

Perceptions amongst university students about elder abuse in Namibia

Thomas Klie & Janetta Ananias²

Abstract

The most vulnerable period in the lifecycle of a human being is in childhood and again reaching advanced age in later life. Social work students need to have knowledge and competencies to respond effectively to vulnerabilities such as elder abuse. The aim of the study was to examine social work student's level of awareness and knowledge on elder abuse, in order to highlight content areas to be addressed in curricula by social work educators. In a qualitative method study, the convenient sample method was used to select 150 social work students in the first, second and third year of study. Each student was able to present two case examples on elder abuse in their communities. The findings indicated that economic and financial abuse of older people takes place on a regular basis, participants further shared that older adults experience neglect, abandonments and emotional abuse. To a lesser extent older people suffer from physical abuse. From the viewpoint of young people it has been confirmed that elder abuse is a common concern in Namibia and that it has a serious impact on the lives of the elderly. The study underlines the importance of public awareness. Documentation and help systems need to be developed to effectively address the problem of elder abuse. A component of aging, and in particular, elder abuse need to be incorporated in the social work curricula to better prepare graduates.

² Prof Thomas Klie, University of Freiburg, Germany & Dr Janetta Ananias, University of Namibia

Keywords: elder abuse, neglect, violence, university student, Namibia

INTRODUCTION

The aging population is one of the fastest growing populations worldwide. In 2015, one out of eight persons worldwide was aged 60 years or over, and the rate is expected to increase one out of six persons by 2050 (United Nations, 2019). As the population of older people is increasing at an even faster speed in sub-Saharan Africa, elder abuse is becoming common and an important public health issue (Bigala & Ayiga, 2014). Violence, in general, is rife in the Namibian society. Some research on gender based violence has been conducted in Namibia (Izumi, 2007; Barnett, Miller-Perrin, & Perrin, 2011), however, violence on the elderly population received less attention and recognition (Women's Action for Development, 2008).

Elder abuse was first recognized in the 1970s and was referred to as "granny battering" (Bloemen, Rosen, Lindberg, & Krugman (2020), eventually studies on elder abuse were conducted around the globe (Schuster & Krahé, 2016). Both older women and men may be equally vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Sadly, the problem of elder abuse is an invisible, hidden problem which is underreported worldwide (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988). Research points out that elder abuse is a common, fatal, and costly yet understudied condition (Dong, 2015). The abuse and neglect of the elderly can be regarded as a serious violation of the human rights of older people, as the United Nations Principles for Older People (Schiamberg, Barboza, Oemke, Zhang, Griffore, Weatherill, Von Heydrich & Post, 2011) affirms the basic rights of older people to be treated with dignity, including freedom from exploitation and abuse. It is

therefore crucial to engage in discussions on the rights of older people to ensure that they live dignified lives in their old age, free from abuse and neglect.

Although some research on elder abuse has been done in developed countries, not much research has been conducted on elder abuse within the African or Namibian context. In particular, not much research has been done on the views of young people. The purpose of this paper is to report on the research findings which explored the perceptions of university students on the nature, extent and consequences of elder abuse in Namibia. In addition, we will discuss the national and international efforts to combat elder abuse. The paper will make a contribution towards national debates on the rights of older people in general and the protection of the elderly from abuse and neglect in particular. A better understanding of elder abuse could lead to the development of efficient policies and programmes that fit the Namibian context. Therefore, it is critical that social work educators consider incorporating curricula on elder abuse and neglect in social work curricula.

DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF 'ELDER ABUSE'

There is no universal definition of elder abuse, the perceptions about what elder abuse differs from one society to another (Ferreira, 2004; Schiamberg et al., 2011). In other words, what may be regarded as elder abuse in one community may not be perceived as abuse in another community. The lack of consensus on what elder abuse is further contributes to the lack of recognition of the problem. A global definition on elder abuse, initially developed by the Action on Elder Abuse in the United Kingdom, adopted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

