



Breaking the silence: Elder abuse in the Republic of Moldova

Research summary

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HelpAge International helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty, so that they can lead dignified, secure, active and healthy lives.

Introduction

Demographic projections for the Republic of Moldova indicate a staggering growth in the number and proportion of older people in the total population, which will have significant effects on the economy and society. The situation is complicated by the negative perceptions of ageing and old age ingrained in society, which make difficult not only the inclusion of older people in various aspects of social life, but are also a threat in terms of strengthening solidarity between generations and social integration.

The complexity of the phenomenon of violence and abuse requires an assessment of the condition of older people as a social group. The scope, importance and novelty of this research was therefore determined by: the lack of direct empirical studies in the field at a national level and the need to approach the phenomenon of abuse against older people as a complex social problem; the need to estimate the prevalence of cases of abuse, violence and discrimination against older people in Moldova and to explain their causes; the need to shape the protection and social care policies, the personal security of older people, and their adjustment to the challenges of the population ageing.

The full research is available in Romanian for a more in-depth analysis.

Research methodology

Research goal: to analyse the incidence and forms of discrimination, abuse and violence carried out against older people in Moldova.

The study was conducted at national level by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, and multiple sources of information/target groups. The study includes:

- **quantitative research** by using the method of social survey questionnaire on two national representative samples¹: for *people aged 60 and over* (1,096 respondents) and for *people of employment age 20-55* (500 respondents). The number of women respondents exceeds the number of men respondents, according to their share in the number of population 60+, ensuring the national representativeness of the research. *The quantitative research* was conducted between 3 and 23 July 2014. The questionnaire given to the two target groups was different, but adjusted to the study, allowing comparison of opinions, perceptions and attitudes of the respondents regarding the situation and the problems faced by older people.

“Poor old people, they hide things (violence and aggressiveness against them) because they are ashamed to report their own children and they are afraid...” (social worker expert)

“A 40-year-old son beat his mother because she did not give him money to buy something to drink. He does not have a job and he drinks; the 78-year-old old woman told him to stop doing this, but he beat her”. (police expert)

	Total	Males	Females	Urban	Rural
People aged 60 and over (number)	1,096	360	736	455	641
People aged 20-55 (number)	500	169	331	242	258

¹ Sampling and validation were based on data from the National Bureau of Statistics. The selection of households and interviewed persons was random. The margin of error represents $\pm 3\%$ with a probability of 0.95. The study included all territorial-administrative units of the country, including both rural and urban areas. Data was collected by custom interviews carried out in Romanian or Russian.

“We have older people afraid to go home... because they are beaten. They do not go home because they are afraid they will be killed. They even came to our Centre with bruises where they had been beaten”. (social worker expert)

“Sometimes your own people land you a blow in the face, especially when they drink wine”. (focus group with older people, Briceni)

- **qualitative research** by conducting individual *10 in-depth interviews* with experts - representatives of social care institutions, experts from the local public authorities, workers from the healthcare centres and daycare centres for older people etc. and *3 focus group discussions* with retired people (aged 60 and over) who live in their own household/housing (10-13 participants per focus group). *The qualitative research* was conducted between 4 and 22 December 2014 in six territorial-administrative units (Briceni, Sangerei, Hancesti, Nisporeni, Causeni, Comrat), so that statistical areas North, Centre and South were included. Considering the differences within the groups, two interviewing guides were developed to supplement the questionnaires used in the quantitative research, in order to aid continuity and to deepen the results of this complex study.

We focused on direct and indirect age discrimination, which undoubtedly is present in the social life spheres, perceptions and behaviours, as well as on the most common forms of abuse against older people that are prevalent in Moldova: *physical abuse; sexual abuse; psychological abuse; economic abuse; neglect; and abandonment* (according to research on Domestic Violence against Women in the Republic of Moldova by the National Bureau of Statistics, Chisinau, 2011).

Results/empirical data

A rapidly ageing population means that abuse and violence against older people have become a major concern. The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe estimated an increase in the incidence of abuse against older people in its 2011 European report on preventing elder maltreatment (www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/144676/e95110.pdf), since many countries have rapidly ageing populations, and meeting their needs is likely to become increasingly challenging due to limited resources.

According to the UN definition, abuse against older people 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*”. Therefore, abuse is defined in relation to a person’s physical, psychological and social wellbeing: “*Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation.*” (Missing voices: views of older persons on elder abuse, WHO/ INPEA, 2002).

Our survey established that throughout Moldovan society there is an awareness of the violence and abuse being carried out against older people. At the same time, whether an act of violence is reported is strongly determined by a victim’s cultural background. Acts of violence are reported only rarely as they are perceived as something shameful, likely to lead to stigmatization and social disapproval.

