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Sad Senility: Domestic Violence Against the Elderly

Domestic violence has recently become one of the most frequently discussed topics. Its increasing relevance can be seen on television in social campaigns aimed at sensitizing society to this phenomenon, its manifestations, conditions, and effects. A great deal of social welfare institutions offer support to help victims of violence, and those who are abused are encouraged to take courage and seek professional support. While people of all ages are, unfortunately, exposed to violence, the most common victims of violence are children, women, and the elderly. Elderly abuse is a painful, difficult, and hidden reality wherein a person's home and family cease to be safe; therefore, this vulnerable population needs support. However, in order to help this population, it is necessary to know about the problem and effective forms of intervention. This article discusses the extent of domestic violence against the elderly, what it looks like, as well as the circumstances of such behavior based on research conducted in social welfare institutions in the Podlasie Province of Poland. The last part of the article presents the elderly's most common responses to the abuse, which can be useful to all those who find out about violence against seniors and want to help them.

Key words: old age, the elderly, family relations, domestic violence, social welfare.

Introduction

Old age often has negative associations due most likely to the fact that many people associate old age with disease, infirmity, debility, and

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death. Adam A. Zych explains that “old age is an inevitable effect of aging—the process by which a person’s biological, psychological, and social abilities interact with each other synergistically and decline, thereby leading to a biological and psychological imbalance that an individual cannot counteract.”¹ As such, old age is a natural phase of life and a consequence of multifaceted changes that take place within the human body. It is not a rule, however, that old age be a time of decline, disease, or stagnation. Rather, for many people old age is a period in life when it is possible to be active, fulfill plans and dreams, and flourish. As John Paul II wrote in his letter to the elderly, old age is a time to be active, fulfill plans, and prosper: “old age [is] a ‘favorable time’ for bringing life to its fulfillment [...] when everything comes together and enables us better to grasp life’s meaning and to attain ‘wisdom of heart.’ [...] Old age is the final stage of human maturity and a sign of God’s blessing.”²

It is difficult to say which approach to old age is currently most popular in Poland. On the one hand, the model of active aging, wherein one enjoys free time in retirement as well as activities that will improve one’s condition and make one better able to survive this stage of life, is becoming more widespread in Poland. On the other hand, many young Poles live among people who witnessed history, remember World Wars I and II, and lived through the difficulties of the Polish People’s Republic. These individuals witnessed and learned a passive approach to aging from their parents and grandparents who withdrew during old age and lead a life of prayer. While old age has many faces, and the elderly are not all alike, all seniors are equally exposed to the problems of old age, including possible domestic violence.

According to Polish literature, violence is generally understood as an imposition of someone’s own will on or coercion of another person.³ Irena Pospiszyl defines violence as “any intentional act that goes beyond norms of mutual relationships and harms an individual’s

¹ A. A. Zych, *Słownik gerontologii społecznej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, 2001), 202.

² John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), 8, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_01101999_elderly.html (Accessed: 10.28.2017).

³ M. Halicka and J. Halicki, “Przemoc wobec ludzi starych jako przedmiot badań,” *Przemoc wobec ludzi starych. Na przykładzie badań środowiskowych w województwie podlaskim*, eds. M. Halicka and J. Halicki (Białystok: Temida 2, 2010), 20.

personal freedom or physical and psychological well-being.”⁴ Pospieszyl emphasizes the intentional nature of the perpetrator’s actions, which violate what is important for every human being: dignity and freedom. She also highlights two important areas where the victims of violence experience its effects: physically and mentally. Although the harm that each person suffers is different, the reality is that the harm is done.

Several types of violence exist: physical, psychological, economic, sexual, or passive. Each of these forms of violence entail neglect of another person’s needs (e.g., attention, food, medication). Violence can occur anywhere—on the street, at school, at work, or at home. But, among the various forms of violence, domestic violence hurts the most. Małgorzata Skwarek defines domestic violence as “any family member’s act or negligence that jeopardizes another family member’s life, body, mental integrity, or freedom and seriously harms his or her personality.”⁵ Foreign literature more precisely defines domestic violence against the elderly as: “a single or repetitive act or negligence that occurs in a relationship where trust is expected; these acts harm the elderly and cause suffering.”⁶ The statement “a relationship where trust is expected” is particularly important. The Second Vatican Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et spes* states that “the family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the foundation of society.”⁷ These assumptions are, however, only wishful thinking in a family where violence occurs.

