding, and
496 low-paying, offering little by way of long-term security. With advancing age, women's
497 capacity to continue working in physically strenuous jobs diminishes, further tightening
498 the grip of economic dependence. The pandemic's detrimental impact on rural labour
499 markets—such as disruptions in supply chains and reduced farm gate prices—
500 compounded these vulnerabilities.

501 **3. Pension Schemes as Partial Buffers:**

502 Pensions can mitigate some financial uncertainties, yet only 38% of the surveyed women
503 received pension benefits. While these benefits provide a critical baseline income, their
504 limited coverage and modest amounts mean that pensions seldom suffice as a standalone
505 security measure. This is particularly salient for older women, who, facing compounding
506 health expenses and reduced family contributions, find that their pensions fall short of
507 meeting basic needs. Better targeting, streamlined access, and increased pension
508 amounts could enhance their role as a stabilizing force.

509
510 **Income Sources Beyond Wages and Pensions**

511 **1. Self-Help Groups (SHGs):**

512 Participation in SHGs—though limited to about 10% of respondents—offers
513 potential pathways out of economic fragility. SHGs can provide microcredit, foster
514 community cohesion, and encourage small-scale entrepreneurial activities. Education
515 and caste significantly influenced who joined these groups. More educated women and
516 those from relatively advantaged caste backgrounds were likelier to leverage SHGs to
517 supplement their income, while marginalized groups and the oldest cohorts remained on
518 the periphery. Expanding SHGs to reach these underserved segments could gradually
519 lessen economic dependence.

520 **2. Non-Farm Activities and Informal Enterprises:**

521 While less common, some respondents engaged in small-scale trading, handicraft
522 production, or animal husbandry to diversify income streams. These informal enterprises
523 were most feasible among women with some level of literacy and better mobility.
524 However, the success of such ventures often hinges on local market conditions, access to
525 credit, and supportive social networks—factors not uniformly available to all women.

526 3. **Community and Religious Trusts, Philanthropic Aid:**

527 A minority relied on ad-hoc forms of support from community or religious trusts
528 and philanthropic organizations, especially during the pandemic’s peak. Although not
529 systematic or guaranteed, such assistance occasionally bridged financial gaps. Enhancing
530 partnerships between local NGOs, community-based organizations, and government
531 agencies could formalize these sporadic supports and create more reliable safety nets.

532 **Implications of Economic Dependence:**

533 The patterns of dependence, employment, and supplementary income streams highlight
534 structural impediments hindering women’s financial autonomy. For many elderly women, the
535 absence of personal savings, the decline in earning capacity with age, and the inconsistent
536 availability of pensions or family support result in chronic vulnerability. Without meaningful
537 intervention, economic dependence can erode self-esteem, limit healthcare access, and reduce
538 overall quality of life.

539 The data call for strategic efforts to diversify income sources and strengthen the
540 resilience of elderly women. Improving access to financial literacy programs, expanding SHG
541 participation to marginalized communities, increasing pension coverage and amounts, and
542 encouraging skill-based training—particularly for the younger elderly—can mitigate the
543 intensity of economic dependence. Ultimately, tackling the root causes of dependence, rather
544 than merely treating its symptoms, requires holistic and well-coordinated policy responses.

545

546 **Social Identity and Economic Disparities:**

547 The financial well-being of elderly women in rural Maharashtra is not merely a function
548 of age or education level. Social identity—shaped profoundly by caste and other historically
549 entrenched hierarchies—plays an equally critical role in determining who gains access to
550 resources, who secures stable employment, and who receives dependable support. Education,
551 while offering some upward mobility, also intersects with caste, influencing how effectively
552 women can leverage their skills, networks, and knowledge to improve their circumstances.

