

Elder abuse in parts of Africa and the way forward

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C.J. Mba. Elder abuse in parts of Africa and the way forward. Gerontechnology 2007; 6(4):230-235. Despite their acknowledged social and economic contributions, as well as their role in traditional and cultural affairs, many older adults in Africa experience abuse and are largely excluded in socio-economic and political affairs. The processes of modernization and urbanization are beginning to erode the traditional social welfare system of Africa, the extended family. The abuse and violence against older persons and their vulnerability to financial exploitation is a key challenge faced by many African countries. Older persons, particularly women, have to care for their dying children and orphaned grandchildren. They suffer from financial hardship and social isolation thereby endangering their health. To prevent population aging from becoming an economic and social problem, adequate, timely and dynamic measures should be implemented at international, national and local levels. Because the increase in the elderly population tends to lead to an increase in pension and health costs, active measures for employment and social protection should be implemented to ensure the sustainability of public finances. The overwhelming majority of elderly persons in Africa, especially older women, has no formal education that would have secured them employment in the competitive job market, and would guarantee them social protection in old age. Consequently, subsequent education and employment of this sector of the population can play a pivotal role in furnishing social security and ameliorating elder abuse in the coming years. Provision of online education to African older adults, and employing them to index African cultural heritage will among other things empower them with skills to spread awareness about elder abuse and making them more self-sufficient.

Keywords: abuse, Africa, older adults

Both the absolute and relative numbers of the elderly population in Africa have been increasing consistently over the years¹⁻². As a result, population aging represents the most significant population shift in history as people are now living longer than ever before. While this is an accomplishment worthy of celebration, our joy is tempered by the awareness that many older adults in Africa are facing a future of neglect and abuse without a social safety net³.

Africa has long been considered a society that revered its older citizens and the tradition of reverence has been an integral part of its value system. In most traditional African societies older persons were highly respected and honored⁴⁻⁵. However,

the ideals of a society and the realities of daily life may be quite different. As a result of a changing social and economic environment, older adults are not always given the respect and reverence that tradition dictates in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, as evidenced by elder abuse, neglect and inadequate housing conditions. Despite their acknowledged social and economic contributions, as well as their role in traditional and cultural affairs, many elderly persons in Africa experience abuse and are largely excluded in socio-economic and political affairs^{4,6-9}.

One of the most important attributes of the traditional extended family is its potential for caring for the older population

as a result of the social relations and interactions among kin groups, as well as roles and responsibilities different age groups assume. In fact, because of the lack of a universal social security system in Africa, the welfare and support of older persons were generally provided within the context of the extended family network as in many parts of the developing world¹⁰⁻¹⁴. Unfortunately research findings suggest that the processes of modernization and urbanization are beginning to erode the traditional social welfare system of Africa, the extended family^{4,5, 7,15,16}. The resulting condition is likely to impact negatively on their financial support, health, image and self-esteem thereby precipitating elder abuse due to their socio-economic vulnerability.

Very little information exists on the internet via the World Wide Web regarding spreading awareness of African elder abuse in various communities. But the internet could be used as a vital training tool for educating community members on how to detect the signs of elder abuse, as well as to instruct African elders on how to protect themselves from such abuse and where to report it when it occurs. This important training tool is not yet being explored.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Empirical evidence and information technologies provided online, indicate that elder abuse is any form of maltreatment that results in harm or loss to an older person^{9,17-20}. Abuse generally includes physical, sexual, financial, and psychological factors, and also neglect.

Elder abuse includes gender-based violence of all kinds such as rape, domestic violence, 'honor' killings and trafficking (illicit exploitation) in older persons. Increasingly, gender-based violence is recognized as a major public health concern and a serious violation of basic human rights²¹⁻²³. Furthermore, psychological

violence, though difficult to detect and diagnose, includes false accusations, humiliation before others, refusal to talk to partners, isolation, husbands staying away from home, discrimination and favoritism between wives. Emotional and psychological violence is capable of causing psychiatric disorders, and even killing the elderly.

Extent of the problem

Old age is expected to be the golden period of one's life characterized by tranquility, enjoyment and satisfaction. The reality, however, is a disappointing shattered dream. Old age in many African countries is a nightmare and a tale of woes. Although there exist legislative instruments that guarantee the rights of all persons including the older population in some parts of Africa, elder abuse is rampant because most older persons are poor and voiceless. They lack basic healthcare, shelter and dignity. The rights of elderly persons are often trampled upon with impunity and they are looked upon with contempt. Older women, for instance, are often branded as witches and are blamed for every calamity that happens in their communities including the HIV/AIDS pandemic²⁴.

Although there is a paucity of data on elder abuse in much of Africa it is common knowledge that older persons suffer from emotional and verbal violence including derogatory remarks. Machera²⁵ reported that "...when I was growing up in a rural village in Kenya, there was a belief that old women, particularly the poor and ugly, were witches". This highlights the negative attitudes and psychological trauma elderly persons have to contend with in a traditional African setting.

A Committee appointed by South Africa's Department of Social Development to study the situation of older persons wrote a report (available online) and found that abuse and neglect of the elderly is common in residential homes, hospitals, with-

in families, in communities and in pension paying queues and government offices²⁶.

Due largely to lack of access to or control over resources, elderly persons are socially isolated¹²⁻¹³. Social integration is a function of money availability for food, transport, lodging and entertainment. Sometimes, family conflict and violence are triggered by disagreements over financial matters and control over resources such as land. The elderly family members are usually caught-up in such feuds especially over succession issues.

