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ELDER ABUSE - A SERIOUS CONCERN FOR THE EU



AGE CALLS FOR EU ACTION



The European Older People's Platform
La Plate-forme européenne des Personnes âgées



Why elder abuse is a concern for AGE

‘Elder abuse is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person’ (Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse, 2002). It can take various forms: physical, psychological or emotional, sexual, financial or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Network of the Prevention of Elder abuse (INPEA) have recognised the abuse of older people as a significant global problem.

Hundred thousands of older people in the European Union encounter a form of elder abuse each year. They are pressed to change their will, their bank account is plundered, they are pinched or beaten, called names, threatened and insulted and sometimes they are raped or sexually abused otherwise

Elder abuse is a human rights violation and it is an infringement of Article 25 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights which recognises and respects the rights of older people to lead lives of dignity and independence, and to participate in social and cultural life. Research on where and when and how often elder abuse occurs is inadequate and inconsistent. Awareness needs to be raised on this crucial issue and a pan-European strategy on elder abuse is urgently needed.

The extent of the problem in domestic settings

The abuse of older people within the family is a serious and hidden problem. Abuse of older people in domestic circumstances can be due to several causes. For instance, these can include financial abuse from an adult/child in need of money or physical or psychological abuse from a partner due to the stress triggered by providing ongoing care.

Abuse in a domestic setting is often very difficult to identify. Such abuse is often not reported for several reasons: the sense of shame felt by the victims, the relationship between the victim and the abuser, the state of dependency which the victim is in vis-à-vis the abuser and the fear of reprisals. Older women are at a higher risk of all types of abuse.

Facts and figures

In 2005 a survey carried out by the Dutch National Platform 'Combating Elder Abuse', showed that 41% of victims suffered physical abuse, 46% suffered psychological abuse, 37% were being exploited, 18% were neglected, 12% were being denied basic rights and 3% were sexually abused. Since several forms of elder abuse occurred simultaneously and the combined percentages exceeded 100%.

In 2006, Zivot 90, a Czech association for older people, estimated from calls made to its helpline that 59% of the abuse of older people was carried out by family members. These findings are comparable with those in other EU Member States.

The extent of the problem in institutional settings

Violence and abuse of older people in nursing homes and other forms of residential care have many aspects. These include the persecution of residents by the staff, aggressive behaviour between residents and abusive threats and conduct of older people towards the staff. Types of abuse include direct physical violence including abusive restraint. Indirect physical violence such as the misuse of medicines is also defined as abuse.

Other forms of abuse include physical neglect (malnutrition, dehydration, poor hygiene or bedsores) emotional or psychological violence (verbal aggression and emotional coldness), financial or other kinds of material exploitation and neglect. The abandonment of older people in hospitals or care home by their relatives who are unable to cope with the situation is a further form of elder abuse.

Facts and figures

The extent of this problem is hardly known as it often goes unreported due to the frequent dependent state of the older person or the lack of courage of the staff to report it or fear that it will reflect badly on their work.

In Spain, according to the magazine 'Revista 60 y más', the percentage of elder abuse in institutional settings is between 1 and 5%.

According to 2007 special Eurobarometer report 47% of Europeans are of the view that poor treatment, neglect and abuse of dependent elder people are widespread occurrences in their country.

The extent of the problem in community settings

Safety within the home and their community environment is a crucial concern for older people who often feel vulnerable and worry about their personal safety. They are often reluctant to take part in outdoor activities or to use public transport due to fear of crime or being molested.

The most common crimes reported by the older population are house break-ins, theft, bag-snatching and assault. For these reasons, the participation of older people in society is limited. Many older people are also abused by individuals or groups perpetuating financial scams and frauds via the post, internet and media or through face-to-face contacts.

Facts and figures

According to crime statistics, older people are at lower risk of violence and burglary than younger people. This might be due to underreporting or to older people's avoidance of risk situations. Evidence suggests that many older people feel insecure in public places, in particular in the evening, and prefer not to go out.

As ALMA observed, a French helpline for older and disabled people suffering from violence, 75% of violent crimes are against women over 79 years of age who are usually dependent, unable to protect themselves or react in self-defence against an abuser.

In a 2006 survey, Gabija, a Lithuanian Association, measured the scale of violence against older people which indicated physical violence 50%, economic violence 24%, psychological violence 19% and sexual violence 7%.

