

VIOLENCE TOWARDS OLDER PERSONS IN THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT – FORMS AND SOCIAL-DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *Násilie voči starším osobám je problémom, ktorého rozsah sa v posledných rokoch značne zväčšil. Majú na to vplyv sociálno-demografické a kultúrne činitele. Z dôvodu na to, že je to závažný spoločenský problém, mal by sa stať predpokladom pre intenzifikáciu intervenčných a edukačných činností, ktorých cieľom je opačné pôsobenie a stavanie mostov medzi generáciami.*

Kľúčové slová: *Násilie. Násilie voči starším osobám. Agresia. Formy násilia. Osoba v staršom veku. Staroba. Sociálno-demografické podmienky. Kultúrne podmienky.*

Summary: *Violence towards older persons is a problem the range of which has been increasing significantly in recent years. The social-demographic and cultural factors decide on it. As it is an important social issue, it should become a premise to intensify emergency and educational actions aiming at its counteraction, the construction of bridges between generations.*

Key words: *Violence. Violence towards older persons. Aggression. Forms of violence. A man at the older age. Old age. Social-demographic conditioning. Cultural conditioning.*

Introduction

The contemporary Polish family struggles with various problems and dangers, which lead to the occurrence of risky phenomena, and even pathological. More and more often it is becoming a dysfunctional environment in which home violence exists deriving from very different sources and conditioning (Śniegulska, 2004).

The phenomenon of dysfunctionality, on the background of which home violence dangerously often exists, generally results from two groups of factors: social-demographic and social-economic. The first group includes the consequences of changes connected with starting up families, a natural increase and a breakdown of families. These factors are directly connected with the social, moral and economic changes, which have led to essential changes in the structure of the family in

contemporary times (the breakdown of big and multi-generational families, integrated both spatially and socially for small, nuclear families). The second group of factors making a functioning of a family difficult consists of social-economic conditioning, which indicate the material level of life and functioning. They are connected with salaries of family members, their situation in the job market, social security guaranteed by a country and other negative social factors, which were exposed at the moment when protective functions of a state were limited radically (Badora, Badora, 2002).

In the context of the mentioned factors, the family is becoming an area of home violence, which is often defined as each activity or omission undertaken in the family by one of its members, striking in life, physical or also psychological integrity or in freedom of another member of the same family, or which is greatly damaging to development of his/her personality (Rode, 2010). Home violence is a social phenomenon which takes place when a member of a family, a husband, a wife or a partner tries to dominate the other partner, children, parents, grandparents, in-laws, etc. physically or psychologically, using a physical dominance, threats, a blackmail in order to hurt them morally or physically. Therefore, home violence is an intentional action taking advantage of power against a member of a family which violates laws and personal goods as well as cause suffering and damage (http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Przemoc_domowa).

Violence in the family environment can be manifested different forms and is realized in a lot of areas of the everyday life. It can be included in the relations between an adult and a child or in the relations between other members of the family. In this aspect we can discuss the violence which exists:

- in the intramarital (partner) relations. It is violence between the spouses and it tends to be directed to a husband or a wife,
- in the relations between siblings – own or half-blood,
- in the relations with the persons at the older age which is usually directed to parents or grandparents (Śniegulska*, 2003). This violence is often defined as a single or repeated action, or an omission which is in any relation in which trust is anticipated, and which results in harm or suffering of an older person. This type of violence is considered to be a very important issue and a worldwide problem. It is worth mentioning that all the member states of the United Nations accepted a document entitled the International Plan

of Action in Madrid in 2002, in which the importance of the prevention from this problem is clearly stated and it is stressed that the protection of persons at the old age against violence belongs to the Universal Human Rights (Starega, 2003).