553

554 **Caste as a Structural Determinant:**

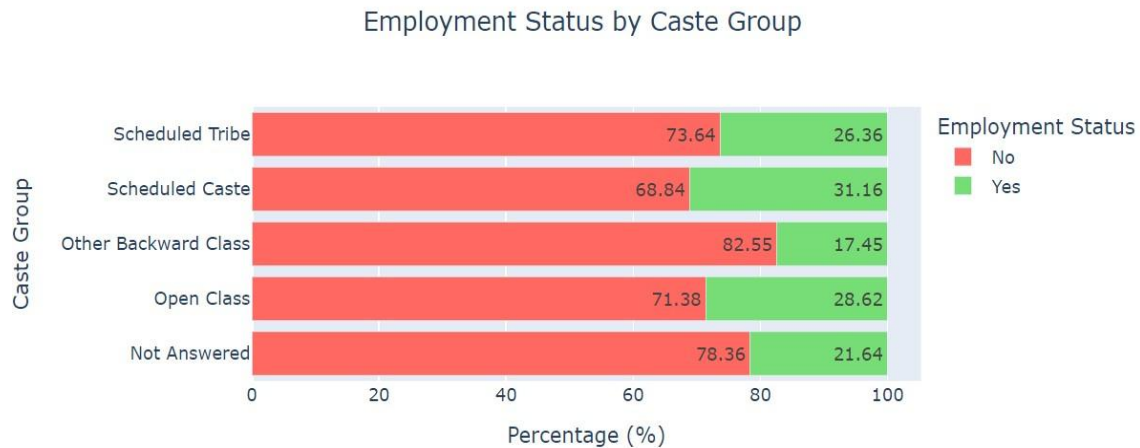
555 1. **Income Inequalities Across Caste Lines:**

556 Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes consistently appeared at the lowest rungs of the
557 income ladder, while Open Class respondents had comparatively better, though not
558 uniformly strong, financial standings. Chi-square analyses confirmed caste-based
559 disparities in both family income ($\chi^2 = 213.238, p=0.000$) and financial support.
560 Lower incomes in marginalized caste groups reflect long-standing structural
561 inequalities—such as limited access to education, credit, and land ownership—that stifle
562 the economic advancement of these communities.

563 2. **Restricted Employment Opportunities:**

564 Employment patterns underscored these inequities. Scheduled Castes and Open Class
565 individuals showed higher employment percentages (31.16% and 28.62%, respectively)

566 compared to Other Backward Classes (17.45%) and Scheduled Tribes (26.36%). This
 567 disparity points to differing degrees of social capital and networks that can help in
 568 securing work, even if wages remain modest. Caste-based discrimination, albeit often
 569 subtle, can manifest in hiring biases, wage negotiations, and opportunities for upskilling
 570 or moving into less physically taxing roles.



571
 572 *Above table highlights the variation in wage-based employment across caste groups.*
 573 *Scheduled Castes exhibit a relatively higher employment rate (31.16%), whereas Other*
 574 *Backward Classes have notably lower participation in wage labour (17.45%), reinforcing the*
 575 *role of social identity in economic engagement*

576 3. Gaps in Self-Help Group Participation and Benefits:

577 Self-Help Groups (SHGs) can offer financial relief and a measure of autonomy.
 578 However, caste profoundly shaped who gained entry into these empowering networks.
 579 With participation rates as low as 5.40% among Scheduled Tribes and up to 14.86%
 580 among the Open Class, these variations highlight how existing social power dynamics
 581 affect access to collective financial mechanisms. Even when marginalized caste
 582 members join SHGs, they often receive fewer financial benefits on average, indicating
 583 that mere inclusion does not guarantee equal treatment or resource allocation.

585 The Role of Education in Mitigating Disparities:

586 1. Education as a Buffer:

587 While no single intervention can eradicate centuries-old inequalities, education emerged
 588 as a partial counterweight to caste-based disadvantages. Women with higher levels of
 589 education reported better chances of employment and higher wages (ANOVA: $F=10.319$,
 590 $p=0.000$), even if these gains were incremental. Education provided a platform to
 591 understand government schemes, negotiate wages, or seek alternative livelihoods—steps
 592 that can gradually chip away at caste-imposed ceilings.

