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## THEORETICAL BASICS OF THE ISSUE OF THE ABUSE OF THE ELDERLY

### Teoretyczne podstawy zagadnienia przemocy wobec osób starszych

#### Abstract

##### Introduction

Violence is defined as the deliberate and instrumental action that seeks to enslave the victim, deprive him/her of autonomy and sovereign thoughts and actions, to subordinate his/her needs and requirements to the perpetrator. Due to the rapid ageing of societies, violence against seniors is predicted to be a growing problem.

##### Aim

The purpose of the work is to show the theoretical issues of the phenomenon of the abuse of the elderly.

##### Review

Many works attempt to define elder abuse. A consistent definition is needed to properly monitor cases of the elderly's abuse and to investigate its spread over time. This consistency will help to determine the extent of elder abuse and allow the problem to be compared at different locations around the world. The collected data will finally inform the necessary preventive and intervention measures. The phenomenon of violence against older people is difficult to diagnose. This results from the myths and stereotypes that are widespread in the society and the feeling of embarrassment and intimidation of the victims themselves. This is a hidden but growing problem in the society. There are different forms of violence. With regard to the age group of seniors, the following are mainly distinguished: physical, mental/emotional, sexual violence, financial abuse and neglect.

##### Conclusions

Every year, a significant percentage of people experience a form of violence that causes fear, loneliness, and consequently depression or even suicide. The phenomenon of violence is a very serious problem and its effects are felt by the victim, most often, for the rest of his or her life, which is why research in this area is so important.

**Keywords:** elder abuse, theoretical basics, older adults, risk factors

#### Streszczenie

##### Wstęp

Przemoc definiowana jest jako zamierzone i instrumentalne działanie dążące do zniewolenia ofiary, pozbawienia jej autonomii i suwerennych myśli oraz działań w celu podporządkowania potrzebom i wymaganiom sprawcy. W związku z szybkim starzeniem się społeczeństw szacuje się, że przemoc wobec seniorów będzie coraz większym problemem.

## **Cel**

Celem pracy jest ukazanie teoretycznych zagadnień aspektu zjawiska przemocy wobec osób w podeszłym wieku.

## **Przegląd**

W wielu dziełach dokonuje się próby zdefiniowania przemocy wobec osób starszych. Potrzebna jest spójna definicja, aby we właściwy sposób monitorować przypadki przemocy nad osobami starszymi i badać jej rozpowszechnienie w czasie. Ta spójność pomaga określić skalę znęcania się nad osobami starszymi i umożliwia porównanie problemu w różnych lokalizacjach na całym świecie. To ostatecznie informuje o konieczności podejmowania działań prewencyjnych i interwencyjnych. Zjawisko przemocy wobec osób starszych naznaczone jest trudnościami w diagnozowaniu. Wynika to z rozpowszechnionych w społeczeństwie mitów i stereotypów oraz z poczucia zawstydzenia i zastraszenia samych ofiar. To ukryty, ale narastający problem w społeczeństwie. Wyróżnia się różne formy przemocy. W odniesieniu do grupy wiekowej seniorów wyróżniona się głównie: przemoc fizyczną, psychiczną/emocjonalną, seksualną, wykorzystanie finansowe oraz zaniedbanie.

## **Wnioski**

Co roku znaczny odsetek osób doświadcza jakiegokolwiek formy przemocy, która powoduje strach, osamotnienie, a w konsekwencji depresję i akty samobójcze. Zjawisko przemocy stanowi bardzo poważny problem, a jego skutki są odczuwane przez ofiarę najczęściej do końca życia, dlatego tak istotne jest prowadzenie badań w tym zakresie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przemoc wobec osób starszych, teoretyczne podstawy, osoby starsze, czynniki ryzyka

## **Introduction**

Elder abuse is increasingly recognized as a global public health and social problem, as countries around the world have been dealing with the problem of an aging society for many years. This process is referred to as a global phenomenon [Markiewicz and Skawina, 2015; Janiszewska, 2015; Hirsch, 2019]. The aging process of the society is articulated by the progressively increasing percentage of older people. The development of this phenomenon is also observed in Poland [Mossakowska, Więcek and Błędowski, 2012]. Due to the rapid aging of societies, it is estimated that elder abuse will be a growing problem. The consequence of the growing number of older adults in the family is a negative impact on physical and mental condition, economic pressure, mental disorders and emotional tensions, lack of responsibility and tolerance, and fatigue and social isolation of family members and their proteges. This situation, as a consequence, may lead to anti-social behaviour and increased violence. Older people are often used in many ways, which has serious and lasting consequences. Elder abuse remains one of the most hidden forms of family conflicts, and it is anticipated that their frequency will increase in many countries where population aging is rapidly increasing [Piri et al., 2018]. Every year, a significant percentage of people experience a form of violence that causes fear, loneliness, and consequently depression and suicide. The phenomenon of violence is a very serious problem and its effects are most often felt by the victim for the rest of his life. Therefore, it is important to pay more attention to the occurrence of this problem by health care professionals, scientists and social assistance workers. Promoted activities should also seek to increase public vigilance and respond appropriately [Pruszyński, 2009; Beach et al., 2010].

