

Abuse, Neglect and Violence against Older Persons

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Preventing and responding to elder abuse, neglect and violence against older people not only entails identifying normative gaps but also addressing the enormous knowledge gaps that exist, especially in situations of humanitarian emergencies and crises.

The extent to which older persons suffer from natural and man-made disasters and their exclusion from humanitarian assistance, research and emergency preparedness, amount to neglect and structural abuse¹. HelpAge International cites the limited available data and funding showing that older people were disproportionately represented in disaster-related morbidity and mortality in Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, the tsunami in Japan in 2011, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013 or in Nepal in the 2015 earthquake².

Older persons also suffer different forms of violence and abuse in the community, within families and in institutions. Humanitarian handbooks and guidelines state that in situations of emergency, older persons are at higher risk of violence, including: sexual and domestic abuse; exploitation by family members and more^{3 4 5}, but we seldom have hard data to demonstrate the extent of the problem or to prove the correlation between the abuse suffered and the mortality and morbidity of older people in these situations. Even when we have the data, this knowledge is not necessarily translated into practice. What happens when an emergency strikes? Do these types of violence continue at the same or higher rate? How can we recognize, respond and

¹ HelpAge International, *Older voices in humanitarian crises: Calling for change*, 2016
<https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/older-people-in-emergencies/>

² HelpAge International: *End the neglect. a study of humanitarian financing for older people*, 2016
<https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/older-people-in-emergencies/>

³ UNHCR emergency handbook <https://emergency.unhcr.org/entry/251401/older-persons>

⁴ Age and Disability Consortium, *Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities*, <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/>

⁵ Older people in emergencies: considerations for action and policy development. Hutton, D. WHO, 2008
https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43817/9789241547390_eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

prevent these types of violence in situations of crises? How can we ensure that older people's rights are protected at all times?

It is necessary to review our understanding of elder abuse and violence against women and men in all contexts and understand how already fragile support systems can further weaken in order to improve the way we raise awareness of the humanitarian actors and properly address the problem.

What is elder abuse?

There is controversy around the term elder abuse. Is it violence? Is it maltreatment? How is it defined? A big debate around the definition is whether elder abuse occurs within a relationship in which there is an expectation of trust or whether it is any act by anyone directed at an older person that causes harm or distress^{6 7 8 9}.

Although there is no consensus on a definition, there is agreement that elder abuse can be intentional or unintentional, includes acts of commission or omission and can take multiple forms, including but not limited to physical, psychological, sexual abuse, financial abuse/exploitation and neglect. It can happen in any setting, public or private. There is an increasing focus on structural and societal abuse, with a clear view that elder abuse constitutes a violation of human rights and that governments have an obligation to study, prevent and respond adequately.

While abuse can happen to anyone, we can neither assume that all older persons are abused nor that they are free of all risk.

Evidence on violence against women in emergency situations also suggests that older women may be at particular risk because they experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. This includes (but is not limited to) HIV

⁶ Action on Elder Abuse UK, Action on Elder Abuse Bulletin, 1995:1, cited in <https://www.elderabuse.org.uk/Pages/Category/what-is-it>

⁷ WHO, fact sheet on elder abuse <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/elder-abuse>

⁸ Inter-American Convention on protecting the human rights of older persons

http://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/docs/inter_american_treaties_A-70_human_rights_older_persons.pdf

⁹ NYC Elder Abuse Center, <https://nyceac.org/about/definition/>

positive women, older women with disabilities, widows and women from ethnic or tribal minorities¹⁰.

Scope of the problem

According to WHO, around 1 in 6 older people experienced some form of abuse in the past year¹¹. A 2017 systematic review of elder abuse prevalence studies in the community in 28 countries found that 15.7% of people aged 60 and over had suffered some form of abuse over the previous year¹². It is believed that prevalence rates reported in existing population-based elder abuse studies likely underestimate the true population prevalence. Not only this field of research suffers from methodological and comparability challenges, but also elder abuse prevalence surveys carry substantial participation bias in that they exclude individuals with cognitive impairment, who could potentially be most vulnerable to abuse¹³. A 2019 systematic review of prevalence studies in institutions reveals much higher rates. Overall abuse estimates, based on staff reports, suggest that 64.2% of staff admitted to elder abuse in the past year¹⁴.

