



# Elder Abuse in Europe

*Synopsis of the Background and Position Paper of the  
EuROPEAN project*

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## **Background**

Over the past twenty-five years academics, policy makers and practitioners have paid increasing attention to elder abuse. However, a lot of work still needs to be done if the full scope of elder abuse is to be understood and for a comprehensive definition of elder abuse to be developed. The *European Reference Framework Online for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and Neglect* project (EuROPEAN) funded by the European Commission aims to establish, over a two year period, a reference framework of good policy measures and practices for the prevention of elder abuse. This reference framework will help shape how policy makers across Member States address and tackle the issue.

This document is a synopsis of the project's Background and Position Paper (BPP). The BPP outlines basic understandings of elder abuse which exist in 11 countries, nine of which are represented on the project's steering group. The BPP document was written to provide a basis for the Reference Framework of Good Practices which will be developed at a later stage of the project. Information presented in the BPP was provided by 77 European expert(s) (organizations) across a range of disciplines in Austria, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, The Czech Republic, The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Slovakia. Each respondent completed a questionnaire on how elder abuse is addressed in their respective countries, covering topics ranging from risk factors, recognised forms, prevalence rates and legislation relating to elder abuse.

## **Policy Progression**

Elder abuse was recognized as a serious problem in the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing* (MIPAA) (2002). In 2002, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and Neglect (INPEA) attempted to gather international data on elder abuse in eight countries. The resulting *Missing Voices* document demonstrated how elder abuse can not be viewed outside social and cultural contexts. It is in the *Missing Voices* document and the following *Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse* that the WHO and INPEA adopted the definition of elder abuse first developed by Action on Elder Abuse in 1995, namely:

*'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.'*

In December 2007, the European Commission published a special Eurobarometer report on *Health and Long Term Care in the European Union*. This report presents the views of citizens in 27 Member States on several issues concerning health and care within their countries. Findings show that although Europe-wide elder abuse is believed to happen 'fairly often'; perceptions on elder abuse differ between countries. This again underlines the fact that elder abuse must be viewed within a social and cultural context.

The 2008 *Breaking the Taboo* study, funded under the European Commission's Daphne II programme, also deals with the issue of elder abuse. It is a compilation of seven country specific reports addressing the context of elder abuse, whether it is identified within families or within institutional settings, the risk factors that are most common and the way in which it is perceived. Findings show that these vary from country to country with some cross-country similarities.

The WHO (2008) project *A Global Response to Elder Abuse and Neglect* aimed to tackle some of these issues by developing a reliable instrument applicable in different geographical and cultural contexts to increase awareness of elder abuse and neglect among Public Health Centre (PHC) professionals and to 'build the capacity of PHC workers to deal with elder abuse and neglect through evidence-based education for the development of prevention strategies.' The WHO recommended that a tool should be developed that takes into account cultural sensitivities. This need for a cultural perspective in addressing elder abuse is further recognized by the previously mentioned *Missing Voices* document published by WHO and INPEA (2002).

Another project, *EUSTaCEA* is currently running under the European Commission's Daphne III program and addresses elder abuse from a rights perspective. It is argued that the debate on elder abuse is essentially a human rights one; in older age people still have these rights both at home and in institutions.

Running in parallel to the development of these documents and projects were several European conferences on elder abuse. These were organized under different European Presidencies. For example, during the European Commission's conference on *Protecting the Dignity of Older Persons* on the 17th of March 2008 it was recognized that new challenges are arising to protect the dignity of older people as population's age. Healthy ageing was also a point of discussion during the 2008 Slovenian Presidency's Conference *Together for Mental Health and Well-Being* and the 2008 *Europe against Alzheimer's Disease* conference under the French Presidency. The Czech Presidency in 2009 organized a conference on the protection of older citizens, named *The Dignity and Hazard of the Elderly*. The topic of elder abuse was of specific interest at several workshops during this conference. The Swedish Presidency in 2009 organized the conference *Healthy and Dignified Ageing*. According to recommendations made at this conference cooperation at an EU-level and within Member States between social and health sectors should be enhanced to promote healthy and dignified ageing (Council of the European Union, 2009).

### **Definition of Elder Abuse**

Definitions of elder abuse vary between countries, cultures and disciplines. Data from the 77 experts who answered the EuROPEAN questionnaire showed various perspectives. The most complete definition of elder abuse referred to by experts was the aforementioned definition developed by Action on Elder Abuse and subsequently adopted by the WHO and INPEA:

*'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.'*

However, it was noted that this definition is not complete as it implies that an expectation of trust or a relationship should exist between the victim and offender. It then excludes forms of abuse where these two indicators do not exist, such as financial or material abuse by a stranger or a company (for instance, tricking an older person into subscribing to some kind of service that is of no use to them). The words 'elder abuse' may also be too harsh to lead to a broad acceptance. Victims, offenders and/or witnesses may not recognise the term or identify with it, especially when abuse is unintentional.

The definition of elder abuse also varies between cultures. A conclusion drawn in the Background and Position Paper is that different indicators of elder abuse (e.g. relationship between victim and offender, different forms, situational factors etc.) should be identified and a definition based on a consensus on these be developed.

