

Transnational Families: The Experiences of Elderly Mothers in India

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Abstract: This study examined the transnational experiences of 30 elderly mothers in India with adult offspring residing in the United States. Through personal interviews, the focus was on examining the issues, challenges, and coping strategies that older mothers faced in the transnational context. The average age of the older mothers was 64.7 years (SD = 7.2). All of them had some college education (75% had a college degree), and they were most likely to be widowed (80%). Except for two interviewees, the rest were followers of the Hindu faith. Through qualitative analysis, the following themes were salient: loneliness, uncertainty/anxiety pertaining to the future, being irrelevant, intergenerational contact, and communication connectivity. The study highlights the challenges faced by “left behind” mothers, and addresses the implications for the health and well-being of both elderly mothers as well as adult offspring residing in two different nations.

Keywords: transnational families, aging, loneliness, intergenerational relationships, irrelevant.

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A rapid demographic “aging boom” is underway in India. By 2035, the older population (60 years+) is projected to more than double from 100 million in 2011 to 230 million (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This means there will be a substantial restructuring of India’s population composition. Advances in health care, prevention efforts, control of infectious diseases, and improved nutrition have contributed to this boom. However, such a demographic boom also creates new challenges and caregiving issues for elder care, both at the macro and micro levels. To address this, programs, policies, and legal safeguards must be in place to address the climbing life expectancy rates coupled with declining birth rates.

Undertaken by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Longitudinal Ageing Study of India (LASI) 2021 is a comprehensive national survey that reports the status of older adults in India (Perianayagam et al., 2022). It shows that 12% of India’s population includes those 60+ years of age. The sex ratio among older adults reflects the higher life expectancy rates of Indian women compared to Indian men. About 58% of India’s elderly population is women, and a substantial number of them (54%) are widows. The aged-dependency ratio is about 62 per 100 working-age adults, a high number that reflects the socio-economic responsibilities on the working-age group.

In an era of superdiverse social structural forms in society, the transnational family is one of them. Globalization and other factors have created transnational families throughout the world. Though geographically separated, transnational families create and retain a 'sense of collective welfare and unity, in short “familyhood,” even across national borders' (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002). An inevitable consequence of migration, this “transnational family” phenomenon is hardly new. However, what is breathtaking is the number of people worldwide who cross national borders to live in another country. From 173 million in 2000 to 281 million in 2020, the number of international migrants is steadily rising (United Nations, 2022).

In 2024, the United States was the final destination for approximately one out of five of the world's migrants. As of 2023, nearly three million Indian immigrants lived in the United States, making the country the second most popular global destination for Indians (Greene & Batalova, 2024). It is said that the Asian Indian population became the nation’s largest Asian population group in 2020, growing by over 50% between 2010 and 2020 (Rico et al., 2023). In the 2025 Pew Research Center’s report, the median age of Indian immigrants was identified as 40.9 years (Im & Greenwood, 2025). A majority (80%) of them are of the working age, 7% being 18 years of age and younger, and 13% are 65 and older.

When new transnational family constellations are formed, the impact is seen in both source and destination countries. A heavy focus has been on the migrant, their adjustment to the new host country, and the challenges they face. By comparison, somewhat overlooked is the impact on family members left behind, especially the elderly (Kalavar et al., 2015). Older adults often remain in their country of origin while younger generations migrate, resulting in smaller local support networks. Transnational families with elderly members navigate care across national borders, sometimes across continents. Such caregiving is negotiated long-distance and involves networking with possible siblings, friends, family members, and paid professional services in the home country to ensure that care is provided, whether routine or emergency-driven.

Traditional cultural values can generate guilt for the migrant offspring, causing them to feel torn between filial duty and migration opportunities. This entails balancing cultural expectations and emotional bonds with physical distance. Besides juggling the demands of one's own family in the United States, transnational families face challenges in providing elder care, leading to increased isolation for "left-behind" elders but sometimes strengthening ties through innovative long-distance communication technologies. Though parallels exist with long-distance support giving within nations, transnational support is further compounded by immigration between nations, migration policies, visa, diverse systems of support delivery, currency fluctuations, cultural expectations, and communication technologies as this is provided across national boundaries. Kalavar et al. (2020) proposed the term "in-absentia caregiver stress" to represent a complex outcome of guilt, anxiety, worry, sadness, and helplessness experienced by adult children when providing transnational support to elderly mothers. With the rise of transnational families, intergenerational support is being carried out across borders, and this not only impacts adult offspring but also "left behind" elders.