According to the 2014 *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention* survey in 133 countries, only 17% of countries said they had any survey data on elder abuse, the majority of which were high-income countries. Elder abuse was, according to the reports submitted by Member States, the least surveyed of the different types of violence in low-income countries. No country in South East Asia said they had conducted a survey¹⁵.

¹⁰ DFID, Chase briefing paper, 2013

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271932/VAWG-humanitarian-emergencies.pdf

¹¹ WHO, fact sheet on elder abuse <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/elder-abuse>

¹² Elder abuse prevalence in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Yon Y, Mikton CR, Gassoumis ZD, Wilber KH. *Lancet Glob Health*. 2017 Feb;5(2):e147-e156.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28104184>

¹³ Pillemer, K et al (2016), Elder Abuse: Global Situation, Risk Factors and Prevention Strategies. *The Gerontologist*, 2016 Vol 56, M0S2 S194-S205

¹⁴ The prevalence of elder abuse in institutional settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Yon Y, Ramiro-Gonzalez M, Mikton C, Huber M, Sethi D. *European Journal of Public Health* 2018.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29878101>

¹⁵ World Health Organization(2014), *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014*, page 78.

The 2006 report by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) describes instances of deliberate targeting, torturing, displacing and killing of vulnerable populations, including older persons¹⁶

The extent of elder abuse: Estimated prevalence

Type of abuse	Elder abuse in community settings (1)	Elder abuse in institutional settings (2)	
	Reported by older adults	Reported by older adults and their proxies	Reported by staff
Overall prevalence	15.7%	Not enough data	64.2% or 2 in 3 staff
Psychological abuse	11.6%	33.4%	32.5%
Physical abuse	2.6%	14.1%	9.3%
Financial abuse	6.8%	13.8%	Not enough data
Neglect	4.2%	11.6%	12.0%
Sexual abuse	0.9%	1.9%	0.7%

(1) Elder abuse prevalence in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Yon Y, Mikton CR, Gassoumis ZD, Wilber KH. Lancet Glob Health. 2017 Feb;5(2):e147-e156. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28104184>
(2) The prevalence of elder abuse in institutional settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Yon Y, Ramiro-Gonzalez M, Mikton C, Huber M, Sethi D. European Journal of Public Health 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29878101>

Gender-based violence

HelpAge USA and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) carried out a prevalence and risk factors study of gender-based violence among women and men over the age of 49 years in situations of protracted displacement in five displacement sites in Uganda, Iraqi Kurdistan, Pakistan, and Panama. An average of 77% of respondents from all sites reported that had experienced some form of violence associated with conflict or displacement, including gender-based violence, with 11% stating they experienced sexual violence during displacement. Across the five sites, an average of 32% of women and 14% of men had been exposed to at least one form of intimate partner domestic violence, either physical or verbal¹⁷.

¹⁶ PHR report on Darfur, 2006 https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/darfur-assault-on-survival.pdf

¹⁷ Age is No Protection: Prevalence of gender-based violence among men and women over 49 years of age in five situations of protracted displacement, AAAS, 2017 <https://www.aaas.org/resources/age-no-protection-prevalence-gender-based-violence-among-men-and-women-over-49-years-age>

The 2013 WHO *Global and regional estimates of violence against women* states that the reported prevalence among women 50 and older is lower than the one in younger age groups. However, it adds that given the small number of studies, the large confidence intervals and the fact that they are mostly from high-income countries, it should not be interpreted that older women experience lower levels of partner violence, but rather that less is known about patterns of violence among women aged 50 years and older, especially in low-income countries.¹⁸

Abuse of an older woman by her partner, may well constitute Intimate Partner Violence. She may have suffered it throughout her married life. But older women victims of Intimate Partner Violence mostly fall through the cracks and are generally overlooked by both the women's and older people's service systems. Intimate partner violence programmes generally serve women under 50 while geriatric medicine and adult protective services have focused primarily on the frail and most vulnerable. Researchers of violence against women often exclude older women from their target populations reinforcing the perception of older women as frail and sexless. Many of the risk factors present in abusive couple relationships are the same regardless of age. Despite the similarities across the life course, there are profound differences of approach as to the ways of interviewing older women, what kinds of interventions are appropriate and what services are available.