1. Background of violent behaviour towards the seniors

Home violence towards the older persons has been a subject of research and scientific analyses conducted systematically only for a relatively short period of time. Previously, the problem was not noticed which was caused by two main facts. On one hand, the elderly are more often isolated socially and have significantly fewer social contacts than young persons. Therefore, their victimisation is more seldom noticed by the environment. On the other hand, the older persons do not usually report about harm being afraid that they will have to leave their home after the abuse is confirmed (Herzberger 2002). Moreover, the elderly keep quiet with reference to experienced violence owing to shame, perceiving themselves as a bad parent, fear for the torturer (fear that the intervention will worsen the situation even more), for fear that they will not meet efforts of living. Sometimes they also do not accept the fact of harm or they even worry that the intervention will cause the punishment of the perpetrator who is most often their own child (most cases of violence take place in the family environment and are caused by the loved ones – children, spouses).

Nowadays, the problem of harm of the elderly is discussed more. Because of “lengthening the human life (caused by development of medical science, an improvement of living conditions, a well-balanced diet), there are more and more of older persons in the more civilised societies” (Śniegulska*, 2003:46). As it appears from the reports, in 2003 there were about 600 million persons in the world who are 60 years and over. This number will have doubled by 2025, and in 2050 there will be 2 milliard of older persons on the Earth. The persons over 80 or more comprise the population increasing the most in developed countries who most often become victims of violence or neglect. Furthermore, women live longer than men in practically most societies. As a result of it, the proportion of women and men amounts to the value of 2:1 in the population of persons at a very old age. The data is even more essential as women make up 68.3 % of violence victims among the elderly (Starega, 2003).

Other sources report that by 2050 the population of seniors will have increased by 70 million at the simultaneous decrease in the total number of people by 80 million. The phenomenon of demographic ageing of societies is a resultant of a decreasing number of births as well as lengthening of an average lifespan of the human life, and especially the lifespan of the age over 60. Between 1955 and 1995 the average lifespan increased from 47 to 65 years globally. According to the prognosis, in 2025 it will reach 73 years (Pakuła, 2011).

In order to understand the phenomenon of violence towards the elderly, the social-cultural context of its occurrence should be taken into account. I. Pospiszyl expresses his opinion with regard to this issue remarking that the attitude towards the older person is one of very significant indicators of development dynamics of social relations. Persons at the older age are positioned the highest in the communities steered by tradition. An individual advanced in terms of age is seen as a means of conveying wisdom, knowledge and culture of the society in such a community, as a creator of life of young generations. The situation of the older person is different in the society where first of all the dynamics of changes counts. Each generation creates a reality here in the way specific for them. The decrease of the position of the older person is a consequence. His/her wisdom is not a signpost for the young any more, and what is more he/she himself/herself is not usually willing to yield to the progressing rush of the life (Pospiszyl 1994).

The culture and the model of the society in which we currently live, characterised by the fast speed of changes, cause rejection and alienation of the old person. His/her problems are unnoticed, minimalized, and his/her role in the society is marginalized (Śniegulska** 2003). In the times of extremely fast development of the civilisation of science and technology, the formation of the information society, expanding globalisation, the common cult of power, health, beauty and youth, the older generation, unfortunately, succumbs to the social exclusion in the more and more great degree.

If additionally the fact is taken into consideration that the older a man becomes, the more and more disabled he/she is and at the same time dependent on the environment, he/she may and often becomes a victim of abuse and maltreatment. His/her situation is additionally worsened by sometimes complete defencelessness (Śniegulska*, 2003).

Analysing the relations which happen between adult children and their parents, another factor of harming older persons should be considered. Namely, it is about the appearance of a new duty, which is a necessity of

taking care of a senior, often an ill, disabled person understood by the young as a stressful situation. The necessity to deal with the caring duties generates tensions, destroying a possibility to realize individual needs, aims and life plans of the young (Herzberger 2002). The situation is additionally complicated by a difficult financial situation, unemployment and a lack of a constant source of income, bad living conditions, which together determine a low social-economic position of a family. Then, the necessity of taking care of the older member of the family is sometimes seen as a limiting factor of the funds of the family environment which is already low. Obviously, the abuse of alcohol or other stimulants, psychological disorders of an older person or a disease of another member of the family, a lack of life perspectives or life failures favour the escalation of the violence situations.

