

How to prevent elder abuse

Background, Good Practices and Recommendations



Elder abuse as a major problem

Elder abuse is increasingly being recognised as a major societal problem. A report issued by WHO/Europe in June 2011 indicated that each year, at least four million European people aged 60 years or older experience abuse.

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.

Definition of The World Health Organization (WHO, 2008)

Elder abuse is not limited to physical abuse. It also includes psychological, financial/material or sexual abuse, as well as neglect and discrimination. It also refers to unintentional action from overburdened carers. It can occur in the home as well as in residential care facilities.

European project to prevent elder abuse

To address the issue of elder abuse, the European Commission facilitated the pilot project EuROPEAN (2009 – 2011). The assignment was to develop an online European Reference Framework for the prevention of elder abuse. The Framework incorporates background information, good practices and makes recommendations at a national and European level.

Nine countries participated in the project. The project was coordinated by ANBO in the Netherlands.

Insights, suggestions and recommendations for addressing elder abuse

Background

Project outcomes show how partner countries differ widely in many aspects, including the definition, the level of recognition of the various forms of elder abuse, the risk and protective factors and the theories on elder abuse that are applied.

These differences can be explained by social and cultural differences, including the stereotyping of older people, the role of the family, the role of the state and the organisation of care. In some countries,

elder abuse remains hidden within the private realm of the family. For this reason, countries should reconsider their roles within this private domain in order to protect vulnerable people and ensure their human rights are not violated.

On the other hand, the partnership found common elements across Europe, including a lack of data on the phenomenon of elder abuse and a lack of dedicated legislation that considers the specificities and complexity of abuse towards older people.

The project partners agreed on the need for national programmes regarding elder abuse. At present, national programmes only exist in Austria, Ireland and the Netherlands.

Good Practices

As part of the project, 40 good practices for the prevention of elder abuse were selected. They can be found in an online database: www.preventelderabuse.eu. These practices have been described, and they are transferable. Each is classified according to various characteristics (e.g. activities, target groups, operational levels and types of prevention).

The database contains examples of successful practices in the areas of education and training, quality improvement, empowerment and participation, network development and awareness raising.

'One-size-fits-all' solutions do not exist, and each practice must be customised to new settings. Nevertheless, national and international experiences can offer a source of inspiration and a way of transferring knowledge between countries.

Recommendations towards a national programme

As the first step, each national government must recognise the problem and the necessity of a legal framework.

Second, each state must develop an effective, comprehensive approach in cooperation with all stakeholders. A cross-departmental approach is preferable, as elder abuse is a multi-layered phenomenon that includes the violation of human rights, domestic violence, criminal and civil law, health and healthcare, welfare, employee working conditions, vocational education and life-long learning, police, justice systems and banking.

In the final report, a model for developing a national programme is presented. Suggested policy includes the following elements:



1. Placing elder abuse on the political agenda
2. Informing the general public
3. Providing prevention for at-risk groups
4. Detecting elder abuse
5. Intervention
6. Assistance in case of elder abuse
7. Follow-up care and relapse prevention

The recommendations at the national level are ordered according to these elements, with attention to relevant factors in a policy process, including legislation, stakeholders, process agreements and supporting conditions.

Countries can use the recommendations as a checklist for establishing their own priorities and choices in the development of an appropriate national programme or action plan.

Recommendations for the European Union (EU)

The EU does not have the competence to develop legislation on elder abuse. Nevertheless, the European level can play an important role in supporting the efforts of national stakeholders towards the development and implementation of an action plan to prevent elder abuse.

1. The EU should press for the recognition of elder abuse in all settings as a political issue in each member state of Europe.
2. The EU should promote integral national policies and programmes on preventing and combating elder abuse in each member state of the European Union, including the promotion of the EuROPEAN checklist proposed in the report.
3. The EU should address the problem of elder abuse as an undivided political issue at the European level, thus ensuring an integral and comprehensive approach to the issue of elder abuse.
4. The EU should explore the possibility of coordinated legislation on aspects of elder abuse upon which the EU has undisputed competence, for example financial elder abuse in the area of consumer protection.

Recommendations for the Council of Europe

As a community of values, the Council of Europe is another very important actor. This international organisation, comprises 47 European countries, was established in order to protect human rights.

The Council of Europe should emphasise elder abuse as an act that violates human rights.

The project partners invite the Council to explore their potential role in ending the problem of elder abuse. One possible measure could involve a Convention on preventing and combating elder abuse, similar to the Convention on prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul, 11.V.2011)

Resulting products

The main products of the EuROPEAN project are as follows:

- the website, www.preventelderabuse.eu
- the Background and Position Paper *Elder Abuse in Europe*
- nine national reports on the specific social and cultural backgrounds of elder abuse.
- an online database of good practices for the prevention of elder abuse
- a final report containing the results and recommendations of the project

Call for action

The outcome of the project is a call for action. It is necessary to break the taboo surrounding elder abuse and make clear to everyone that elder abuse is unacceptable at any level and in any setting. The project partners call upon each national government to make appointments with stakeholders in order to arrive at an integral, comprehensive programme on preventing elder abuse.

They hope to inspire policymakers, experts, stakeholders and professionals with the good practices, which can be found in the online database and can be applied to different situations.

Where new examples of good practices or additional information emerge, these can be added by project partners or by individuals contacting one of the project partners, providing an on-going resource to all stakeholders.

‘Older people do not want more than others; they want equality – a human right’.

Project partners

- Austria (EURAG Austria)
- Czech Republic (Život 90)
- Greece (KMOP)
- Ireland (Age Action Ireland)
- Italy (Anziani e Non Solo)
- Poland (Fundacja JA KOBIEȚA)
- Slovakia (Fórum pre pomoc starším – národná sieť)
- Slovenia (ZDUS)
- The Netherlands (MOVISIE)
- The Netherlands (ANBO), coördination



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