Domestic violence against the elderly is very complex. This article will present the extent of domestic violence against the elderly, its most common causes, and victims’ reactions based on research conducted in social welfare centers in Poland’s Podlasie Province. It is important

⁴ I. Pospieszyl, *Przemoc w rodzinie* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne Spółka Akcyjna, 1994), 14.

⁵ M. Skwarek, “Przemoc wobec kobiet w rodzinie—perspektywa społeczno-polityczna,” *Praca Socjalna* 16, no. 4 (2001): 45.

⁶ C.A. Walsh, G. D’Aoust, and K. Beamer, “Elder Abuse and Bullying: Exploring Theoretical and Empirical Connections,” *Bullying in Different Contexts*, eds. C. P. Monks and I. Coyne, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 185-210. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511921018.009.

⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 52, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (Accessed: 11.12.2017).

to note that the elderly in Poland deeply respect and trust the clergy. That is why it is so important to make priests and religious aware of this important issue.

Data and Methods

The empirical material of this study was obtained through quantitative and qualitative research methods from employees of social welfare institutions throughout Poland's Podlasie Province. The study focused on domestic violence against the elderly, who were categorized as individuals aged 60 years and over.⁸

In order to understand domestic violence against the elderly, we conducted a diagnostic survey among the social welfare institutions' staff. This survey included questions about the prevalence of domestic violence against the elderly, the most common forms of domestic violence against this group, the distinguishing features of this phenomenon, etc. We then conducted in-depth, structured interviews⁹ with one social worker and one psychologist from every social welfare institution throughout the Podlasie Province. In total, 145 people (133 social workers and 12 psychologists) took the survey and were interviewed between July and December 2011. The closed-ended questions were then analyzed statistically, and transcripts of the recorded interviews were prepared and analyzed qualitatively.

A General Description of Domestic Violence Against the Elderly

In order to determine whether the elderly are domestically abused and neglected in northeastern Poland and the extent of this phenomenon, our team asked employees of social welfare institutions to share whether cases of domestic abuse against the elderly had been reported to their centers within the last 5 years. Table 1 below depicts how the staff responded.

⁸ E. Kramkowska, *Człowiek stary jako ofiara przemocy w rodzinie* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe KATEDRA, 2016), 16-28.

⁹ L. Sołoma, *Metody i techniki badań socjologicznych. Wybrane zagadnienia* (Olsztyn: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, 1999), 65.

Table 1. Elderly Domestic Violence Reports According Social Aid Institution

Type of social welfare institution	Did the elderly contact your institution to report domestic abuse between 2005-2010?				Total	
	Yes		No		#	%
	#	%	#	%		
Village Social Welfare Center (VSWC)	33	53.2	29	46.8	62	100
City Social Welfare Center (CSWC)	28	77.8	8	22.2	36	100
Provincial Social Welfare Center (PSWC)	6	50	6	50	12	100
Social Welfare Center (SWF)	7	35	13	65	20	100
Crisis Intervention Center (CIC)	11	73.3	4	26.7	15	100
TOTAL	85	58.6	60	41.4	145	100

$p < 0.01$

Domestic violence against the elderly is a real and, unfortunately, common problem. Objective data provided by those interviewed for this study reveal that over half (58.6%) of the social welfare institutions in Podlasie Province received reports of domestic violence against the elderly from 2005 to 2010. Often, in concrete cases of domestic violence, the *Procedura Niebieskie Karty* (Blue Cards Procedure) was initiated.¹⁰ In addition, not only the social workers, but also the police, physicians, nurses, family members, neighbors, or parish priests were often aware of these situations. Table 1 indicates that welfare centers located in