Summing this motif of deliberations up, it is worth adding that among basic factors increasing a risk of violence B. Krahè enumerates metal pathology of the harmed person, the abuse of psychoactive substances, a dependence of an abused person on a victim, as well as outer stress, the source of which is outside the family context and a sex of a perpetrator – the overrepresentation of men among violence perpetrators, and an intergenerational transmission of violence in behaviour (Krahè, 2006). It should also be added that the last factor connected with the inheritance of some behaviour and transferring the cultural legacy of the past, including stereotypes, determine the process of marginalization of women significantly (Dolata, 2011).

2. Forms of abuse of persons at the older age

A man at an older age becomes a victim of various forms of violent behaviour. Apart from physical abuse, the following displays are most often mentioned:

- negligence – not administering necessary medicines, limitation of food, negligence of nursing and hygienic actions, negligence of visits at the doctor's;
- limitation of freedom – closing alone at home, limitation of contacts with people, a bathroom or other common rooms, closing in one room, limitation of contacts with other members of a family (a ban on leaving a house, a ban on having visitors, a ban on using a telephone);
- depriving from rights to their own decisions or having own secrets;

- getting a disability pension back, making an older person change a testament, forcing them to sign a real estate, goods and money over (economic violence);
- offending and humiliating older persons (psychological violence) (<http://www.inp.uni.opole.pl/geronto/debata-przemoc.html>), poking out the old age;
- forcing them to do housework, taking care of grandchildren, etc.

Recently the media have informed about another significantly perfidious form, which is giving the elderly to hospitals for religious holidays by their relatives. Families bring older persons for the so-called routine check-up, and then they do not take them back. The ways how to leave a relative in hospital are different. Sometimes a person is dropped off in the hospital admission room. The sick stay in hospital even for several months. Nobody visits them and does not get in touch with the medical personnel during this period of time. The similar proceeding takes place during leaves and holidays, when an old man/woman becomes an obstacle in summer travel.

The main categories of violence towards the elderly which are in the family together with the chosen symptoms are presented in Tab. 1 below.

Tab. 1: Types and symptoms of abuse towards persons in the period of the late maturity

CATEGORY	TYPE OF ABUSE	SYMPTOMS
PHYSICAL	beating, pushing, jerking, slapping, kicking, strangling, patting, shaking, burning, feeding with the use of force, the use of tranquilizers, indelicate lifting, overdose of medicines	wounds, bruises, cuts, burning, injured places, fractures, unexpected loss of weight, changes in behaviour
PSYCHO-LOGICAL	shouting, cursing, applying insults and threats, humiliating, blackmailing, no respect for the personal dignity and privacy, ridicule, calling names, criticising, limiting contacts with other persons, no psychological stimulation,	depression, withdrawal, anger, changes in behaviour and mood, fear, terror, aggression, lowering self-esteem, increased excitability or apathy

	depriving of information, depriving of a right to choose, ignoring	
SEXUAL	rape, sexual harassment, disrobing, forcing to watch pornographic films and read pornographic magazines, jokes with sexual undertone	venereal diseases, infections of urine, torn and blood-stained clothes, discomfort while sitting and walking, changes in behaviour
FINANCIAL	stealing, embezzlement, forgery, appropriation of an estate, getting a disability pension and other material goods back, blackmailing, forcing changes in a testament, overuse of power of proxy, excessive burden of costs	no money, sudden changes in a testament
NEGLIGENCE	not enough food, drink and medicines, no clothes, no comfort, no warmth, bad quality of hygiene, no care, negligence of basic needs	deterioration of personal hygiene and appearance, rash, wounds, inexplicable decrease in weight, hunger, thirst, boredom, depression
DISCRIMINATION	harassment because of age, disabilities, race, complexion, religion, sex	sadness, feeling of inferiority/being different

Source: Baumann, 2006.