(INPEA) states that “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” (World Health Organization WHO, 2020). From a Southern African perspective, elder abuse refers to physical abuse, verbal/emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and loss of respect for older people, but also includes accusation of witchcraft and systematic abuse (Donatelli, 2010; Ferreira & Lindgren, 2008). From a Namibian perspective, the Bill on the Rights, Care and Protection of older people (2002) criminalizes elder abuse as punishable by law. This draft piece of legislation defines elder abuse as the maltreatment of an older person or the infliction of any physical, mental or financial power on an older person which adversely affects that person. The understanding of abuse includes the following actions and omissions: assault, intimidation, or humiliation, unlawful and intentional use of mechanical restraints on an elderly person, confinement or isolation of an elderly person, denying an older person access to visitors, administration of incorrect medicine to an elderly person, failure to administer to an older person medicine prescribed by a medical doctor, withholding of or failure to provide care and basic necessities required for the physical and mental wellbeing of the elderly person, theft or misuse of the money or property of the older person, sexual conduct towards an older person without his or her knowledge or consent, and forcing an older person to accommodate or take care of any person against his or her wishes.

National legislation on elder abuse

The Namibian Constitution as supreme law protects all people irrespective of age. Article 8 of the Constitution states that all people must be treated with human dignity. Any form of abuse or maltreatment of an older person is thus a violation of his or her constitutional right. According to the Namibian Constitution, statutes that were enacted before independence are also part of Namibian law. This implies that the Aged Person's Act 81 of 1967 which provides for the protection and welfare of aged and debilitated persons is still part of Namibian law. Another amended legislation on older persons, namely the Aged Persons Amendment Act 14 of 1971, provides for the registration and management of old age homes. Both these two existing legislations are outdated and do not make proper provisions to protect the elderly from abuse and neglect.

The Bill on the Rights, Care and Protection of Older People in Namibia of 2002 will replace the two statutes once enacted by the Parliament. The proposed bill has been developed after consultation with international documents such as the Madrid Plan of Action on Aging (2002) and the African Union Policy Framework on Aging (2003). The Bill on the Rights, Care and Protection of Older People strives to ensure that older people are treated fairly and with respect regardless of gender, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed, social or economic status, and that older people will remain independent and live with dignity in the community for as long as possible. Specific provisions on the protection and care of older people are stated in part three of the draft bill. Clause 12 in the bill provides for the mandatory reporting of elder abuse by health professionals such as dentists, medical practitioners, nurses and social workers. In addition, the bill makes provision for the investigations of complaints on elder abuse by social workers

as well as court enquiries about elder abuse and neglect to be carried out. Clause 17 of the further states that an older person who is unable to financially, physically, or mentally support himself or herself or any other person on behalf of the older person may apply to the magistrate court that an adult child of the older person should provide protection and care to the older person. The remaining part of the Bill on the Rights, Care and Protection of Older People provides for regulations on homes and shelters for the temporary accommodation of older people, care and support for abused, victimized, displaced, abandoned or homeless older people and for community based care and support services for the provision of facilities and services of care and support to older people in order to promote and maintain the independence of older people in the communities where they stay. Except for draft bill, national policies on ageing can further guide programmes in aging. Provisions on elder abuse are supposed to be integrated into the draft national policy for older people. No national policy on older people exists in Namibia.

Some national legislation that does offer some form of remedy on elder abuse is further explained. The Combating of Domestic Violence Act 24 of 2003 makes reference to physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse, intimidation and harassment that occurs in a domestic relationship. Some types of abuse within a domestic relationship may also occur among older populations. The Combating of Rape Act 8 of 2000 explains the sexual act that takes place under coercive circumstances. A sexual act committed against an older person because of the person's vulnerability due to age is also regarded by the Rape Act as coercive circumstances. The Maintenance Act 9 of 2003 states that parents and children have a reciprocal duty to support one another. Once an elderly parent becomes unable to maintain him or herself and is in need of maintenance, the

adult child who is able to pay maintenance have a legal obligation to support the elderly parent. This provision is almost similar to what is stated in the Bill for the Rights, Care and Protection of Older People.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological theory is the most relevant theoretical framework for studies in elder abuse as it brings to light the complexity of elder abuse as a phenomenon. The theory takes into account four levels of environment: individual, relationship, community and society and therefore avoids one-dimensional explanations while also offering approaches for prevention and intervention to address all levels of environment attributing to the abuse of elderly people (Schiemberg et al., 2011). In the context of this study, the interactions between the older person as an individual and his or her family or caregiving relationships in the broader community or societal context will be of interest (Penhale, 2010; Schiemberg *et al.*, 2011).