¹⁰ The **Blue Cards Procedure (Procedura Niebieskie Karty)** entails a set of measures that are carried out when there is reasonable suspicion of the occurrence of domestic violence. The procedure is initiated when a victim of domestic violence reports the abuse to the police either by phone, in person, or during a home intervention visit and then fills out a form by detailing the kind of violence that took place, the victim(s), the perpetrator(s), etc. The police officer who reports to the scene or takes the victim's report then completes the form and turns it in to the chairman of the Interdisciplinary Team of the local social welfare center. Each social welfare center has its own Interdisciplinary Team, which is responsible for helping victims of violence address and handle their situations.

cities received reports of domestic violence most often (CSWC-77.8%, CIC-73.3%), while roughly the same number of centers in rural areas (53.2%) did not receive as many reports (46.8%) of domestic violence against seniors. Literature on this topic reveals that domestic violence occurs most often in large cities and in the countryside and less often in small towns. This is due, among others things, to cultural and social conditions.

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Agata Woźniak-Krakowian explains that “in cities (large agglomerations) more people diffuse their responsibility for their own actions; [in other words] people feel anonymous, which gives them a sense of impunity. In addition, because of the breakdown of social ties in cities (family, neighborhood, etc.), these types of crimes generally occur more often.”¹¹ In a rural environment, the lifestyle, work, and education of the elderly also influence the situation. For, compared to their peers who live in cities, the elderly who live in rural areas know less about domestic violence and the institutions to which they can turn should they find themselves victims of domestic violence. In addition, no one informs the elderly who live in rural areas that they are victims of abuse; therefore, rural social welfare institutions receive fewer reports of domestic violence. Employees of the social welfare institutions said the same thing when speaking about their own professional experience: “I just see it. Generally the elderly or others in the family do not understand that it is violence because it normal to them. I know from observation because, when I ask the elderly, they deny it and think things should be that way. During the interviews, I can see that violence is occurring, but older people deny it” (Female, VSWC, age 47 years, social worker). Another social worker explained: “Older people do not realize that they are largely unaware of what violence is and what it looks like. It seems to me that violence can be understood in a very ordinary way. Violence, meaning abuse, and its other forms are less known” (Male, VSWC, age 36 years, social worker). Other social workers provided a different perspective. For example, a social worker from one community said: “You know what? They don’t necessarily have to say that it is violence, but they do feel that things are not going well and that they are being hurt—that they are being harmed and that they can go somewhere to find help in such a situation. But they do not seek help because they are ashamed to do so, or they assume that they will just see how things play out” (Female, CSWC, age 45 years,

¹¹ A. Woźniak-Krakowian, “Przemoc wobec rodziny. Próba psychologiczno-socjologicznego portretu sprawcy przemocy w rodzinie,” *Zagrożenia życia rodzinnego*, eds. G. Poraj and J. Rostowski (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2003), 207.

social worker). How the elderly define and understand various social phenomena, including domestic violence, as well as their behavior and attitudes toward these issues is greatly conditioned by how they have been socialized. This occurs regularly and can, in principle, generally be applied to senior citizens.

Statistics based on data from social welfare institutions in northeastern Poland indicate that the elderly who experience domestic violence are most often parents whose children act aggressively toward them. Among institutions that are in contact with elderly victims of domestic violence, more than 75% knew of mothers who were victims of domestic abuse and neglect at the hands of their adult children, while 25% received reports from elderly fathers who were abused and neglected by their adult children. More detailed data indicate that parents experience violence primarily at the hands of their sons (75.3% of cases) and significantly less often at the hands of their daughters (24.7%). Studies have also indicated that violence also occurs among elderly spouses, although far less frequently, and is usually the consequence of violent behavior that began earlier in the marriage. Along these lines, among social welfare institutions that received reports of domestic violence, 41.2% received reports from elderly female victims abused by their husbands, while 3.5% received reports from elderly males being domestically abused by their wives. Other perpetrators of domestic violence against the elderly include: daughters-in-law (16.5%), sons-in-law (4.7%) or grandchildren (11.8%). Unfortunately, often several people abuse the elderly at the same time (i.e., two sons, or a son and a husband), which exacerbates the situation.