In Thika, a district neighboring Nairobi in Kenya a man aged 25 years was reported to have raped his grandmother aged 105 years²⁵. In Ghana, more than 2,500 women, including the elderly, suffered various forms of abuse between January and September 2004 alone²⁷. Of this number, 837 were sexually assaulted, 130 were abducted, and 1,358 were battered.

In a cross-sectional community survey designed to investigate the prevalence of disability and the utilization of health services among elderly Zimbabweans, Allain and colleagues²⁸ found that the older population had inadequate access to health services and used medication infrequently. Additionally they found that the elderly persons' health and functional abilities deteriorated with age, while they had declining resources with age and received little help from the social welfare department.

Using the empirical evidence from the Accra Women's Survey, 2004, Mba⁶ characterized the general health condition of older women in Accra, Ghana's capital city. He found that the overwhelming majority of older women lack basic education, are not in any form of paid employment, and only 3% of the women rate their general health condition as excellent, while 35 % believe their health condition has worsened in the last 12 months. Unfortunately,

even though they are now experiencing a double burden of disease (as they are afflicted with the common tropical diseases such as malaria, while simultaneously experiencing chronic illnesses such as hypertension and diabetes), the elderly persons' concerns have remained marginal to the major social and economic debates in Ghana. These and other related studies paint a dismal picture of the ramifications of abuse that the elderly in Africa are subjected to.

Risk factors

The abuse and violence against older persons and their vulnerability to financial exploitation is a key challenge faced by many African countries. For example, HIV/AIDS has social and economic consequences for many older persons, especially those living in poor rural communities²⁹⁻³¹. Older women in particular have to care for their dying children and orphaned grandchildren. They suffer from financial hardship and social isolation thereby endangering their health.

The movement of people - migration and displacements - have contributed to the disintegration of the family^{4,8,16}. As a result, too many older persons are left alone or are forced to care for children who are abandoned or separated from parents and home. These elderly persons then struggle to fend for themselves and the dependents with their limited resources although it is clear that their financial vulnerability is a function of advancing age and the concomitant frailty.

Keikelame and Ferreira³² reported that the causes of elder abuse are poverty, lack of respect shown by adult children, alcohol abuse, the presence of beer halls and taverns in townships, drug abuse, unemployment, beliefs in witchcraft, and the marginalization of the aged by the government. They found that the most reported elder abuse cases occurred in the context of social disorganization, specifically do-

mestic violence exacerbated by crime, alcohol and drugs.

PREVENTION

To prevent population aging from becoming an economic and social problem, adequate, timely and dynamic measures should be implemented at international, national and local levels. Because the increase in the older population tends to lead to an increase in pension and health costs, active measures for employment and social protection should be implemented to ensure the sustainability of public finances.

The overwhelming majority of elderly persons in Africa, especially older women, had no formal education^{5,6,8,15,16}, which would have secured them employment in the competitive job market, and which would have guaranteed them social protection in old age. Consequently, education of the elderly will certainly play a pivotal role in furnishing social security and ameliorating elder abuse in the coming years.

African countries are members of the United Nations and have an obligation to honor the international laws, instruments, charters, conventions and conference resolutions on human rights of their citizens, especially the elderly and other vulnerable groups. Gender equality, equity and development are central to all the international laws and conventions. Consequently, gender-specific abuses, such as violence against elderly women and girls in all its forms including harmful cultural practices, must be addressed to enable them to lead a meaningful life in old age.

Employment

Governments and non-governmental organizations should explore the possibilities of employing older adults (especially the young elderly, 60-69 year olds, since many of them still are physically and mentally strong to work) in productive ventures and encouraging their participa-

tion in social and recreational activities. In this respect, African governments should provide online education to these elderly persons to empower them with skills to, *inter alia*, spread awareness about elder abuse and help them earn a living and lessen their economic burden on society and make them more self-sufficient. This will go a long way in improving the socio-economic conditions of the elderly.

This option holds an important promise since search engines such as *Google* routinely pay persons a small fee to index materials that machines cannot perform online. As African elderly people become more computer literate it will be necessary for these persons with long cultural memories to index the images and textual materials unique to their continent. African elders with their extensive knowledge of cultural heritage could perform the traditional function of being the repository of cultural knowledge, as they have in the past, and receive payment for their services through the knowledge industry serving Africa. It also will help enrich the rest of the world by preserving a vanishing cultural treasure present in the African elders.

Awareness

Importantly, use of the web will bring policymakers and legislators within the continent into close contact with data collected by researchers in elder abuse who are using the internet to spread their information to those capable of addressing the problem. Furthermore, gathering statistics about elder abuse at community levels, using low-bandwidth networks and field stations as data gathering instruments and sharing data via World Wide Web will improve the quality of information brought to bear on the problem of elder abuse in Africa.

Admittedly, laws have been passed to criminalize certain customary practices that are injurious to elderly and other vulnerable groups, especially women and girls. It

should, however, be noted that legislation per se is not a panacea to the incidence of harmful cultural practices perpetrated against the elderly in Africa. What is needed is a concerted action by all, especially traditional authorities and religious groups to advocate against these practices.

Older persons, through their wealth of knowledge and in their position as custodians of values, can make an invaluable

contribution to society. Older persons are the custodians of our traditions, our heritage and our cultures. They reflect our past and are the mirrors of our future. They have the right to a healthy, productive life, to live in a caring environment and to be treated with respect. Consequently, all forms of elder abuse must be nipped in the bud.

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