Methodology

The research project was undertaken to explore the perceptions of elder abuse held by university students. A qualitative approach was adopted to gain an understanding on the views of students on the phenomena of violence against older people as a broader social issue. The study population consisted of registered social work students from the University of Namibia in their first, second and third year. The convenience sampling method was used to draw 150 students from the social work programme who attended a lecture on a particular day. The majority of the participants were female students (89%) while

only 11% were male. The research participants represented all 14 regions in Namibia, from both urban and rural communities, the average age participant as 25 years old. This study provides a perspective on elder abuse from a national as well as an international context, as research participants also included international students from countries such as Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Malawi, Nigeria and Kenya. Self-administered questionnaires consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions were handed out to every student after the purpose of the study was explained. Students could voluntarily participate in the study and anonymity was granted. Each participant was asked to provide two case examples on elder abuse witnessed or observed in their communities. The fact that each participant has been aware of at least one case of elder abuse shows that elder abuse is a pretty common phenomenon. Anonymous written statements from the students were captured in the two examples of elder abuse. The qualitative data were transcribed verbatim, analyzed manually and coded into key themes. This paper mainly reports on the qualitative data of the study.

Findings

The themes that were derived from the study was based on the questions students had to describe in relation to the case examples on elder abuse. The themes therefore are the various forms of elder abuse, the consequences of elder abuse and the prevention measures to elder abuse.

Economic and financial abuse

All Namibians older than 60 years receive a pension grant from the State. Participants reported that the pension money of pensioners is either stolen or taken by force or used without the consent of the older person. Family members, caretakers or nonrelated people in the community were reported to be the perpetrators. Especially on pay-days, pensioners may become victims of robbery, either by strangers or even trusted people accompanying the elder to the Cash Pay Points.

“use of their pension fund by other family members without their (the older peoples) consent”

“Some family members would force the elderly to give them the pension money.”

“Youth are waiting for the elderly to rob them at the Cash PayPoint”

The pension grant from the Government may not be the only source of income elders receive, adult children or other family members may also provide material support to the older person. Participants reported that while grownup children may offer financial assistance to their elderly parents, unemployed siblings or other family members of older adults may misuse the money. On the other hand, some children never pay maintenance to their needy elderly parents even though they are in a position to do so.

“.... Money send by children is grabbed by another unemployed male child who spends it on alcohol.”

“Children stopped financially supporting the elderly. No communication because some feel they are a burden and expensive to take care of.”

Some older persons may have acquired property during their productive years but find themselves in situations in which the property is used by family members without consent or even sold, as stated in the quotations below:

“The oldest son of a certain widow forged his mother’s signature and sold the family house.”

“Grandchildren had unauthorized access to the monies of the grandparents. All the money was withdrawn from the ATM.”

“Where elders cannot read and write, they are forced to sign false documents that can even lead to the grabbing of their funds and valuable properties.”

People in rural areas rely on their land and livestock to make a living. Some older adults were reportedly losing their land and livestock as a result of financial exploitation.

“Selling an elderly person’s livestock for their personal gains, taking advantage of their mental condition.”

“One case was trialled in front of court against a son-in-law who farmed on his mother-in-law’s land without authorization and then didn’t lend any proceeds from the land to the old lady after harvest.”

Grandparents are fulfilling a valuable caregiving role towards their grandchildren in some Namibian communities. Participants

reported that grandchildren are sometimes left in the care of the grandparents while the biological parents make no financial contributions for the caretaking. The grandparents will have no choice but to use their small pension to provide for their grandchildren's needs.

"Family members leave their grandchildren with grandparents offering them no support."

"Elders are forced to buy food and feed the entire household from their pension."

Neglect and abandonment

Research participants stated that older persons do not receive proper nutritional care from caregivers and other relatives, and as a result older people suffer from malnutrition. Some older persons do not receive any meals from caregivers, might be too weak to prepare their own meals, and have nobody who could assist them.