Apart from experiencing the mentioned forms of violence, the elderly also become victims of the institutional violence. It is the violence existing in welfare homes and nursing homes, caring institutions and other centres dealing with taking care of the seniors. The maladjustment of the system to the needs of the older people, omissions in some procedures resulting from the insufficient number of nurses and carers are the most frequent types of abuse. The symptoms which these forms of behaviour lead to include, first of all, states of irritation (Baumann, 2006).

As it was indicated in the table, the results of harmful behaviour are serious and refer to all the fields of an old person's functioning. B. Tobiasz – Adamczyk, apart from the mentioned effects of violence, additionally enumerate: a perceptible lack of a sense of security in their own house, difficulties with sight, headaches and other chronic pains, diet disorders, a loss of appetite, complaints connected with the circulatory system, a social isolation, alcohol addiction, trials to commit suicide, psychological dysfunctions, and also – 9 % of cases – death (Kościńska, 2010).

Conclusions

A human being, starting a period of the old age and experiencing its different stages, changes in terms of physical, psychological and health aspects. These changes, unlike those in the previous periods of life, are of a definitely negative value for a man. Admittedly, the old age crowns the whole life, however a man loses his/her beauty, fitness and health at this age and due to this fact he/she becomes dependent on help and care of other persons. Often depressions developing on the basis of a decrease in professional activity and lack of contacts with their peers, the group of whose becomes less and less numerous are the consequences (Śniegulska** 2003). All these problems significantly contribute to victimization of persons at the old age.

Analysis the problem of harm, several elementary aspects of this occurrence are taken into consideration. First of all, it should be emphasized that there are not enough appropriate legal tools in Poland, which results in lack of a proper reaction in case of a recognition and publicizing cases of violence towards seniors. Paradoxically, even health care workers of the first contact, who should play a fundamental role in this respect, do not identify a situation of harm. The problem is marginalised in the macrosocial scale, forgetting many times that its significance is universal, existing almost in every country, both industrialized and developing (Baumann, 2006).

Consequently, the old age, which should be time of peace and deriving joy from fruits of the life for everybody, is neither fulfilled or bright. The last years of life spent in the family house which is an area of violence are only marked with suffering and bitterness for a lot of seniors. The sad autumn of life full of fear, which is experienced by a big part of the society, should be an essential premise to intensify

intervention and educational actions aiming at the counteraction of dangerous and reprehensible behaviour of perpetrators. First of all, it requires the change of stereotypes and myths¹ concerning the old age, breaking the specific taboo referring to the whole period of becoming old making aware of the existence of the social problem which is harassment of people at the old age.

It should be realized that such actions require a full engagement of professionals from a lot of domains – pedagogues, psychologists, doctors, gerontologists, ethicists and sociologists, as well as the participation of a lot of social environments. The media, undoubtedly, play the special role in the scope of education and publicizing information.

Let us add that only making others aware and delivering true and reliable knowledge in connection with the creation of positive attitudes towards the old age, getting old and passing can contribute to the construction of real BRIDGES BETWEEN GENERATIONS in the constructive manner.

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¹ For instance, there is a myth in the social awareness that supposedly "intellectual deficit" was an attribute of the old age. Yet, the research of psychologists and doctors unambiguously indicate that there are no grounds for further persistence of the myth nowadays. Intellectual possibilities of a man do not get weaker in the maturity and the old age, and a significant part of mental abilities retains its efficiency till late years of the life. Even everyday observations reveal that there are persons among the elderly who indicate the high level of needs both cognitive and cultural. The worse activity of the old was indicated in the research conducted in the conditions differing from the natural ones. Owing to this fact, their results did not always reflect full knowledge about the intellect of the elderly. (Radochoński, 1998).

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