Family is the primary support system for India's elderly as they provide a variety of support in late adulthood, including being the most preferred living arrangement for older people (Gupta et al., 2009). Golandaj et al. (2013) reported that family in India is the primary source of care in late life. They also indicated that less educated older women belonging to an older age

group expect financial and emotional support from offspring, and want to live with their sons. Socio-culturally speaking, adult offspring, especially the oldest male children, assume an important role in caregiving for older adults, though such expectations on the oldest male child have weakened. Undoubtedly, there is a strong preference in India for elder care to occur within the family setting (Brijnath, 2012).

Caregiving was never deemed a separate role but included in the roles and responsibilities held by a family member (Narayan et al., 2015). In the English translation of the Taittiriya Upanishad, an ancient Vedantic text, it is explicitly prescribed that mother and father are to be revered as God (Gambhirananda, 1957). In 1990, Vatak addressed the multilayered concept of *seva* (service) towards elders by youngsters that was rooted in respect. Another profound Indian custom demonstrating respect is the tradition of touching the feet of elders (Narang, 2023). This is seen as an expression of reverence, acknowledging the knowledge and life experiences of older adults, and seeking their blessings to forge a successful path forward. However, the economic drive for prosperity along with globalization and westernization has come with a hefty social price tag – the erosion of elder care values. In 1996, Dandekar emphasized that many older adults have to live with their children as they cannot afford an alternative. This may be particularly so for older widows, especially given gender differences in life expectancy.

In Indian culture, we see feminization of the aging experience. Not only are there more older women than older men, but caregiving for older adults is typically done by female members of the household. When family provides care, women predominate as the spouse, daughter-in-law, daughter, and other relatives. As more and more women assume roles outside the home, changing lifestyles and erosion of values have altered the social landscape of India (Kalavar, 2006). The feminization of aging is also seen in demographic terms, such as 1065 females per 1000 senior males (Press Information Bureau, 2025). Many prominent Indian gerontologists (Ramamurti & Jamuna, 1995) have long emphasized the need to pay special attention to the issues and considerations of elderly women in India. In fact, they have advocated for measures to empower older women as a priority policy directive. Therefore, this project focused on elderly mothers as the most vulnerable group.

The health and well-being of older adults left behind by the emigration of adult offspring is shaped by a complex intermix of psychological, cultural, financial, and logistical issues. While adult offspring may make remittances that upgrade their standard of living, older adults are often at loss with their children's physical absence, and fall prey to feelings of loneliness, marginalization, and alienation. In this study, the focus was to examine the issues, challenges, and coping strategies that older mothers faced in the transnational context.

Method

Study Design

Using a dyadic format, the parent study examined the nature of bidirectional transnational support exchanges between 30 Asian Indian elderly mothers in India and their adult offspring in the United States. This article focuses on a narrow aspect- the narratives as expressed by elderly mothers in India regarding their issues, challenges, and coping strategies in the transnational context.

To participate in this study, a screening instrument was used to determine eligibility for the interviews. Respondents had to be females, aged 60 years and older, who spoke English, and had at least one child living in the United States. If a participant did not meet any of the conditions, they were no longer retained in the pool of prospective participants. The average age of the female participants was 64.7 years ($SD = 7.2$). All of them had some college education (75% had a college degree), and they were most likely to be widowed (80%). Except for two interviewees, the rest were followers of the Hindu faith. The interviews with elderly mothers were conducted in Tirupati, Bengaluru, and Chennai, as these represent diverse geographical and linguistic regions of South India that have a high exodus of immigrants to the United States. The author worked with various institutions (primarily with Sri Venkateshwara University's Center on Aging and NRIPA) with regard to data sampling and recruitment. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with older mothers in India as they permitted the researcher to establish rapport with the older adult, allow for clarification of questions, and address any hearing limitations by speaking clearly in a quiet and comfortable place, home or public area chosen by the respondents.