"The child of the elder does not provide food, love and care the elders deserve."

"....she told us she didn't eat at home for days because no one was giving her food."

"Elderly cannot do housework and cook, so they are left hungry by the younger person."

It is not only poor nutritional care but also poor personal care and unhygienic circumstances that the elders are exposed to. Participants reported that caregivers and other responsible people fail to clean the houses of the elderly, or to assist

bathing the elderly. Awareness about poor hygienic conditions of the elderly has led to responses amongst the youth to clean the houses of the elderly, as illustrated by the quotes below.

“Young people clean the rooms of the elderly or wash their clothes.”

“Very dirty, no one to clean him or her, nothing to eat.”

The mere reality of old age causes some older adults to be vulnerable. Older adults who suffer from physical and mental disabilities are reported to be even more vulnerable to neglect, as illustrated by the quotes below.

“A caretaker refused to take care of a mentally unstable elderly woman.”

“... being sick and blind and left alone at home from eight to five.”

“An old man is blind and his family does not care a lot about him. He struggles to get someone to help him to get his pension. Sometimes he is not given food but his money is used up for their own things.”

The participants highlighted that older adults who are living in rural communities experience much more isolation as compared to older persons in urban areas. The migration of young people from rural areas to urban areas, without regular visits to their parent's homes, contributes to the feelings of loneliness and isolation amongst the elderly.

“When children go to live in towns, and have better lives, they forget about their elderly parents in the rural areas.”

“An elderly woman, 87 years, in my village, living alone because the daughter refuses to go live in the village and take care of her mother, yet, she is not doing anything in town.”

“Educated married son neglects mother in village, never goes home to visit.”

Another form of neglect that was reported by the participants is the restraining of the older person. This form of abuse is a violation of the older person’s right to move freely around.

“Elderly is locked in room outside the main house. They never fed her and only give her water. She is hidden from her own grandchild.”

“The elderly is locked in the house all day long.”

There are very few old age homes in Namibia. The perception of participants about old age homes was rather negative since the neglect of frail and weak older adult who have difficulties to use the toilet and bathroom facilities has been reported to occur at these institutions.

“Caregivers in an old age home leave the elderly unattended. An elderly man has messed himself and none of the caregivers wanted to change him.”

“Care assistants in old age homes often neglect elders with their day-to-day care needs. Especially the ones that are incontinent and often with their personal care.”

“verbally abusing and harassing old man because he messed in his pants”

The physical processes of aging may cause older people to develop chronic medical conditions or even serious disabilities that require regular medical attention. Some older persons may need assistance to visit health facilities. The participants have reported that older persons are not always taken to the hospitals by family members or caregivers for their follow-up chronic medication or other ailments.

“No one take him to the hospital for treatment.”

“A man was partially blind and his family mistreated him and deprived him to take medication or assist him to receive treatment.”

“Elder woman is sick for several months and her daughter-in-law refused to take her to the hospital but instead used herbs.”

Emotional abuse

Participants indicated that emotional abuse is another form of elder abuse that occurs in communities. People are communicating with older persons in a disrespectful way. Examples of poor communication reported were shouting, yelling, using abusive words and insults towards the older person. Ageism, which is a form of discrimination or stereotype also leads to the emotional abuse of older persons. One participant reported that the older person is teased and laughed at due to negative images on aging. The quotes below illustrate the extent of emotional abuse.

“My friend and cousin laugh at grandfather, ... that he is old and forgetful. They tease him and he will cry for a long time and he would wish to die.”

“One 16 year old boy liked to shout to his grandmother like he is talking to his friend, saying bad words to her, especially abusive language.”

“The daughter-in-law tells her mother-in-law to wake her dead husband to support her and to leave her husband (of the daughter-in-law) alone...”

“Older mother of five children was verbally abused in public by her younger daughter that insulted her and told her she is a witch.”

Participants shed light on some cultural beliefs and traditional practices that link older people with the practice of witchcraft. Once again ageism may be the core for such beliefs. Some participants have reported that older persons are being blamed for unexplained misfortunes that may happen in communities and are also accused of practicing witchcraft as an explanation for such misfortunes. The accusations of witchcraft lead to physical attacks and mobbing towards an older person.

