

INCIDENCE AND PREVENTION OF ELDERLY PERSONS ABUSE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined incidence and prevention of elder abuse in Nigeria. Elderly persons today are more visible, more active and more independent than ever before. They are living longer and in better health, but as the population of elderly people grows, so also is the hidden problem of elderly person abuse, exploitation and neglect. Elderly person 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 elderly person and which could be in form of physical, psychological, sexual, financial, religious or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect. This paper discussed the various incidences of elderly persons' abuse as well as the risk factors for elderly persons' abuse. The consequences of the abuse and the preventive measures that can be adopted were discussed. Relevant recommendations such as the fact that the government should as a matter of urgency pay serious and sufficient attention to the issue of elderly persons' abuse and neglect. Conclusions were made in the body of the work.

Introduction

The issue of old age abuse like that of child abuse has not been given any prominence in research especially in Nigeria. The attitude that working with elderly people is not a real social work still persists. Professional helpers or workers who are committed to this type of work are seen by many as taking the easy option. In actual fact, working with elderly people can just be as demanding and stressful as working with children and families. One should bear it in mind that the elderly people, just as any other client group, has a variety of practical and emotional needs that must be satisfied. (Bowling, 2005).

Older people today are more visible, more active and more independent than ever before. They are living longer and in better health. But as the population of older people grows, so the hidden problem of elder abuse, exploitation, and neglect or elder mistreatment. And this is why American Psychological Association has stated that "Every person, no matter how young or how old, deserves to be safe from harm by those who live with them, care for them, or come in day to day contact with them." Every person — every man, woman, and child deserves to be treated with respect and with care. The elderly persons deserve, respect because of their age and experience (Denga & Udoh, 2005).

According to WHO (2002), the issue of elder abuse and neglect has not yet received sufficient attention and appears to be taken less seriously than child abuse and violence against women, which are problems that various governments have started to tackle in a determined manner in recent years. The United Nations International plan of Action on Ageing (2002) strongly recommended that more emphasis be put on preventing elder abuse through a multi-sectoral, community-based approach. It called for changes in attitude, policies and practices at all levels and in all sectors in order to ensure that persons everywhere are able to age with security and dignity as citizens with full rights. With the support of WHO, the first World Elder Abuse Awareness Day was organized on 15 June, 2006 by the International Network for the prevention of Elder Abuse (INPE, A 2006)).

Anyone age 60 or older might be a victim of elder abuse. Victims are men and women from all ethnic backgrounds and financial situations (rich, middle class and poor). They can be healthy or sick, with or without memory problems. The person sitting next to one in the doctor's office, on the bus, or at a religious service could be an elder abused victim. On Nigerian streets, motor parks, market places etc. one can see many elderly people begging for arms, probably as a result of elder abuse and neglect. (Abiodun, 2008).

Objectives

Objectives of this paper include the following among others:

- (i) To create awareness on the increasing menace of the abuse of the elderly persons even in Nigeria, a concept which is formerly alien to Nigeria.
- (ii) To promote an insight into the causes, consequences and possible intervention to the problem of elderly persons abuse.
- (iii) To equip individuals and professional helpers better in preventing abuse of the elderly persons
- (iv) To ensure that the frail and extremely vulnerable are not ignored and that their voice is heard before it may be too late.
- (v) To ensure that if it is not totally possible to eradicate old age abuse, there is the hope of reducing its occurrence and mitigate some of its worst effects.

Meaning of Elder Abuse and Neglect

"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". It can be of various forms: physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, financial or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect (WHO, 2002).

Elder abuse is any harm done to an older person that is violent or abusive which is often a crime that is caused by a family member, a friend, staff in group residential setting such as care homes (retirement homes, retirement lodges, seniors' group residences and supportive housing) and in long term health care facilities such as nursing homes, homes for the aged, public and chronic care hospitals, or anyone the older person relies on for basic needs (Evans, 1996; Baumhover, and Beall, (eds.), 1996).

Someone who commits elder abuse usually has control or influence over the older person. 'Victims of elder abuse often know and trust their abuser. Most victims of elder abuse depend on the people who hurt them, sometimes for food, shelter, personal care, or companionship. Harm caused by strangers may be considered a crime but it is not considered elder abuse. An older person's self-neglect is also not elder abuse. And it may be necessary to give explanation of what self neglect means. Self neglect according to Strawbridge, Wall Hagen and Cohch (2002) could be regarded as blanket term used to describe situations in which older people, in the judgment of others, are thought to be neglecting their needs and putting themselves at high risk of additional and serious deterioration. Sometimes the consequences are permanent and, at other times, can be reversed if the circumstances, attitudes, and behaviour contributing to the lack of self-care are changed and improved.