AGE RECOMMENDATIONS

AGE calls on the European Commission to

- Develop European quality standards for community and residential eldercare services to ensure that older people across the EU can enjoy a life of dignity in accordance with Article 25 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- Ensure that quality standards and care professionals qualifications norms are in place to protect patients rights in case of cross border service provision within the EU internal market;
- Collect data in the area of elder abuse from age and gender perspectives, taking into account that older people are a heterogeneous and disparate group, to help policy makers evaluate the extent of the problem, define needs and draw recommendations for the development of an adequate EU legal framework;
- Ensure that the collection of statistical data on elder abuse takes into account all older people including minority groups who are often overlooked in their community's policies;
- Facilitate the exchange of good practices on elder abuse prevention programmes among Member States;
- Acknowledge and economically quantify the work of informal carers at EU and national levels to help Member States understand the huge contributions they make to their national economy and community;
- Encourage Member States to design measures in favour of informal carers and to provide them with counselling, training and respite care services to enable them to reconcile work and family life with their caring duties and to reduce related stress.

AGE calls on the Member States to

- Ensure that preventive measures and adequate regulations are put into place to combat violence against older people, that quality control is ensured and sufficient funding is provided to health and social care services;
- Increase the public provision of training for all carers to improve the quality of care and to facilitate collaboration between the formal and informal care sectors;
- Develop a national action plan to promote a more rational and adequate use of human resources in the care sector;
- Develop protection mechanisms and services which can protect older people from violence and abuse and give them a voice;
- Provide support to victims and counselling to potential perpetrators;
- Raise awareness on elder abuse and how to detect it among social workers, primary care professionals and police staff;
- Allocate funds to develop programmes to prevent elder abuse.

AGE calls on civil society organisations to

- Develop campaigns to raise awareness of the issue of violence and abuse against older people;
- Create specialised support teams, helplines and sheltered housing that could provide older people suffering from abuse with legal and practical assistance;
- Provide information to vulnerable older people on the protection and support structures that are available to them.

AGE calls on local authorities to

- Put elder abuse on their agenda and adopt action programmes to combat elder abuse and provide support to victims;
- Adopt measures that promote the integration and recognition of contribution made by carers, especially migrant workers who are playing an increasingly vital role in the provision of care and protection;
- Take actions to combat abuse against older people living at home or in residential care and ensure that all older people, are treated with respect and dignity;
- Coordinate actions with local NGOs so that sustainable measures can be taken to prevent elder abuse;
- Develop training programmes for older people on how to interact with informal carers or formal care staff so as to safeguard their freedom and autonomy when they are dependent on others;
- Implement adequate information and mandatory recording systems that would allow the development of elder abuse indicators.

AGE calls on individual citizens to

- Learn how to detect and safeguard against elder abuse on a personal level;
- Tackle the increased isolation of older people through individual efforts and develop neighbourly social structures within their communities;
- Become more conscious of the problem of elder abuse in their localities and report such instances as and when they occur;
- Encourage health and social service professionals to address suspected cases of elder abuse.

Useful links

World Health Organisation report (2002) “Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse - a study from eight countries: Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Canada, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Sweden”

http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/missing_voices/en/index.html

The Toronto Declaration on Global Prevention of Elder Abuse (2002)

http://www.who.int/ageing/projects/elder_abuse/alc_toronto_declaration_en.pdf

European Economic and Social Committee Opinion on Elder Abuse (2007)

http://eescregistry.eesc.europa.eu/viewdoc.aspx?doc=\\esppub1\esp_public\ces\soc\soc279\en\ces1465-2007_ac_en.doc

Special Eurobarometer “Health and Long-term care in the European Union” (2007)

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_283_en.pdf

International Network Prevention for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

<http://www.inpea.net>

Action on Elder Abuse

<http://www.elderabuse.org.uk>

Further references

Supporting Family Carers of Older People in Europe: the Pan-European Background Report (2005), EUROFAMCARE

<http://www.uke.uni-hamburg.de/extern/eurofamcare/publikationen.php>

Zaidi, Asghar (2006), Policy Brief: Poverty of Elderly People in EU25

http://www.euro.centre.org/data/1156245035_36346.pdf

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More information on AGE

More information on AGE - the European Older People's Platform and on its objectives and lobbying activities can be found on the AGE website at: www.age-platform.org. Detailed information on elder abuse issues can be found on the "Health" section.

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