“Elderly person is accused of witchcraft and are beaten to death.”

“The elderly is accused of witchcraft if someone dies, based on advice of witchdoctor- it results in verbal and physical abuse.”

“...neighbours say: Why can't he die when other young ones are dying? He must be the one killing them”

Physical abuse

Participants reported on the various forms of physical abuse experienced by the elderly. Older persons were being beaten up with a belt, stabbed with a knife, slapped and pinched. Participants indicated that perpetrators are often male family

members such as the own son, a son-in-law, a grandson or even a non-related young person. Both male and female older people were reported to be the victims of abuse.

“Her sons would beat her with a belt”

“An old man was stabbed with a knife in the struggle to rob him of his money”.

“The grandson used an axe and started cutting the old lady.”

“At old age homes health professionals abuse elderly, slapping them or pinching them but make sure that they don’t leave visible injuries of what they have done.”

Some of the case examples of physical abuse was reported to be so severe that older people sustained serious injuries or it even led to the premature death of an older person. In some instances, the financial needs of the perpetrator were the driver of elder abuse, as illustrated in the quotes below.

“When one of the old grandfathers was murdered because the man thought that the old man has money in the house since he assumes that he was given money by his sons.”

“Grandson killed his grandmother with a knife over her pension money.”

“Elderly person hacked to death with an axe by son because she refused to give him money.”

Sexual abuse

A number of disturbing incidents of sexual abuse of older women were reported by the participants in their case

examples. The perpetrators of sexual abuse are male family members, village members, employers and also strangers.

“A 72 year old woman was raped by one of the village members who was 32 years old.”

“Grandson of about 30 years of age sexually abused his grandmother.”

“Elderly woman was raped and killed by her worker.”

“An elderly woman was physically abused and raped by a gang of males in the informal settlements.”

Participants indicated that cultural beliefs and traditional practices contribute in some instances to the sexual abuse of older adults.

“A man tried to rape his grandmother for money rituals.”

“One is misled by a witchdoctor that he will get rich if he or she has sex with an older person.”

Intimate partner violence

Domestic violence amongst the older generations is often not recognized as a problem. However, some participants revealed that both male and female older adults are victims and perpetrators of partner violence. While older male partners display physical abuse and financial abuse, older female tend to neglect their partners but may also become physically abusive towards their partners.

“My mom’s older sister used to be physically abused by the husband each and every day. He used to hit her head on the dressing mirror and in the corners of the bed. He went as far as beating up his children.”

“Sometimes the elder woman and her child abusing the man, for example won’t give him food.”

“An elder man is abused by his wife, she beat him up, she does not give him a bath and she takes his money.”

“Only female pensioner use to spent on household necessities. The men (husband) normally keep his money so that his family member from his side, e.g. sister’s child can inherit that money upon his death.”

Older women in polygamous marriages may risk stability and security. Participants reported that older women may find themselves abandoned and destitute, as illustrated by the quote below.

“A woman and her children were kicked out from the family home by her husband and other wives.”

Consequences of elder abuse

Older persons are living in poverty because of economic and financial exploitation. Their income may not be sufficient to make a decent living and provide for basic needs such as food, shelter and medication. Participants reported that as a consequence of financial abuse older adults may have no choice but to sell their livestock or borrow money from others to survive. Some older adults are losing their property such as homes and land because of the inability to pay the bonds and municipality bills. As a result, older persons living under such circumstances become homeless and destitute.

“left with no means of income for their basic needs”

“She had to sell her chickens and goat meat to make money to live on as she waits for the next pension money.”

“The elder had to borrow money from other people to survive.”

“His property was taken.”

The neglect and abandonment of older adults is reported to lead to elderly beggars and visibly dirty older people in urban areas. When circumstances in urban areas become unbearable, older people were reported to migrate from urban areas to rural areas. Although perceptions on old age homes was negative, the placement of older persons into an old age home was regarded as a safety net in the cases of neglectful situations of older persons.

“had to go on the streets to ask for food from neighbours”

“The woman became homeless and she had to go to the village.”