What often shocks caregivers, volunteers and service providers is that shame does not always accompany blatant and dramatic conditions in which self-neglect is apparent. Sometimes it is hard for us to comprehend that the conditions which we consider to place the older person at risk are, for them, "life as usual". These elders maintain elements of personal dignity, a fierce insistence on their independence, and do not necessarily welcome outsider intervention. When assistance is mandated or volunteered, some elders may try to escape from those offering help, directly refuse the assistance or sabotage efforts to improve their conditions (Levy; Slade; Kundel, & Kasi, 2002).

Elder abuse in Nigeria takes the form of harm done by the Nigerian government and other organizations by not paying the gratuity and pension benefits to the retirees at the appropriate time which invariably causes a lot of pains, problems and their inability to meet up with their financial obligations as at when due. As a result of this many (elders) have certain nutritional diseases and a lot of untimely deaths have been recorded for these elderly ones (McCraedie, 1996).

The inability of the government to have appropriate social welfare packages (like giving of food coupon) for the elderly or senior citizens by the Nigerian government and other non-governmental organizations which makes most of these elderly persons to go begging for alms could be regarded

as an incidence of elder abuse in any society or culture. The inability of the extended family unit to give adequate care to the elder financially, physically, psychologically, health-wise, spiritually or neglect/abandonment (of the elderly) could be regarded as elder abuse in such setting.

Types of Elder Abuse

Abuse of elders takes many different forms. Some involving intimidation or threats against the elderly, some involving neglect and others involving financial chicanery. The most common ones are briefly discussed below as identified by Evans (1996) and Thomas (1996).

Physical Abuse: It is a non-accidental use of force against an elderly person that results in physical pain, injury or impairment. Such abuse includes not only physical assaults such as hitting, or shoving, slapping, beating or forced confinement in a room, bed, or chair but also the inappropriate use of drugs (over medication) to make older people docile. People who commit physical assault or forced confinement are committing crimes that are punishable by law.

Psychological Abuse: This is also called emotional abuse. In this psychological senior abuse, people speak to or treat elderly persons in ways that cause emotional pain or distress. Such behaviour could be verbal and could be non-verbal. Verbal forms of emotional elder abuse include name calling, intimidation through yelling or scapegoat while non-verbal psychological elder abuse can take the form of ignoring the elderly person, isolating an elder from friends or activities and terrorizing or menacing the elderly person (McCraedie, 1996).

Financial Abuse/Exploitation: This is another serious form of elder abuse which involves unauthorized or improper use of an elderly person's funds, property or any resources of an older person. Financial abuse may include coercing the change of a will, bank account or property transfer, using cash or credit card of an elder person without permission or knowledge, forging signatures on cheque, engaging in identity theft, persuading an elderly person to give you money, trying to persuade an elderly person to relinquish control over his finances, trying to persuade an elderly person to sign over his house to someone. Other typical rackets that target elders include:

- (a) announcements of a 'prize' that the elderly person has won but must pay money to claim
- (b) Phony charities and investment fraud

Sexual Abuse: Sexual elder abuse is contact with an elderly person without the elder's consent such contact can involve physical sex acts and activities such as showing an elderly person pornographic material, forcing the person to watch sex acts, inappropriate touching, fondling, or kissing, rape, or forcing the elder to undress are also considered sexual elder abuse (Holt, 1993a & 1993b).

Neglect: Elder neglect could be regarded as the repeated deprivation of assistance or care needed by the older person, including proper nutrition, personal hygiene and measures to prevent the development of health problems (for instance bed sores/pressure ulcers). Other examples include withholding food, water, clothing, medication or abandonment. (Rowe & Kahn, 1997).

Healthcare Fraud and Abuse: This could be carried out by unethical doctors, nurses, hospital personnel and other professional care providers. Moody (2006) identified some of the healthcare fraud and abuse regarding elders to include:

- (i) not providing healthcare, but charging for it.
- (ii) overcharging or double-billing for medical care or services
- (iii) getting kickbacks for referrals to other providers or for prescribing certain drugs
- (iv) over medicating or under-medicating
- (v) recommending fraudulent remedies for illness or other medical conditions
- (vi) medicare fraud.

Religious (Spiritual) Abuse: This involves control, manipulation, guilt and/or deception to enforce a doctrinal position, and/or to refuse one the right to their own religious beliefs or practices. This abuse of power may occur in the self-serving use of position by a person in authority; it can be

perpetrated by a particular organization or can operate throughout a religious system. The indicators of this type of abuse include loss of trust in self and others, depression, anxiety, anger, shame, feelings of worthlessness, diminishment or emotional, social and vocational functioning (Evans, 1996).