The open-ended questions included older mothers being asked about expectations from adult offspring in the United States, the feasibility of living in the United States, the rewards and challenges of having an adult offspring in the United States, and how this transnational experience has worked out for them.

Data Analysis

In addition to socio-demographic information, several open-ended questions were used to elicit a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and sociocultural underpinnings of the transnational context. Each interview lasted approximately 75-90 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded, and then transcribed later.

Data was input into the data analysis software NVivo. A systematic coding strategy was employed that was informed by principles of the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative research allowed for an in-depth examination of unexplored phenomena, eliciting insights and understandings into transnational family experiences as experienced by elderly mothers. The constructivist grounded theory analysis was used as it facilitated analytical consideration of transnational experiences (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2014). Initially, we openly coded transcripts line by line using NVivo, paying attention to the transnational experiences of individuals and how these experiences shaped individual perceptions. Second, we produced focused codes by drawing together previously identified open codes with common logical underpinnings. Third, we placed data in a relational diagram and reviewed it to ensure the findings were grounded in the data. The concept of the transnational experiences of elderly mothers underpinned the five categories in the data. Therefore, these five categories were considered subordinate categories, which defined different aspects of mothers' transnational experiences. See Figure 1 for the structure of the categories, and a description of each category that follows next.

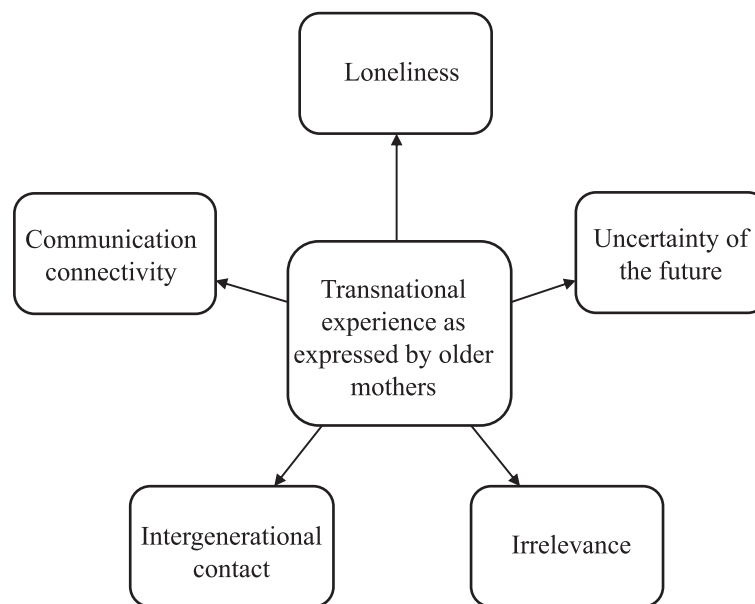
Results

Elderly mothers were asked to capture their experiences with having adult offspring in the United States. Based on grounded theory approaches, Huberman and Miles (1994) outlined a set of "tactics" that ranged from noting patterns and themes, clustering them, shuttling between

data and categories, to eventually arrive at words that represent similar sentiments clubbed together as a single category. In organizing these categories, the following five sentiments were salient: loneliness, uncertainty/anxiety pertaining to the future, being irrelevant, intergenerational contact, and communication connectivity.

Figure 1

Categories representing the transnational experience as expressed by older mothers in India



Loneliness

Loneliness was a very common theme pertaining to several questions asked of older mothers. It was less about social isolation, and more about feeling disconnected from others. Sometimes this was seen as the outcome of mismatched expectations and the reality of relationships. Many older adults pointed out that they had been raised in the extended family context during their childhood years. So, the family system had a built-in safety net for the care of older adults. Families stayed together and geographical mobility was limited. The social distractions were fewer and life was simpler. Some of them pointed out that they had adapted to the needs of their aging parents and grandparents. Again, they felt they were adapting to the needs of their children and grandchildren. A few of them stressed that they want to make meaningful contributions but feel very disconnected with family members.

Some older adults lived with other adult offspring but yet reported loneliness. As one female respondent (aged 72) said, *“There are many people in the house but everyone is busy doing their own thing. Everyone is*

rushing from one thing to another. I feel like the wall. I am the constant. No one has time to even pay attention to me. I am fleetingly acknowledged but no one asks me how I am actually feeling or thinking. The dinner conversation is all about events of the day, and my hearing loss does not allow me to fully participate. I don’t even understand some of the things they say. So, I am with people but still lonely.”