“She was moved into an old age home.”

“uncleanliness, wandering around, drinking, smoking, begging for money to buy cigarettes”

There is quite a range of psychological consequences of elder abuse. Participants have reported that some older persons feel not loved but rejected and abandoned because of the abuse they experience. Some older persons have less social contacts and live in isolation and loneliness. The isolation and withdrawal happens on the one hand when older people are losing interest to socialize with others or if loved ones do not maintain social contact with the older person.

“does not want to associate with other people anymore”

“withdrawn from family contact”

“She has nobody to talk to.”

Participants further pointed out that older persons are suffering from depression. These feelings of depression were reportedly combined with thoughts about death.

“feelings of despair”

“They wished they were dead.”

Elder abuse severely affected the physical wellbeing of the victim. Participants have reported that victims may sustain bruises and wounds. Serious bodily injuries on the eyes, arms and legs were also reported, which also resulted in hospitalization. Older persons already suffer from chronic conditions but elder abuse may further worsen these chronic conditions. Some participants mentioned that elder abuse has eventually resulted in the premature death of the older person. Deaths may occur because of starvation, or for other reasons. The physical abuse has also resulted in the killing of the older person.

“death due to hunger”

“died due to injuries of the abuse”

“she was killed”

Law enforcement interventions were reported as a positive action to address the problem of elder abuse in communities. A few participants mentioned that the cases of elder abuse were

reported to the police and the perpetrators were arrested and punished. Another consequence of elder abuse which is very common in cases of domestic violence is the removal of the perpetrator from the older person's residence. In rural communities, where customary law is practiced, elder abuse is often reported to the headman who will preside over such matters. One participant reported that some community took the law in their own hands and stoned the perpetrator according to customary practices.

“arrest and imprisonment”

“perpetrator was removed from the elder person's residence”

“perpetrator was stoned to death”

Despite the progressive laws on domestic violence, sexual assault and maintenance that protects the Namibian nation participants reported that there were no legal actions taken elder abuse in terms of civil law. Some participants indicated that since the abuse of the older person was not reported anywhere, nothing happened after the abuse. One participant does not regard elder abuse as a serious matter; this is most likely the attitude of many people in the community. In other instances, people just do not care about elder abuse. The older person may further not report any abuse because the perpetrator is a close family member. Feelings of affection or feelings of fear towards the perpetrator may also result in not taking actions to report the abuse. Some people may not have reported any abuse because they were not aware that any abuse took place. The quotes below support the findings.

“it's not that serious”

“No one seems to care about it.”

“Nobody did anything because they did not know.”

“Mothers always protect their children.”

“The old lady is so scared of her son.”

“because it were her own children that abused their mother”

Prevention of elder abuse

Based on the cases of elder abuse and the consequences of elder abuse it is necessary to develop effective preventive strategies to stop elder abuse. Most participants indicated that the older people themselves can play a role in preventing elder abuse and had the following suggestions how older people could play a role in the prevention of elder abuse; Know about the rights of older people and about elder abuse, Older people must learn how to read and write, Report the abuse, Older people should not keep their money in the house, Older people should be accompanied by a trusted person to the cash pension PayPoints, Older people must walk in groups from the cash pension PayPoints, Older people must be placed in old age homes, Older people must show respect to young people in order to be treated with respect.

Participants have pointed out that the family can also play a role in the prevention of elder abuse. The following suggestions were made: Families must take up their responsibility to love and care for the elderly, Families must be educated on the effects and consequences of elder abuse, Family members must accompany the older person to pension PayPoints, Ensure that the older person is never left alone, Take the older person to an old age home, Assist the older person to report abuse, and Older people need to be treated with respect.

Participants further stated that the police must carry out regular patrols in the communities. The police also have the duty to investigate complaints on elder abuse. More sensitivity is needed for older victims of abuse. In addition, participants have also suggested that stricter punishment should be meted out against perpetrators of elder abuse. The social worker has the following preventative role to fulfil: Educate communities on elder abuse, Visit older people who are living alone, and Take vulnerable older people to places of safety. Participants briefly mentioned that local governments have to build more houses for older people.