The information provided by the staff of the aid institutions also shows that the elderly are often the victims of psychological violence known as verbal abuse (insults, profanity). About 98.8% of employees received reports of verbal abuse from elderly women, while only 31.8% received similar reports from elderly men. The statistics presented here are consistent with the data obtained during research conducted during the *PolSenior* project.¹² The elderly respondents were presented with nine forms of violence and told to indicate which forms of violence they had experienced. Among the respondents, 5.4% had predominantly experienced neglect, disparagement, abuse, embarrassment,

¹² The multidisciplinary research project *PolSenior* examines the medical, biological, social, and economic aspects aging in Poland. The study included 5695 people, 4979 of which were aged 65 and over, and 716 of which were aged 55 to 59.

or ridicule, while 2.1% had experienced threats or blackmail.¹³ These observations were also confirmed during the DAPHNE III project¹⁴ via a nationwide survey conducted in social welfare institutions that serve elderly female victims of spousal abuse. Almost all of the institutions questioned had helped elderly women suffering from psychological and physical abuse.¹⁵

Social welfare institution employees from the Podlasie Province also pointed out that older women (72.0%) and older men (20.1%) have also experienced economic violence (their children or family members have taken money from them, made specific purchases of items without their consent) and neglect (their children refused to feed them, give them medicine, or provide necessary help). Unfortunately, older women (66%) also reported having been abused physically, which is less likely to happen to older men (16.5%). Of these institutions, 16.5% received reports from elderly women who were courageous and strong enough to admit and report the most shameful violence—sexual abuse.

The Circumstances of Domestic Violence Against the Elderly

Joanna Cichla believes that “a family without conflicts does not exist, and neither does one without such problems. It is important to solve problems constructively, and reconcile any kind of differences as much as possible. Violence occurs in families where this fails to happen, and this violence leads to the breakdown of family life.”¹⁶ Abuse or violent behavior can occur on different levels in family life: between spouses, between adult children and parents, and between

¹³ M. Halicka, J. Halicki, and P. Ślusarczyk, “Przemoc w stosunku do osób starszych,” *Aspekty medyczne, psychologiczne, socjologiczne i ekonomiczne starzenia się ludzi w Polsce*, eds. M. Mossakowska, A. Więcek, and P. Błędowski (Poznan: Termedia Wydawnictwa Medyczne, 2012), 497.

¹⁴ The International Project DAPHNE III, *Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women*, was conducted from 2009 to 2010 by Austria, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Hungary, and the United Kingdom. Researchers from the University of Białystok’s Department of Sociology of Education and Social Gerontology and Department of Andragogy and Gerontology participated in the research. More information about this project is available at: www.ipvow.org.

¹⁵ E. Kramkowska, A. Szafranek, and C. Żuk, “Przemoc wobec starszych kobiet –sondaż w instytucjach,” *Praca socjalna* 28, no. 5 (2012): 49.

¹⁶ J. Cichla, “Formy pomocy ofiarom przemocy w rodzinie w kontekście teorii i doświadczeń praktycznych,” *Wybrane aspekty przemocy. Diagnoza i profilaktyka*, eds. R. M. Ilnicka and J. Cichla (Torun: Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne AKAPIT, 2009), 107.

other family members (grandchildren, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, etc.). Various factors affect the occurrence of domestic violence.