## **Aim of the study**

The aim of the work is to show the theoretical issues of the aspect of the phenomenon of elder abuse.

## **Review**

### *Definition of elder abuse*

Many works attempt to define violence. The attempt to determine which definition of elder abuse should be used and adopted is a complex process because there is no single definition used worldwide, in the country or in different disciplines. Despite the existing misunderstandings, according to the World Health Organization, the following should be considered elder abuse: "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 dis-

gress to an older person. This type of violence constitutes a violation of human rights and includes physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect” [www1]. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention similarly to WHO defines violence as “an intentional act, or failure to act, by a caregiver or another person in a relationship involving an expectation of trust that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older adult” [www2]. On the other hand, the definition that appears frequently in the Polish literature is the one by Pospiszyl describing violence as all non-accidental acts violating the personal freedom of the individual or contributing to the physical and psychological harm of a person, acts that go beyond the social principles of mutual relations [Pospiszyl, 1994]. According to the definition of the European Parliament, violence is a violation of human rights to life, personal security, freedom, dignity and physical and mental integrity [Stożek, 2009]. The Act of July 29, 2005 on the prevention of domestic violence formulated the concept of domestic violence: “domestic violence – is a one-off or repeated intentional act or omission violating the rights or personal rights of family members, in particular exposing them to the risk of loss of life, health, violating their dignity, physical integrity, freedom, including sexual, causing damage to their physical or mental health, as well as causing suffering and moral harm to people affected by violence” [www3].

The phenomenon of elder abuse is marked by difficulties in diagnosis. This results from the myths and stereotypes that are widespread in the society, and to the feeling of shame and intimidation of the victims themselves. This is a hidden but growing problem in the society. Research estimates that approximately 1 to 10 older adults living in family homes experience different forms of violence every year [www4]. According to the World Health Organization statistics, about 4 million older people in Europe fall victim to physical violence every year, nearly 30 million – experiencing psychological violence, and 2.500 – lose their life [www1]. A meta-analysis of research carried out from 1990 to 2011 prepared by Sooryanarayana, Choo and Hairi [2013], indicates that in developed countries, elder abuse is experienced by 13.5 to 28.8% seniors, and in developing countries by 44.6% of seniors. The most common forms are psychological and financial violence. According to the National Centre on Elder Abuse (NCEA), nearly 7.6-10% of seniors experience violence. Data provided by the State Agency for Adult Services (APS) show an increasing trend in reporting cases of elder abuse [www5]. In turn, the results of the national survey PolSenior indicate that 5.9% of people over 65 experience violence. This group is significantly more often created by women. The authors included nine types of violence in the study. The results indicate that abuses, insults, ridicule or disregard (5.4%) are the most commonly experienced forms of violence. Then, according to frequency, there are intimidation and blackmail (2.1%), removing someone from the apartment (1.1%), taking and using a person’s property without his knowledge (1%) and limiting freedom, e.g. moving, locking in a room” (0.6%), and others [Moszakowska, Więcek and Błędowski, 2012; Yon et al., 2017]. In a study of the Institute of Psychology of the Polish Academy of Sciences regarding elder abuse and disabled people conducted in 2008 on a representative group of 1.000 Poles, more than half of the respondents said that they had encountered the phenomenon of elder abuse outside their own family. In turn, 9-13% of respondents declared the occurrence of violence in their own family [Korzeniowski and Radkiewicz, 2015].

#### *Types of elder abuse*

There are different forms of violence. The most frequently mentioned are: physical, psychological/emotional, sexual violence and financial exploitation [Thomas and Hazif-Thomas, 2019]. However, in relation to the age groups of seniors, individual forms of violence were distinguished:

- Physical violence is any deliberate behaviour or act that, as a consequence, leads to bodily harm, pain, injury, hurt by pushing, beating, restraining and others.
- Psychological violence may include various activities aimed at inflicting mental pain, inflicting unpleasantness, humiliation, harassment, preventing contact with relatives, friends and others. It is one of the most common forms of violence that is often harder to prove than other forms.
- Financial exploitation is the unlawful or improper use of the material resources of a senior by a guardian, family or other person who has a trust relationship with the senior. This includes depriving an older adults of legitimate access to information, benefits or the use of personal re-

sources, means and things. Financial abuse may include coercion or total theft, with or without the victim's awareness.