DISCUSSIONS

This study was aimed at understanding the perceptions of university students on the situation of elder abuse in rural and urban communities in Southern Africa, especially in Namibia. The findings of this study confirm that older adults are victims of economic and financial abuse, neglect and abandonment, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and partner violence. The findings are in line with previous studies which state that elder abuse is often committed by male family members such as sons, sons-in-law or grandsons (Hooyman, & Kiyak, 2011). Economic abuse and financial exploitation were found to be a common form of elder abuse which contributes to the poor living conditions of the older person in this study. Compared to other studies, the most common forms of abuse were in the order of physical, emotional and financial abuses (Bigala & Ayiga, 2014). In confirmation with the ecological model Schiamberg et al., (2011), unemployment and financial hardships within families, community and the society at large,

the financial exploitation is but a symptom of larger impoverished nations. The unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment because of unequal distribution and access to resources has been found to be a driver of elder abuse in Southern African communities (Bigala & Aviga, 2014). Therefore, interventions to address economic and financial abuse of older adults need to incorporate stakeholders from a variety of levels and sectors. The state old age pension offered by the Namibian government is an attempt to improve the poor living standards of the older Namibian adults. Stricter security measures need to be introduced to reduce the risks of robberies and financial exploitation of older adults at cash pension paypoints by ensuring a stronger police and security patrolling and presence. In addition, alternatives to cash pension payment system in the form of bank and post office deposits that offer safer access to pension payouts could be encouraged. In matters of elder abuse that are reported to the police, the study reported that the police must show greater sensitivity whenever they investigate matters of elder abuse.

The findings confirmed that older adults are exposed to severe forms of neglect and abandonment. Neglect and abandonment occur in both urban and rural areas, and both in community and institutional settings. In confirmation to the ecological model Schiamberg et al., (2011), the results clearly indicate that caregiving environment in both community and institutional settings are aspects that need attention. The findings confirmed that older people also experience emotional abuse which has serious psychological impact on the older person, to the extent that older adults are depressed and suicidal. The findings confirmed that older adults have suffered under brutal physical attacks, often as a result of the financial unmet needs of the perpetrator of elder abuse. The end result of physical abuse has at times ended in premature deaths of older adults.

According to Bigala and Ayiga (2014) the feelings of depression as a result of the psychological processes of aging can easily be confused with signs and symptoms of elder abuse. Therefore, professionals involved in recognizing elder abuse such as doctors, nurses and social workers should be properly trained to avoid misdiagnosis.

From the findings there seems to be a strong link between substance abuse and elder abuse. Youngsters under the influence of alcohol become aggressive towards elders or will act violently in order to get money to buy alcohol and drugs. Consistent with the findings Ferreira and Lindgren (2008) asserts that alcohol and drug abuse leads to a breakdown of social control in families and communities.

So far, partner violence seems to be the only form of elder abuse where both older men and older women are both victims and perpetrators of partner abuse. The literature suggests the different national legislation that is supposed to provide some form of protection to the general population, but in particular the older person. It is encouraging to note that the reporting of elder abuse ends up in actions from the law enforcement to redress elder abuse. However, the findings suggest that legal protection against elder abuse is under-utilized.

Educational campaigns to all important sectors are suggested to prevent elder abuse which entails that the older person, the family, social workers and the police need to be educated on the rights of older people and elder abuse in particular. The social workers have an important role to play by conducting home visits to the elderly and forming support groups with older people and caregivers. Toll-free help line could also be useful to lonely, isolated older people who do have access to prepaid telephone services.

CONCLUSION

The study confirmed that elder abuse is indeed a common concern in Southern Africa and has a serious impact on the lives of the elderly. Proper reporting and treatment systems need to be put in place to effectively address the problem of elder abuse. Namibia does not have sufficient legislation and national policies to address elder abuse, thus legal reform is a necessity. The building blocks of such a law should include: counselling, hotlines, increasing awareness among the public, protection and supervision. Social work graduates also need to be properly prepared to render protective services to older people who might be at risk of abuse and neglect. Curricula for social work students should therefore be adjusted to prepare students to recognize elder abuse, but also to properly respond to prevention and treatment measures. We hope this paper will result in some further dialogue with relevant stakeholders on the rights of older people in Namibia, which may lead to the enactment of national policy, legislation and eventually programs in the interests and wellbeing of the older people of Namibia and other Sub-Saharan countries.