Alcoholism is one of the main factors that contribute to domestic violence. When analyzing the relationship between alcohol consumption and violence, Krzysztof Frysztacki notes that “this issue is more complex than one imagines because many intermediate biological and socio-demographic variables come into play, and social definitions of these situations and participant characteristics are other modifying factors. Alcohol and violence undoubtedly often occur together, but people should be cautious when making cause-and-effect statements.”¹⁷ Frysztacki’s perception is correct; alcohol (contrary to what many people think) cannot be considered the cause of domestic violence. Rather, at the very most, addiction to alcohol enable a perpetrator’s violent behavior. In their daily professional experience, employees of the social welfare institutes of Podlasie Province saw the connection between alcohol and violence. Their statements reveal that domestic abusers who were addicted to alcohol were usually unemployed sons (either divorced or bachelors) or husbands who had alcohol problems throughout their entire lives. One of the social workers explained the co-occurrence of alcohol and violence very well, saying that “alcohol promotes aggression, particularly because the alcoholic wants money to buy alcohol and will do whatever he needs—even resorting to violence—to get what he wants. Often, initially, raising his voice works to get what he wants, but then the second time he resorts to raising his hand to someone to get money” (Male, VSWC, age 27 years, social worker). Addiction may also give rise to economic, physical, and (the most painful) psychological abuse because “no one who lives with an addict for several years or more remains unaffected by the stigma of the situation. Since the situation is abnormal, it takes great effort to make things appear normal.”¹⁸ Co-dependence also makes it difficult to accurately determine one’s reality. Violent people think of themselves in a distorted way; they do not see the harm that they have done; they consent to the evil that is happening in their lives; and this situation often lasts for years.

Illness and disability can be other contributing factors to domestic violence against the elderly. For example, some of the social workers interviewed for this study reported an incident where a husband was

¹⁷ K. Frysztacki, *Socjologia problemów społecznych* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2009), 104.

¹⁸ W. Sztander, *Pułapka współzależnienia* (Warsaw: Państwowa Agencja Rozwiązywania Problemów Alkoholowych, 2004), 20.

abusive to his wife as a consequence of the side effects of a medication that he was taking. One employee said that the abused wife permitted the situation: “she allowed him to do everything he wanted [...] she thought the situation was normal because he was sick, and she had to give in to him” (Female, CSWC, age 56 years, social worker). Similarly, another worker received reports where a wife was violent against her husband, as “payback” for the physical injuries he inflicted on her: “He was violent toward her his entire life; he was very aggressive and drank. The husband is now sick, lies around, and constantly demands attention and care. He makes his wife care for him, and now she beats him too because she cannot take him any longer. She says that he is so aggressive now that she sometimes restrains him so that she can have a moment of peace” (Female, SWE, age 55 years, social worker). According to Sharon Herzberger, women resort to violence only as a response to their partners’ violence,¹⁹ which is confirmed in the testimony above. Illness and elderly disability, however, also contribute to the violence of children against their elderly parents.

Małgorzata Halicka believes that “regardless of the environment in which they live (city or village), [Polish] families are still the greatest source of support for the elderly, and it is within the family that the emotional, physical, and social needs of the elderly are met.”²⁰ While caring for the elderly is not problematic when they enjoy good health, the situation is often complicated once the elderly have become ill. According to Zofia Kawczyńska-Butry, “it is difficult for sons and daughters who must take care of their parents because it requires them to reconcile their responsibilities toward their own families and children with their responsibilities toward their parents for whom they must care. As a result, they must exert a huge amount of physical and emotional effort. In turn, when they become overly fatigued, they resort to verbal abuse or physical violence against the elderly.”²¹ The employees of the social welfare institutions of the Podlasie Province mentioned such situations. One psychologist explained: “If a person requires care,

¹⁹ S. D. Herzberger, *Violence within the Family: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 12.

²⁰ M. Halicka, “Problemy rodziny w opiece nad człowiekiem starym niesprawnym,” *Zostawić ślad na ziemi. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana Profesorowi Wojciechowi Pędichowi w 80 rocznicę urodzin i 55 rocznicę pracy naukowej*, eds. M. Halicka and J. Halicki (Białystok: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku, 2006), 245.

²¹ Z. Kawczyńska-Butrym, “Problemy opieki nad człowiekiem starszym – obszary pomocy i wsparcia,” *Praca socjalna* 14, no. 4 (Warsaw: Instytut Rozwoju Służb Społecznych, 1999), 13-14.

time, effort, and commitment, it is tiring. People today are not prepared for sacrifice, and they cannot handle children who require more care than older people, let alone the elderly. It used to be a moral obligation to care for one's parents and to ensure that their final years are peaceful and good. Now this is not so. Nowadays, parents are treated like a burden, so there is a growing risk of violence against elderly parents. More and more often we hear about neglect, and people do not treat it as abuse" (Female, CIC, age 45 years, psychologist).