The Sustainable Development Goal indicators related to Violence Against Women (SDG 5.2.1 and 5.2.2) do not include an upper-age limit. Therefore Member States are required to measure violence against women beyond the age of 49, as has been the practice of the Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) and the Reproductive Health Surveys (RHS) funded by USAID and CDC. Current data on violence against older women comes from either a few studies that had extended the age range or from elder abuse studies. There are serious concerns that the current data sets do not adequately reflect the full extent and nature of violence against older women. WHO is currently embarking on the

¹⁸ World Health Organization (2013) , *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non- partner sexual violence*. Page 16

development of a new survey module to complement their existing one on women, to measure violence against older women in the community.

While in community settings in Europe or the US sexual abuse of older women has often been considered to be less than 1% prevalence, a report by Oxfam on sexual violence during conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, showed that women of any age were victims of rape as a weapon of war. Over 10% of the women that received care at the Panzi hospital between 2004-2008 were older than 65. Another 5% were between 55-66¹⁹. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Darfur also found that rape was used systematically as a weapon of war²⁰.

A truthful rights-based analysis of the gender aspects will also have to consider the instances in which older men are abused and in which women are also abusers. Whereas higher numbers of women are abused at any age, older frail men are at higher risk of abuse than younger men.

Challenging myths and stereotypes

Caution is needed when calling for increased protection, which may result in increased stigma, perpetuation of stereotypes or even a violation of the autonomy and rights of older people. A UN resource claims that: “Age influences, and can enhance or diminish, a person’s capacity to exercise his or her rights. The protection risks affect an individual differently depending on age²¹.” This assumption that age is a single determinant of capacity, contradicts the evidence, ignores the multiplicity of factors and increases the perception that all older people are frail. Often, “good intentions” harm. In fact, older persons feel or become vulnerable because they feel discriminated against. A report by HelpAge claims that 44% of those they had interviewed in Ukraine said they felt discriminated against because of their age when trying to access assistance and 43 % said they had to wait longer than younger people for

¹⁹ Oxfam: “Now, The World Is Without Me”:An Investigation Of Sexual Violence In Eastern Democratic Republic Of Congo, 2010 <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/DRC-sexual-violence-2010-04.pdf>

²⁰ PHR report on Darfur, 2006 https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/darfur-assault-on-survival.pdf

²¹ <http://www.globalprotectioncluster.org/themes/age-gender-diversity/>

assistance. In fact, more than half (55 %) said they had been turned away because of their age when seeking assistance²².

We also need to challenge the myth that “in our culture we respect our elders” While it is true that most literature on elder abuse comes from high-income countries, there is enough evidence that elder abuse is a universal phenomenon. In situations of crises, and/or when the elders are destitute of their power or wealth, families and communities can turn against them or ignore them. In some societies older widows are subject to abandonment, property grabbing, sexual violence, forced marriages and accusations of witchcraft. These acts of violence are customs embedded in social structures. Special Rapporteurs on violence against women, its causes and consequences (Rashida Manjoo and predecessor) described some of these harmful practices following official country visits (Ghana, Papua New Guinea and Zambia)²³.

The Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, recently visited Mozambique in the midst of the crisis following two powerful cyclones. Noting the high poverty rates among older persons of around 23%, Ms Kornfeld-Matte claimed that: “financial and economic abuse experienced by older persons is another area of concern. Older persons are left to endure social isolation and economic deprivation as their housing, land and property rights, social grants, pensions or livelihoods are being misused.” She was also puzzled at the scale of witchcraft accusations on older persons – particularly women - that are used to validate abuse, violence and neglect or even killings. These practices are too often acted upon people with undiagnosed dementia and other cognitive health conditions²⁴.

Risk factors

Good evidence regarding several risk and protective factors is lacking. No single factor explains why some individuals behave violently toward others or why elder abuse is more prevalent in some communities than in others.