- Sexual violence refers to engaging in sexual contact without the consent or with the forced consent of the victim or with a person unable to give informed consent, provoking sexual behaviour against the will and desire of an older adults.
- Negligence is the caregiver's or family's failure to provide the necessary medical care, nutrition, hydration, basic everyday activities, shelter, which in consequence causes a threat to health, life and safety. Unfortunately, neglect is very common, but is often the most difficult type of abuse that can be proven. There are also many cases of negligence that are not intentional but occur as a result of a lack of resources or knowledge on the part of the caretaker and the family [www6; www7; Halicka and Halicki, 2010; Baumann, 2006; Durda 2006; Mirczak et al., 2011].

Table 1 presents the forms of violence used, examples thereof, as well as symptoms and effects.

**Table 1. Forms of elder abuse**

Forms of elder abuse	Examples	Symptoms and effects
Physical violence	punching, beating, jerking, pinching, slapping, biting, burning, pushing, non-gently lifting, incapacitation, pulling on the hair, kicking, choking, feeding with the use of force, throwing objects at someone	bruises, discolorations, fractures, wounds, painful places, torn hair, traces of restraint, fear, depression, anxiety
Psychological violence	blaming, swearing, humiliating, intimidating, threatening with force, shouting, criticizing, isolating, infantilizing, verbal aggression, insults, limiting contact with other people	anger, hyperactivity, fear, depression, apathy, embarrassment, loss of appetite, insomnia, reduced self-esteem
Financial exploitation	appropriation of a cash benefit, valuables or property, theft, forcing changes in a will, denying an elderly person the right to own money, forcing a loan	changes in a will, difficulties in paying bills, high unjustified withdrawals from the bank, deprivation of living standards, loss of sense of security
Sexual violence	looking, exposing, sexual jokes, harassment, photographing, rape, forcing to watch pornographic content, touching, suggestive conversations	physical and mental discomfort, venereal disease, pain, bruising of the breasts and/or buttocks, remorse
Neglect	lack of care, no food delivery, no shelter, clothing, medical care, social contacts, poor hygiene	pressure ulcers, malnutrition, apathy, depression, medical problems, weight loss, thirst, hunger
Symbolic violence	forcing to wear a specific outfit, using the right language and choosing words, discrediting your own cultural property	loneliness, violation of rights, isolation

Source: [www6; www7; Halicka and Halicki, 2010; Baumann, 2006; Durda 2006; Mirczak et al., 2011]

#### *Risk factors*

Different theories revolve around individual risk factors that can increase the incidence of aggressive behaviour against older people. According to global data, the majority of victims of abuse are women. The likely targets are older people who have no family or friends nearby[www6]. Elements that determine violence against the elderly can also include: atheism, poverty, social isolation, disability, low level of social support [Brozowski and Hall, 2010; Osiecka-Chojnacka, 2012]. Helplessness of the elderly, poor physical

form and loneliness also play an important role in this aspect. It is often associated with the occurrence of mental disorders [Sygit-Kowalkowska and Kowalkowski, 2008]. Risk factors also include:

- caregiver experiencing a lot of stress in everyday life;
- inability to stop or report abuse by an older adults because of cognitive impairment or physical limitations;
- isolation that is the result of location, cultural or language barriers or health complications;
- a caregiver or an older adults is dealing with an addiction;
- a caregiver or an older adults is dependent on the other person for support, for example financially, socially or physically [www8].

WHO also listed socio-cultural risk factors for elder abuse. They include:

- age stereotypes, in which the elderly are characterized as weak and dependent individuals,
- progressive erosion of intergenerational bonds;
- inheritance systems and rights to land, property and material goods;
- migration of the young generation who leave their elderly relatives alone in society under the care of others;
- lack of money for covering the costs of care [www1].

Elder abuse can occur in various forms. These include domestic or institutional abuse. According to WHO, institutions are more likely to experience violence if:

- standards of health and social care for the elderly are at a low level;
- the employees are improperly trained, remunerated and overworked and professionally burned out;
- insufficient physical environment;
- policies usually operate in the interest of the concerned institutions rather than in the interest of the resident [www1].

### Conclusions

Research on the occurrence of the phenomenon of elder abuse is aimed at identifying those who are potential victims of violence in order to prevent this violence, and in cases where violence already occurs, help its victims. It confirms that the risk of elder abuse increases, although it is still a taboo subject. Public opinion and the public continue to be incredulous and reserved regarding information about ill-treatment or elder abuse. The available data show that only nearly half of the nursing staff can recognize the symptoms of acts of aggression in their daily work among their elderly residents. Therefore, it would be important to participate in trainings and conferences designed to recognize elder abuse [Rinker, 2009; Daly and Coffey, 2010]. One's work should also pay special attention to the possibility of the occurrence of such acts and responding to them. In order to solve the problems of elder abuse, cooperation between institutions should be sought. It is also important to create interdisciplinary teams consisting of all members of the therapeutic team including social workers.

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