References

- African Union & HelpAge International (2003). AU policy framework & plan of action on ageing. Nairobi Kenya: HelpAge International Africa Regional development centre.
- Barnett, O., Miller- Perrin, C. L. & Perrin, R. D. (2011). Family violence across the lifespan: An introduction. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Bigala, P., Ayiga, N. (2014). Prevalence and Predictors of elder abuse in Mafikeng Local Municipality in South Africa *Etude de la Population Africaine*, 28(1), 463-474. <https://doi.org/10.11564/28-1-500>.
- Bloemen, E.M., Rosen, T., Lindberg, D.M. & Krugman, R. D. (2020). How Experiences of Child Abuse Pediatricians and Lessons Learned May Inform Health Care Providers Focused on Improving Elder Abuse Geriatrics Clinical Practice and Research. *Journal of Family Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-020-00143-7>.
- Donatelli, N.S. (2010). Elder abuse and neglect. In: Howard K.P.K. / R.A. Steinman (eds.), Sheehy's emergency nursing principles and practice. Mosby, 672-676.
- Dong, X.Q. (2015). Elder Abuse: Systematic Review and Implications for Practice. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 63 (6), 1214–1238. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.13454>.
- Ferreira, M. (2004). Elder abuse in Africa: What policy and legal provisions are there to address violence? *Journal of Elder Abuse Neglect*, 16 (2), 17-32. DOI: 10.1300/J084v16n02_02.

- Ferreira, M., & Lindgren, P. (2008). Elder abuse and neglect in South Africa: A case of marginalization, disrespect, exploitation and violence. *Journal of Elder Abuse Neglect*, 20 (2), 91-107. DOI: 10.1080/08946560801974497.
- Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia. (2003). Government Notice No. 126. Promulgation of Combating of Domestic Violence Act. URL: <http://www.lac.org.na/laws/pdf/domvio.pdf> [06.03.2014].
- Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia. (2003). Promulgation of Maintenance Act No.184. URL: <http://www.lac.org.na/laws/pdf/maintenance.pdf> [06.03.2014].
- Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia. (2000). Combating of Rape Act No. 8. URL: <http://www.lac.org.na/laws/pdf/comrape.pdf> [06.03.2014].
- Government Gazette of the Republic of Namibia. (1967). Aged Persons Act 81. URL: http://www.dsd.gov.za/dmdocuments/Aged_Persons_Act_1967.pdf [06.03.2014].
- Hooyman, N.R., & Kiyak, H.A. (2011). *Social gerontology: A multidisciplinary perspective*. 9th edition. USA: Pearson.
- Izumi, K. (2007). Gender-based violence and property grabbing in Africa: a denial of women's liberty and security. *Gender & Development*, 15 (1), 1-20.
- Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging, MIPAA, 2002. Ministry of Health and Social Services. (2002). The Bill for the Rights, Care and Protection of Older People in Namibia.
- Penhale, B. (2010). Responding and intervening in elder abuse and neglect. *Ageing international*, 35, 235–252.

Pillemer, K. & Finkelhor, D. (1988). The prevalence of elder abuse: a random sample survey. *The Gerontologist*, 28 (1), 51-57.

Schiemberg, L. B., Barboza, G.G., Oehmke, J., Zhang, Z., Griffore, R.J., Weatherill, R. P., Von Heydrich, L. & Post, L. A. (2011). Elder abuse in nursing homes: an ecological perspective. *Journal of elder abuse and neglect*, 23(2), 190–211.

Schuster, I. & Krahé, B. (2016). Abuse of Elders Living at Home: A Review of Recent Prevalence Studies. *International Journal of Behavioral Science*, 11 (2), 93-108.

United Nations. (2019). World Population Ageing 2019. Highlights.

Women's Action for Development (2008). Understanding the perpetrators of violent crimes against women and girls in Namibia: Implications for prevention and treatment. Unpublished research report.

World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). Fact sheets. Elder Abuse