### **Forms of Elder Abuse**

Cross-country differences on the forms of elder abuse that are recognised were also found. Even in the same country there were differing opinions between experts. The categories that all participants agreed on and that also correspond with the literature were: physical abuse, financial/material abuse, neglect/abandonment and psychological /emotional abuse. Sexual abuse was mentioned also by most respondents. A number of categories were mentioned where there was a question about whether they should be deemed elder abuse (e.g. self-neglect) or whether they were independent forms of elder abuse or should be seen in a broader context that encompass multiple forms of abuse e.g. discrimination and institutional abuse. For future research it is important to establish an international framework of recognized forms of elder abuse, to include those that are recognized in certain situations or countries. Also, a conclusion drawn from the findings is that more attention needs to be given to the issue of commercial abuse.

### **The Context of Elder Abuse**

It is broadly accepted that elder abuse is a complex and multi-dimensional problem and can be triggered by many different factors. These can be situational aspects or individual risk factors relating to the offender and/or the victim or based on aspects of the relationship dynamic. Findings from the BPP questionnaires show that in some countries elder abuse was viewed as a social or societal problem related to the general negative view of older people and old age. For instance, a negative view of old age, whether held by a whole country, a certain culture or within an institution, family or by an individual person, is a situational factor that paves the way for elder abuse.

Risk factors that were mentioned which relate to offenders included overburdening, cognitive impairment, substance abuse such as alcohol and drugs. Risk factors that were outlined which relate to victims included dependency on others, social isolation, and cognitive impairment (such as dementia). More in depth information on risk factors can be found in the full Background and Position Paper.

A distinction was made in the questionnaire between intentional and unintentional abuse. For instance the latter can be a result of the offender's lack of knowledge and competence or stress and frustration as a result of a caring and/or a pre-existing family relationship.

Factors were also identified which can protect older people from becoming victims of abuse. These protective factors included empowering the older person, raising awareness and understanding of rights and stimulating their social involvement. To diminish the risk of unintentional abuse those caring for older people should be prevented from becoming overburdened and should be provided with adequate knowledge and skills. Those at risk of substance abuse should be provided with relevant support and families that have a history of violence should be monitored to make sure that children formerly abused by a parent do not go on to abuse this parents. A key finding is that more attention should be paid to awareness raising of elder abuse generally.

Specific elder abuse legislation did not exist in any of the countries involved in the project. Respondents believed that specific legislation on elder abuse is needed to make the public aware of the seriousness of the problem, to protect older people and to have tools that are adapted to properly punish offenders.

### **Actors and Activities**

Findings on which actors/stakeholders are involved in the prevention of elder abuse show that most activities are undertaken by NGO's and the health care sector. A policy shift is therefore needed to shed light on forms of elder abuse that take place outside (both the formal and informal) care settings and firm measures such as legislation and attention by governments should be put in place in addition to the measures that have already been implemented.

To effectively prevent elder abuse from happening, findings show that measures should be put in place that are adaptable to the cultural, societal and social situations of the person at risk of becoming a victim or an offender. Broad measures on a metalevel, such as awareness raising and legislative measures, should also be put in place to provide a safer environment that is more sensitive to signals of elder abuse. In addition, political awareness is important and respondents agree that much of the responsibility and ability to prevent elder abuse lies with national and international government bodies.

## **Conclusions**

The research presented here shows that many consequences of elder abuse prevent older people *living a life of dignity and independence, and participating in social and cultural life*, which is one of the fundamental human rights according to Article 25 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. Therefore, elder abuse is a human rights issue. Factors like ageism and age discrimination provide a context and climate that stimulate elder abuse. They should, therefore, be addressed in policy and prevention measures, such as awareness raising campaigns to promote positive images of ageing run in conjunction with the implementation of appropriate regulations that prevents ageism and age discrimination.

Another conclusion drawn from the project to-date is that cultural aspects should be taken into consideration when addressing the issue of elder abuse, this can be within multi-cultural societies and/or between Member States within the European Union.

Findings from the data also show that none of the participating countries had full national recognition of elder abuse. Nearly all experts confirm that elder abuse is still a *great taboo and a hidden phenomenon*. It is under reported and in many countries there is no, or very limited data available on elder abuse and neglect. The present study has also shown that there are difficulties with defining elder abuse. Indeed, the term 'elder abuse' possibly creates a greater difficulty in preventing elder abuse as it represents a complex, multifaceted issue in an almost black and white fashion, not-in-the-least with older people themselves. Definitions also vary from country to country and might depend on the context or form of elder abuse. It is therefore suggested that more research is needed to define indicators of elder abuse that might serve, alongside previous research, as a basis for formulating an integrative definition.

The Background & Position Paper of the EuROPEAN project discusses many of the risks and protective factors of elder abuse and neglect. These are, in a sense, generalisations as it is only in individual cases that one can point out the specific risk or protective factors. Experts are convinced that there is no single factor which leads directly to elder abuse, or prevents elder abuse altogether. Nonetheless these factors give a great deal of insight into situations where elder abuse may occur. When professionals and volunteers, who are working with older people are familiar with these factors they are better equipped to prevent and tackle the issue.

It has already been stated that elder abuse needs more attention and research. Most information on elder abuse available in participating countries appeared to come from research and data reports on and from care settings. When looking at elder abuse from a juridical angle, hardly any protection measures seem to be in place. As long as governments think of elder abuse as a problem occurring only within care settings, then this in itself will help to keep certain forms of abuse behind closed doors. Elder abuse is a serious problem that needs to be addressed with serious measure.

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