²² HelpAge International, *Older voices in humanitarian crises: Calling for change*, 2016

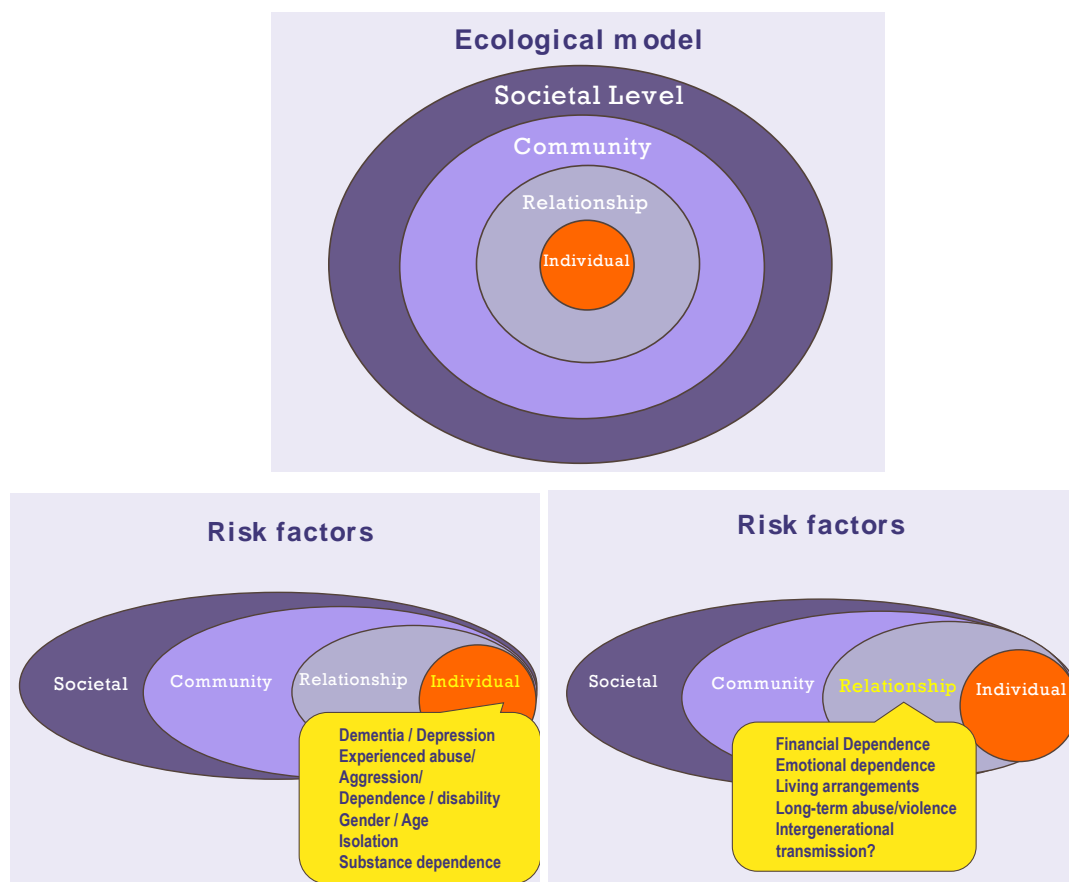
<https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/older-people-in-emergencies/>

²³ A/HRC/23/49/Add.2, in particular paras 31-40 and 64-66, A/HRC/17/26/Add.3, para. 14 and A/HRC/17/26/Add.4, para. 65. And A/HRC/11/6, page 21