Another older mother, aged 67 said, *“My life is a routine. Every day it is more or less the same schedule. I watch a lot of television. That way there are some voices in the house. The household help comes and goes. The groceries are delivered. My daughter has made all the arrangements. Even the nurse comes home to check my BP. All the comforts are here but I have no one who understands me. I miss my husband very much. I know everything going around in the building complex, city, etc. I get messages on WhatsApp, and I am on so many groups. Friends and relatives call and visit me. But they are only checking once in a while. Though I can be with others, I am feeling lonely. Hard to describe.”*

Uncertainty About the Future

It was evident that older mothers (especially those widowed) felt apprehensive about their future. A strong sense of uncertainty about the future regarding living arrangements, intergenerational relationships, health crises, and the fear of dependency persisted. As one older mother (age 64 years) said, *“Now my health is okay, I can do everything I need for myself. But what happens when I cannot? Who will take care of me? My son lives so far away now. Even if he were to leave immediately in an emergency, it will take two days to come here. What if I fall and break my hip? Why do I have to rely on others when I have my own child? My husband and I sent him abroad so he could have good education. Those days, we were filled with pride that our son lived there. Now, I feel that others pity me for being left behind alone. Where are our children when we need them? I can feel the pity that others feel for me. I dread being dependent on anyone. I must go before that.”* Sending offspring overseas to America was considered a glorious achievement decades ago. However, some of the older mothers reported that they were premature in their celebration then. While they felt pride that their children were happy and had made career advancements, some of them regretted sending their children abroad. As one mother (aged 81) said, *“My children have got used to life in America. Now, it is very difficult for them to come back. The adjustment is too much for them and family. I will not go to America for anything in the world. We are caged there at home. No ability to come and go as one pleases. Totally dependent on children. They only have time for us on weekend. That is when they do household chores and socialization. Why go there and be a burden? If something happens to our health, we become a financial burden to our children.”*

Being Irrelevant

Many respondents stated that they had diminished purpose and felt irrelevant or outdated. They could not keep pace with rapid changes in society, didn't understand how to use different Apps on their phone, and felt dismissed by the younger generation.

As an older mother (aged 78 years) stressed about her adult son and his wife, *“They are running everywhere to keep their children's after-school schedule. Who has time*

for parents these days? I feel that I have nothing to contribute, so I feel quite irrelevant.”

Another mother (aged 71 years) added, *“Today's world is not what we grew up in. Technology and everything are changing. Children today are earning well, and money has changed values. I have to ask my son and daughter to help me with so many things. My grandchildren can do more things on my phone than I can. So, it is no longer about grandparents teaching grandchildren. Even stories they like better as cartoons on computer, tablets, television than to hear from a grandparent.”*

Intergenerational Contact

In the transnational context, in-person visits with grandparents are infrequent due to the geographical distance, travel costs, and school/work schedules. However, maintaining this intergenerational bond is critical to building relationships and may be influenced by the gender of the offspring. Older mothers stressed that they have easier access to their daughter's children than to their son's children. Daughters made special efforts to build intergenerational relationships and to engage their offspring with parents using digital tools. With sons' children, some of the mothers stated that they had to negotiate this relationship with their daughters-in-law regarding access and closeness.

As one older mother stated (aged 74 years), *“My daughter's family lives only twenty minutes away. She calls me every day, and asks what I ate, how I am doing, and what I am up to. I am not dependent on anyone and can manage well. My son lives in Chicago, and he calls once or twice a week. Usually, he calls when driving to work so he can talk freely without his wife. He keeps in touch with his sister. But I know that there is tension between them. That makes me uncomfortable. My daughter feels he should do more. She feels caught between caring for me, her children, and her in-laws. Women are always sandwiched. What to do?”*