Prevalence of Elder Abuse

Around the World, current statistics indicate that rates of elder abuse in the United States range from 2 to 10 percent. It has also been estimated that 450,000 adults aged 60 or over experienced abuse or neglect within domestic settings (National Centre on Elder Abuse, 1998). Other reported rates of abuse are between 4 and 10 percent (World Health Organization, 2006). According to Krug (2002), the international prevalence estimates of elder abuse in community settings (including neglect by caregivers, physical, psychological and financial abuse) from Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America range from 4 - 6%. A more recent study in the Republic of Korea found a corresponding figure of 6.3% as pointed out by Oh (2006). And in Israel, an estimate of 18.4% has been reported with the majority of abuse involving neglect as revealed by (Siegel-Itzkovich 2005).

As opined by Pillemer and Moore (1990), the prevalence of abuse in institutional settings is difficult to measure yet it is thought to exceed that in community settings. In the US, 10% of nursing staff in institutional setting admitted committing physical abuse of elders and 40% psychological abuse against residents in the previous year.

In Nigeria, in almost all the streets in major towns in Oyo State, hardly can a day pass by without seeing old people or the elderly begging for alms. This is the evolution of a strange culture in the society which is due to the fact that a lot of children abandon or neglect their elderly ones. In an article titled "Travails of the aged as world marks Elders' Day" which appeared on page 48 of The Nation on Sunday (September 28, 2008), Abiodun reported that the Nigerian government, the family and the society neglect the elderly ones. He further stated that Nigeria today has no special place or respect, honor and dignity for the senior citizens but rather celebrates those who have defrauded the nation or got rich through major fraud and corruption. Abiodun (2008) opined that various levels of governments assiduously strive to cheat the elders, deprive them of their legitimate rights, privileges and honor because they believe the elders are weak, feeble and unable to fight for themselves (elder abuse mistreatment and neglect).

This is more pathetic when senior citizens have no children or successful children of their own. Senior citizens as a result of the abuse and neglect are compelled to turn bitter and vent curses on Nigeria — the effects of which are experienced daily in different forms such as the various insecurities in the country.

Risk Factors for Elder Abuse

According to Bass (2006), it may be difficult to take care of a senior when he or she has many different needs, and it is difficult to be elderly when age brings with it infirmities and dependence. Both the demands of care giving and the needs of the elder can create situations in which abuse is more likely to occur. While virtually any elderly person can become a victim of elder abuse, vulnerability to abuse increases sharply with risk factors such as:

- (i) The individual's physical frailty, including chronic illness and physical and sensorial disabilities leading to dependency on care and loss of autonomy;
- (ii) The individual's compromised mental condition- cognitive disorders and disabilities (dementia), depression, lifelong mental disability, communication difficulties;
- (iii) Social factors affecting the individual isolation, displacement, childlessness, poverty; low social status, lack of community support, cultural and language barriers (in the case of elderly migrants);
- (iv) General societal conditions and trends insufficient resources by society allocated to welfare needs, policies that are insensitive or unfavorable to elderly people, disruption of inter-

generational solidarity stemming from socio-economic changes (in particular as a result of increased geographic mobility and separation of relatives),

- (v) Lack of awareness and prevalence of ageist stereotypes within the society, absence of a legal framework protecting the rights of the elderly, lack of transparent checks in institutional settings, lack of potential civil-society resources (advocacy groups, help lines, etc.) (McCraedie, 1996).

The Consequences of Elder Abuse

The issue of elder abuse has a far reaching consequence because it could lead to physical injury, financial problems, social withdrawal, malnourishment and emotional psychological problems for the person abused, the family of the person abused, the community as well as the nation as a whole.

For older people, the consequences of abuse can be especially serious because their bones are more brittle and convalescence takes them longer even a relatively minor injury can cause serious and permanent damage (Krug, 2002). Victims of elder abuse frequently feel ashamed and embarrassed about being abused. They often are protective of the offender, fearful of not being believed, afraid of retaliation by the abuser, fearful of abandonment or institutionalization, or feel resigned to a situation they perceive as hopeless. Older adult victims of abuse often experience negative psychological effects such as profound sense of disempowerment and dejection, loss of dignity and self-esteem or depression (Helpguide, 2006).

In terms of gender effects, older women tend to be more concerned about how the abuse reflects on her role as a mother or grandmother, and men tend to feel hesitant about telling anyone, if he feels it will reflect badly on him (Elder Abuse Prevention Series, 2005). Strained family relationships may worsen as a result of stress and frustration as the older person becomes more dependant. In some cases, a caregiver's dependence on an older person for accommodation or financial support may be a source of conflict.