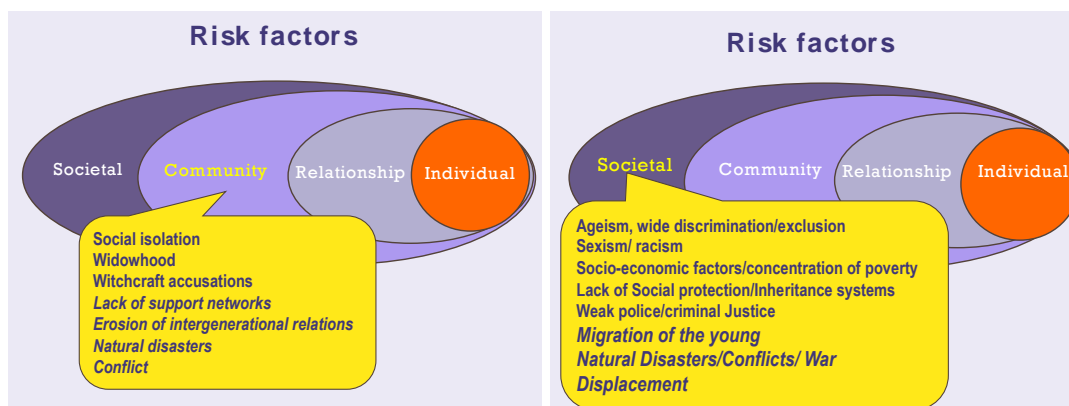
²⁴ OHCHR Press release 2 May 2019

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24548&LangID=E>

Nevertheless, there is strong evidence about the implications of some risk factors such as social isolation, living arrangements, dementia, individual characteristics of the perpetrators and dependence of the perpetrator on the victim²⁵. In order to accommodate the multiplicity and complexity of factors associated with violence, abuse and neglect, the *ecological model* is used to explore the interactions between the individual and contextual factors. It considers violence as the result of the complex interplay between the person's individual characteristics (i.e. intrinsic capacity, personal history), close interpersonal relationships, characteristics of the community in which the person resides and societal factors such as policies and social norms. The ecological model allows elder abuse to be linked to broader social issues such as emergency crises. It can also help us identify the protective measures to take at each level:



²⁵ European Report on preventing elder maltreatment , WHO Euro, 2011
http://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/144676/e95110.pdf



Implications for practice

It is clear that the field of violence, neglect and abuse of older person requires an increased and serious attention at all levels of the ecological model, in all settings and by all actors, including humanitarian and emergency services. A coordinated, interdisciplinary policy response is needed regarding data collection and analysis, prevention, detection, training and intervention.

Both quantitative and qualitative research is needed to gather data on incidence and prevalence disaggregated by gender, age cohorts and disability but also to understand the relationships, breakdown of codes and who the victims and perpetrators are. Participatory research in which older persons design the study and not only respond to is imperative. Understanding the root causes and the wider aspects of ageism and discrimination and how it influences violence and abuse needs to be part of the research. Specific attention needs to be given to cash transfers and whether older persons receive what they are entitled to.

The recently Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities developed by the Age and Disability Consortium, as part of the Age and Disability Capacity Programme (ADCAP) is a live document and needs to be put to the test extensively in order to have a proper evaluation.²⁶

Humanitarian actors need training and could be provided with simple tools to recognize signs of interpersonal violence and abuse, such as pocket tools or apps. They should also receive training in remedy and support services. Older persons

²⁶ Age and Disability Consortium, Humanitarian inclusion standards for older people and people with disabilities, <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/emergencies/>

should be part of the training and be an integral part of the humanitarian planning and action.

An international binding human rights treaty can give member States the tools to ensure that the rights of older persons are protected at all times and provide the platform for accountability.

Annex

Some international frameworks

Global Strategy and Action Plan on Ageing and Health²⁷

Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing²⁸

Sustainable Development Goals ²⁹

CEDAW General Rec. 27 on the human rights of older women³⁰ calls on Member States to pay special attention to the violence suffered by older women in times of armed conflict and displacement, including sexual violence.

Some regional frameworks

Inter-American Convention on protecting the human rights of older persons ³¹

European Charter of Rights and Responsibilities of Older People in need of Long-term care and Assistance³²

Protocol to the African Charter on Human And Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Older Persons in Africa ³³

²⁷ World Health Organization: *Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health*. In. Geneva: World Health Organization: 2017. <https://www.who.int/ageing/global-strategy/en/>

²⁸ United Nations: *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*. In. New York: United Nations 2002 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/madrid-plan-of-action-and-its-implementation.html>

²⁹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

³⁰ https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/GC/27&Lang=en

³¹ http://www.oas.org/en/sla/dil/docs/inter_american_treaties_A-70_human_rights_older_persons.pdf

³² http://www.ede-eu.org/media/EN_European_Charter_Daphne.pdf and http://www.ede-eu.org/media/EN_Accompanying_Guide.pdf

³³ https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32900-file-protocol_on_the_rights_of_older_persons_e.pdf