593 2. Differential Outcomes Based on Intersectionality:

594 The interplay between caste and education is complex. For an illiterate woman from a
 595 Scheduled Tribe, the absence of educational credentials compounds the barriers posed by

596 her social identity. In contrast, a similarly situated woman who has attained at least
597 primary or secondary education may navigate financial challenges more effectively,
598 identify avenues for income diversification, or demand fairer terms from employers.
599 Still, while education can serve as a catalyst for change, the pace and scale of its impact
600 are tempered by entrenched social norms and institutional biases.

601

602 **Consequences for Satisfaction and Well-Being:**

603 Economic disparities rooted in caste and attenuated by educational attainment influence
604 not just material outcomes but also subjective well-being. For instance, the higher satisfaction
605 reported by certain caste groups could reflect either relatively better economic conditions or
606 differing benchmarks for what constitutes “adequate” support. Meanwhile, more educated
607 women—especially those who understand their entitlements or have been exposed to broader
608 socio-economic opportunities—may hold higher expectations, leading to a more critical
609 assessment of their family’s financial support or government provisions.

610

611 **Policy Recommendations:**

612 **1. Expand and Strengthen Social Safety Nets:**

613 ○ **Enhanced Pension Coverage and Amounts:**
614 Broaden eligibility criteria, streamline access, and increase pension amounts to
615 provide a more substantial and reliable income base, particularly benefiting those
616 over 80 and from marginalized castes.

617 ○ **Targeted Subsidies and Income Support:**
618 Introduce caste- and age-sensitive subsidies, ensuring that the most
619 disadvantaged groups have guaranteed baseline support independent of
620 fluctuating family finances.

621 **2. Promote Inclusive Self-Help Groups (SHGs):**

622 ○ **Focused Outreach to Marginalized Groups:**
623 Actively recruit Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, and older women into
624 SHGs. Provide mentoring, capacity-building workshops, and culturally tailored
625 literacy programs to ensure they can effectively participate and benefit.

626 ○ **Strengthen Financial Literacy and Market Linkages:**
627 Equip SHG members with basic financial skills and connect them to buyers,
628 cooperatives, or digital marketplaces, enabling them to earn more stable and
629 competitive incomes.

630 **3. Invest in Adult Education and Skill Development:**

631 ○ **Literacy and Lifelong Learning Initiatives:**
632 Offer flexible, community-based literacy classes and vocational training designed
633 for older adults. Improve digital literacy so that elderly women can access
634 government schemes, banking services, and telemedicine platforms.

635 ○ **Tailored Skill Building:**

636 Focus on crafts, light manufacturing, or service-based tasks suited to older adults,
637 enabling them to continue earning in less physically demanding ways.

638 **4. Design Age-Sensitive Employment Opportunities:**

639 ○ **Public-Private Partnerships:**

640 Collaborate with local industries, NGOs, and government agencies to create
641 lighter, age-appropriate employment avenues. For instance, cottage industries or
642 small-scale food processing units can allow older women to contribute
643 economically without overexertion.

644 ○ **Flexible Work Schedules and Home-Based Opportunities:**

645 Encourage part-time or home-based roles to accommodate the health limitations
646 that come with age, maintaining elderly women's dignity and agency.

647 **5. Strengthen Community Support and Healthcare Access:**

648 ○ **Integrated Healthcare and Counselling Services:**

649 Develop community-level health camps and counselling sessions to address
650 mental health and chronic illnesses, acknowledging that financial well-being and
651 health are closely intertwined.

652 ○ **Local Support Networks:**

653 Partner with local self-governing bodies and religious/community trusts to
654 formalize informal aid channels, ensuring more consistent access to emergency
655 financial help and emotional support.

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