For victims of financial abuse, extortion of assets can have significant consequences as older people often have lower incomes and less opportunity to replace money (Krug, 2002). Elder abuse can reduce life expectancy which may as a result of depression and in some cases can lead to harmful alcohol use as a coping strategy as pointed out, by (Bradshew and Spencer, 1999). Social withdrawal brought about by neglect could also originate suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour in the victim of elder abuse.

Prevention of Elder Abuse

The following preventive measures can be put in place for handling elder abuses. The first and most important step toward preventing elder abuse is to recognize that no one- of whatever age should be subjected to violent, abusive, humiliating or neglectful behaviour. In addition to promoting this social attitude, positive steps toward preventing the abuse include educating people about elder abuse, increasing the availability of respite care, promoting increased social contact and support for families with dependent older adults, and encouraging Counselling and treatment to cope with personal and family problems that contribute to abuse. Violence, abuse and neglect toward elders are signs that the people involved need help immediately. (Mather and Carstensen, 2005).

Education is the cornerstone of preventing elder abuse. Media coverage of abuse in nursing homes has made the public knowledgeable about and outraged against abusive treatment in those settings. Because most abuse occurs in the home by family members or caregivers, there is need for a concerted effort to educate the public about the special needs and problems of the elderly and about the risks factors for abuse. (Rimfat, 2006).

Respite care-means having someone else cater for the elder, even for a few hours each week is essential in reducing caregiver's stress, a major contributing factor in elder abuse. Every caregiver needs time alone, free from the worry and responsibility of looking after someone else's needs. Respite care is especially important for caregivers of people suffering from Alzheimer's or other

forms of dementia or of elders who are severely disabled. (Christensen, Kopelman, Stanhope, Lorentz and Owen, 1998; Gelder; Harrison; and Cowen, 2002).

Stuart (2004) is of the view that social contact and support can be a boon to the elderly and to the family members and caregivers as well. When other people are part of the social circle or care, tensions are less likely to reach unmanageable levels. Having other people to talk to is an important part of relieving tensions. Many times, families in similar circumstances can come together to share solutions and provide informal respite for each other. In addition, when there is a larger social circle, abuse is less likely to go unnoticed. Isolation of elders increases the probability of abuse, and it may even be a sign that abuse is occurring sometimes abusers will threaten to keep people away from the older person.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made having discussed the issue extensively.

- (i) Government should as a matter of urgency pay serious and sufficient attention to the issue of elder abuse and neglect like that of child abuse and violence against women.
- (ii) There should be changes in attitude, policies and practices at all levels and in all sectors to ensure that persons everywhere are able to age with grace, security and dignity as citizens with full rights.
- (iii) It is necessary and recommended that there should be Community Information Centres (CIC) in all local government areas where elders can have access to advice about the services available in their area. Through the centres, elders can be in touch with the right agencies and professionals that can be of help (Harper, 2006).
- (iv) There is also the need to set up Elder Abuse Committee in each of the local government areas.
- (v) Another service is friendly visiting and security checks. Friendly visiting provides social contact and support to isolated or housebound people. These programmes usually try to provide an older person with a visitor who is willing to telephone on a regular basis. Security checks to make sure a senior is safe can be arranged.
- (vi) Training of health - care staff should be intensified upon to enable them diagnose abuse and neglect with a view of proffering solutions. It is also necessary to have training programmes and support services for carers or care givers at home to provide advice on how to provide informal care.
- (vii) Non-government organizations, the media, institutions of learning, and every citizenry should be adequately informed together with the law enforcement agencies of what constitute elder abuse and why everybody deserves the right to live and age gracefully.
- (viii) It is also recommended that counselling units be established in all local government areas and be well equipped as well as having a professionally trained counsellor to man the unit. This is necessary so that such units will be organizing seminars, workshops, conferences on the various issues such as child abuse, violence against women, girl child education, human trafficking as well as the issue of elder abuse and ways to prevent such acts.
- (ix) It is necessary for the Federal Government to enact a law to establish Social Security Board that will be catering for the welfare of the elderly persons in Nigeria.
- (x) The various state governments should also be encouraged to set up social welfare scheme that should be given legal backing for the elderly persons.
- (xi) There is also an urgent need to engage youths in productive ventures so that they do not return to pinch the stipends given to the aged or elderly persons.
- (xii) There is also the need to resuscitate the National Social Insurance Trust Fund (NSITF) which is largely moribund and useful to only the salaried thieving bureaucrats

Conclusion

Considering the various type of abuse that the elderly people are facing in Nigeria today, it will be very necessary for the society and the government to pay sufficient attention to the issue of elder abuse. Every person, every man, woman and child deserves to be treated with respect and care. The elderly persons deserve respect and care because of their age and experience.

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