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Financial matters also make the elderly prime victims of domestic violence and neglect. Nearly 1 out of 5 people interviewed attested to this fact. For example, one employee said the following: "a person who wills away his property is at great risk. Someone who has gotten rid of, willed, or donated his money or property is, in my opinion, more at risk to be the victim of violence. Isn't it absurd? Because the one receiving the inheritance should be grateful but isn't" (Female, CSWC, age 40 years, social worker). Employees pointed out that older parents expect their children to care for them in return for the family farm. But children fulfill this duty differently. Their parents' presence begins to cause disturbances and quarrels, and the children begin to have pretensions about everything. "An older person who once had no money now has money, and the younger people often want to make him give it to them so that they can manage the money and make decisions regarding how they money should be spent," said one employee (Female, PSWC, age 53 years, psychologist).

Some elderly individuals have very strong characters. As some social welfare employees testified, strength of character can provoke violence against older people, especially when these individuals happen to be the parents-in-law or sons- and daughters-in-law who oppose each other, engage in a battle of the wills, and are not willing to back down. These situations can lead to psychological abuse and, sometimes, even the physical abuse of the elderly. There are also cases, however, in which an elderly person's behavior or speech leads to a family quarrel. In turn, everyone turns against this person because he or she is too weak and helpless to defend him or her self. During another interview, a study participant said: "The elderly still want to be in charge. They do not and cannot accept the fact that those younger than them have more control and make decisions about everything. They do not see that they have passed on the right to be in charge, which results in various conflicts and, with everyone's nerves on edge, even, for example, psychological violence and rough and impatient

physical treatment (jerking, pushing). Everyone's nerves are on edge" (Female, VSWC, age 39 years, social worker).

The Reactions of Elderly Victims of Domestic Violence

When experiencing domestic violence for many years, victims develop coping skills in order to survive. Since new situations often provoke anxiety and fear of the unknown, people often choose to remain the victims of violence and in a familiar situation.

One of the frequent ways individuals try to improve their situation at home is to subordinate the perpetrator by getting out the way (e.g., by going out to visit the neighbors), and doing everything necessary to avoid provoking a fight or violence. Nearly 1 in 5 employees of the social welfare institutions in Poland's Podlasie Province spoke about these coping mechanisms. According to the study participants, such behavior is a way to survive and convince oneself that one can resolve the entire situation. In this sense, one social welfare employee mentioned that a woman called her and said "everything will be okay if I remain out of sight. Somehow it will work out. I can shut myself up in my own room so that he won't be able to come to me, or I will put a lock on the door.' She just procrastinates and is waiting to see if things will somehow work if she simply avoids speaking to him; that way, he will just do his own thing and stay out of her hair" (Female, MOPS, age 38 years old, social worker).

Another approach to coping with domestic violence is to deny that anything wrong is happening, or that one is a victim of violence. Pia Melody writes that "[d]isplacement is an automatic and unconscious repression of events that are too painful in an attempt to forget them."²² The author adds that "denial occurs when we perceive certain things and their effects in other people's lives, but we cannot see them in our own lives."²³ Jadwiga Mazur also states that "the natural reaction to violence is to repress it. Sometimes the [trauma of violence] is too terrible to even talk about it out loud."²⁴ The employees of the social welfare institutions spoke about such defense mechanisms. In fact, one manager of a social welfare institution said: "in most of the cases people become accustomed to simply giving in to the situation and

²² P. Melody, *Toksyczne związki. Anatomia i terapia współzależnienia* (Warsaw: Jacek Santorski & CO Agencja Wydawnicza, 1993), 120.

²³ Ibidem, s. 124.