More than a quarter of the older people surveyed (28.6 per cent) had experienced acts of violence and abuse (see Figure 1). Two-thirds of the victims were women, as with every form of abuse surveyed.

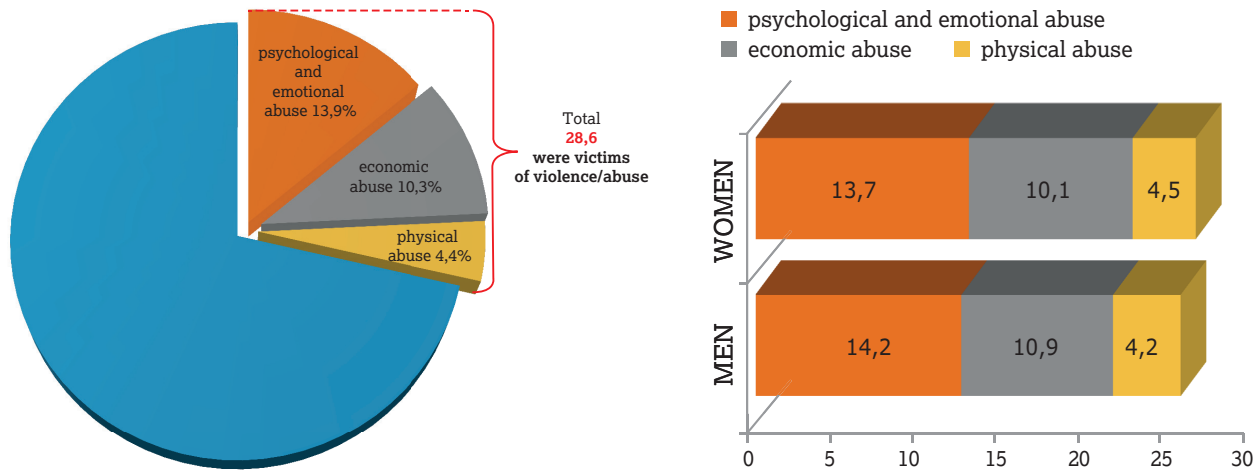


Figure 1. Incidence of violence and abuse against people aged 60 or over (%)

One of the most widespread forms of abuse against older people is *psychological and emotional abuse*. Around 14 per cent of interviewees claimed to have been subjected to humiliation, intimidation, abasement, insult, having their wishes and opinions ignored, threatened isolation and forbiddance of direct contact with friends or family. After the age of 60, about 11 per cent became victims of economic abuse, having their possessions and money stolen, their money, property or possessions spoiled, or their signatures forged, while 4.4 per cent became victims of *physical violence* such as pushing, hitting or beating. It was harder to survey cases of sexual abuse against older women, as the victims tended to hide such cases. The older people interviewed said that the social group they are part of is sometimes subject to sexual abuse, but does not report or declare themselves victims.

According to our results, domestic violence against older people is very widespread in Moldovan society. One in four of the older victims



Figure 2. Features of violence against older people in the family

“They are beaten and killed by their own children. It happens in our neighbourhood – the son beats both of his parents. He steals, drinks and does not have a job because there are no jobs. He doesn’t want to work the land”. (focus group with older people, Comrat)

“I know an old woman who keeps hiding because her own daughter beats her. She slept on a bench in the park because she was afraid to go home. Her son-in-law does not have a job. They trick her pension out of her... and they beat her”. (focus group with older people, Causeni)

interviewed (24.8 per cent) told us that the abuser was a family member. In addition, one-third of these older people were repeatedly abused, both by their partner and by a family member or relative.

Domestic violence took different forms including being left unsupervised or neglected, failure to give necessary medication and ignoring suffering and severe pain, emotional abuse and humiliation, deception, withdrawal of property and throwing out of home, physical abuse (slapping, hitting, beating), and abandonment as a result of children moving away (see Figure 2).

These emotional/psychological and physical attacks on older people were carried out both by family members, (usually linked to alcohol consumption), as well as by strangers. There was a high rate of this abuse and violence (35 per cent) carried out by strangers. Older people were often abused by individuals close to the family or individuals from their neighbourhood. Such cases were reported by 46.3 per cent of the victims and by many of the participants in discussions and interviews. More than half of the older people who had been abused (53 per cent) did not want to publicly accuse their attacker.