Communication Connectivity

All participants considered their smartphones as integral to being connected with family, friends, and the world. The phone unlocked several advantages for older adults: video phone calls, text messages, email, social media,

banking, alarms, YouTube, photos, and music. The instant connectivity was considered a blessing in late adulthood. As a 68-year-old mother said, *“Thank God, we have WhatsApp. My son got me this phone last time, and he has set everything up for me. I can talk to my son several times a week. His wife and children are always busy so I hardly get to see the grandchildren. I didn’t have such a phone then so I missed out on their growing up. When they come to India for holidays, it is for 2-3 weeks. They have to visit their other grandparents also. So, by the time the grandchildren get over jet lag and feel comfortable with the environment, they have to leave. I don’t feel integrated in their lives at all.”*

Discussion

Many people from India seek to move to the United States for a variety of reasons. Some do so for career advancement prospects, an enhanced standard of living, and better opportunities for their children. Separated by geographic distance, transnational families face unique challenges. Unlike long-distance support giving within a nation, transnational families are influenced by immigration laws and policies between nations. Not only are they several thousand miles away but there are challenges of paid time off from work, travel costs, currency fluctuations, visa issues, time zone differences, cultural differences, diverse systems of support delivery, and being caught between two generations. In today’s world, relationships between generations face complex barriers, though consistently accessible technology may help ease the emotional strain of distance and manage the day-to-day logistics of family members living on another continent.

Before embarking on such opportunities abroad, adults must familiarize themselves with the complexities involved. Emigration impacts not only the person who moves but also the person who stays behind. Older mothers are especially vulnerable. While digital tools allow for frequent check-ins, they can never replace the physical presence required for their care, especially during emergencies. In 2020, Kalavar et al. proposed *in-absentia caregiver stress* as a concept. The three dominant themes of guilt, helplessness, and distance/time issues were supported by their study of adult offspring in the transnational context based in the United States.

Nearly all the older adults were vehemently opposed to relocating to the United States to be with adult children and their families. Such uprooting in late life was seen as being far worse in terms of loneliness and isolation. After being in India for several decades, the socio-cultural milieu in the United States is a huge leap of adjustment in late adulthood. Cultural navigation with language barriers is a huge challenge; older adults face a “double jeopardy” – being old and isolated in a new country. Adult children may feel the “cultural and generational tug of war” as they balance the socio-cultural expectations of aging parents from India and young children being raised in the United States. Unless the “left behind” older mothers are empowered with a strong psychological safety net and close support systems, one must recognize that transnational migration may not always be in the best interests of the family. It is older women that have to navigate the socio-psychological consequences of emigration.

If such emigration is inevitable, then adult offspring must recognize that loneliness is more than just being alone. Using digital tools in creative ways to share everyday experiences in real time and celebrate sociocultural traditions can foster closeness, and reduce the risk of isolation. Strengthening emotional bonds by acknowledging both kinship and non-kinship care providers is important. While advocating for parents in the health sector, one must recognize the role of the extended family who may play a vital role as a primary caregiver. Offspring of older mothers can encourage their children to speak the native language so they have a bridge to communicate with older grandparents. They can have grandparents share familial stories or traditions with grandchildren, and create time to bond with one another on a regular basis. Further they should prepare a family preparedness plan both for routine elder care and emergencies.

Transnational families may be said to create a “support fissure” that may vary in size and impact as it separates families and older adults. Social isolation is seen when individuals have limited or lack connections to family, friends, or a community. Loneliness is identified by Gerlach et al. (2024) as the subjective feeling of being alone. Individuals differ in terms of their preference for time spent in solitude. Not everyone who is alone feels lonely. On the other hand, an individual can feel lonely

amidst several people. These authors pointed out that the risk of loneliness increases with social isolation and puts older adults at risk for physical and mental health issues. While the idea of “left behind does not equal abandonment” must be emphasized, the use of technology, financial remittances, and frequent in-person care assurances may promote “aging in place” for older mothers in India. We must develop more age-friendly neighbourhoods that improve access to transportation, and senior-friendly policies that promote the health and well-being of older adults.

In conclusion, we should not overlook the fact that transnational families can impact the well-being of both the elderly parent and adult offspring residing in different nations. Though this study was focused on Asian Indian families, this may be a frontrunner in explaining what transnational families mean to “left behind elders” among other immigrant groups in the United States. Understanding the complexity of transnational relationships may yield powerful insights that can influence health care delivery and inform social policy formulation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the United States – India Educational Foundation (USIEF) for funding this research.

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