A significant proportion (about 17 per cent) indicated as abusers the community and/or the local/central public authorities. Respondents noted that sometimes authors of ignorance, neglect, or insult are officials of the relevant authorities, medical staff and social workers, drivers of the public transportation etc. Older people also reported that banks and their representatives had started deceiving lonely older people and taking their property, goods or source of income (even pension).

Often older people became victims of a series of acts/behaviours that affect both their emotional and physical integrity. Very few older people managed to seek help, fearing to be criticized by society (38.3 per cent) and because they did not trust the law enforcement and community authorities. In those cases, every third person interviewed went to the police; only one in five informed family members or friends and even fewer (12.8 per cent) sought the help of the local public administration.

According to the results of the given qualitative research the stigmatisation of older people, seeing them as weak and a burden on society, led to their mistreatment. The factors determining abuse and violence were: age, low standard of living, low standard of education, physical inability, poor level of information, living with dependent relatives, intolerance due to prejudices and stereotypes, and the fear and shame of being left in an asylum. There were also cases where older people owning property such as a house or flat or agricultural land, were deceived and cast out of their homes.

Older people living alone were more vulnerable to acts of mistreatment and violence (37.7 per cent), and the frequency of physical abuse was higher when compared to older people living with their partner and/or children or other relatives. At the same

time, widowed older people who had children or other relatives were abused more often, from the age of 60-65 years. Over half (56 per cent) of the victims were widowed, most of whom had children, while two-thirds were living alone. A large proportion of the victims were older people living in extended families (about 32 per cent) and were subject to abuse and violence by their family members.

The research shows that abusers were most likely to be: unemployed, financially dependent, abusing alcohol and with a low level of education. At the same time, living with the abuser has been an obstacle to reporting them. Socially decadent behaviour of some people living in communities has increased, leading to an increase in all forms of abuse and violence against older people and other vulnerable groups.

Abuse and violence against older people was determined by multiple factors and its prevention requires a range of strategies for a multidisciplinary team. Very often, this phenomenon was not limited to a single form, as violence was often accompanied by psychological abuse, and the economic abuse was accompanied by neglect of physical abuse.

Recommendations to prevent abuse and violence against older people:

- Promote a positive attitude towards older people by defining them as an active part of the population representing significant social, economic and cultural potential;
- Promote respect within families and solidarity between the generations through the media, school programmes, NGOs, churches and other social actors;
- Stimulate the participation of older people in society and promote active ageing (counselling centres, developing programmes for social integration activities, jobs for older people);
- Create local workgroups made up of older people and involve them in decision making relating to community problems, as well as developing special programmes aimed at involving older people in voluntary activities;
- Improve older people's information on their rights, increase the level of their protection and provide them with better legal assistance;
- Promote gender equality and social equity by encouraging the social inclusion of older people.

*“I knew an old woman who had four daughters and granddaughters. ... She sold her house quite suddenly and went to live at the home of one of her daughters. Her daughter let her live with her for 3-4 years, but then she needed money and **kicked her mother out. The son-in-law used to beat her brutally. She went to an asylum... but no one visits her there**”. (focus group with older people, Briceni)*

***“Banks started to set up all sorts of dark contracts and take advantage of older people by imposing high interest rates. The research identified a case like this with a poor old woman, who is now homeless”.** (focus group with older people, Nisporeni)*



Volunteers prevent violence and abuse of older people

Claudia Cârjă, volunteer and Director of the NGO Comunitate from Carabetovca Basarabeasca district, says: “We have 20 volunteers, all women and 15 of whom are older people. It is through our work with HelpAge International that we, for the first time, heard about the issue of violence and abuse of older people.

“In the beginning, the older people didn’t want to open up and talk about problems in their families. While working with them on other projects as well, we managed to help them reveal their stories little by little. One would say, ‘My grandchild is beating me up’, another would confess, ‘My son forces me to sign off the documents for the house in his name’. Now, after two years of work, I am happy to say that the life of every older person who addressed us has improved, at least for a little while.

“I remember the case of a woman of 73 years, who had low vision, and who asked us for support. It happened that her own son and son-in-law got drunk and after a petty quarrel, jumped on her with fists and kicks. During the whole of three weeks, quarrels with cursing and fights resulting in bruising were going on in that family. Not knowing what to do or who to turn to, the woman appealed for help from the volunteers and myself. I called the police from the district level of Basarabeasca. They came immediately to the house of the woman and the perpetrators were calmed down and punished by paying a fine. At the moment, the situation is peaceful there. The woman told us, the volunteers, that her son and son-in-law had started to help her with the household, heat the stove, help with the grocery shopping. Now, that the situation is settled there, we hope that the soul of an older woman is also calm.”

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