²⁴ J. Mazur, *Przemoc w rodzinie. Teoria i rzeczywistość* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, 2002), 115.

suffering in silence” (Female, CIC, age 36 years, manager). Therefore, as one person stated in this regard, it is about “retreating and doing nothing, but I think that is due to the fact that I refuse think about it as violence” (Female, CIC, age 55 years, psychologist).

Employees of the social welfare institutions also noted that the elderly are exceptionally persistent, and they tirelessly try to hide the violent situations they experience. They do this out of parental love to preserve the good name and social reputation of their families. They are also motivated by shame: they are ashamed of others and of the fact that domestic violence occurs in their home and that their close family members are abusive.

According to this study, only a small percentage of elderly victims of domestic violence seek help. At first, victims might tell people they trust (friends, acquaintances, distant family, or neighbors) about the situation. Sometimes victims will speak to a priest who serves as an authority figure in the local community, especially in the countryside. What the victim chooses to do depends on what his or her confidants advise: “The victim either will or will not report abuse, depending on what his or her neighbor or priest advises,” said one of the employees (Female, CSWC, age 42 years, social worker). More often, however, just talking to someone about the situation is a form of therapy for elderly victims of domestic violence. “In each of us there is a threshold,” explained one of CSWC employees, “and we are able to cope on our own with some things and events. Sometimes, however, it is just too much and it is necessary to tell someone about it and to get it off of one’s chest. But, even when someone tells another, that person does not expect that anything will change, that someone will react. Instead, the abused individual only expects that he will be able to unload his burden” (Female, CSWC, age 38 years, social worker).

Talking about one’s situation provides relief and gives the elderly the strength to continue to deal with their problems. Sporadically, the elderly will report what they experience to social welfare institutions or to the police so that the perpetrators of violence will be punished. However, even if this happens, often victims do not persist. Initially, under the influence of emotions, anger and regret, victims pursue justice; however, as these emotions subside, victims back down from their resolve. Only a few employees involved in this study dealt with an elderly person who persisted in having his or her perpetrator evicted from the home. For example, a woman was successful in having her husband evicted or her son arrested after many years of psychological and physical abuse.

Conclusion

Domestic violence against seniors is a difficult and painful problem that needs to be corrected or prevented appropriately. At the legislative level, measures are being implemented to help reduce violence against the vulnerable: children, women, and the elderly. But these efforts also need our own involvement.

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Before all else, none of us can remain indifferent to the wrong done to others. Once we are aware of domestic violence against the elderly, we should do everything in our power to help, listen, and give suggestions on how to resolve the problem and where the elderly can go to find support. Of course, victims of domestic violence should ultimately decide whether and what should be done, but it is our duty to care for the welfare and safety of others. In his address to the elderly, John Paul II wrote: "Honoring older people involves a threefold duty: welcoming them, helping them, and making good use of their qualities. In many places this happens almost spontaneously, as the result of long-standing custom. Elsewhere, and especially in the more economically advanced nations, there needs to be a reversal of the current trend, to ensure that elderly people can grow old with dignity [...] There must be a growing conviction that a fully human civilization shows respect and love for the elderly."²⁵ May this thought mobilize each of us to take appropriate action to help abused and vulnerable seniors.

O SMUTNEJ STAROŚCI, CZYLI O PRZEMOCY W RODZINIE WOBEC OSÓB STARSZYCH

Przemoc w rodzinie to zagadnienie, które w ostatnim czasie jest jednym z częściej dyskutowanych tematów. Świadczą o tym m.in. pojawiające się w telewizji kampanie społeczne mające na celu uwrażliwienie społeczeństwa na to zjawisko, jego przejawy, uwarunkowania i skutki. Mówi się też dużo o instytucjach świadczących pomoc osobom doznającym przemocy i tym samym zachęca się wszystkich doświadczających złego traktowania, by zdobyli się na odwagę i szukali profesjonalnego wsparcia. Na doświadczenie zachowań przemocowych narażony jest niestety każdy, a wśród najczęstszych ofiar nadużyć są dzieci, kobiety i osoby starsze. Starość przeżywana w cieniu przemocy jest doświadczeniem bolesnym i trudnym. Dlatego wsparciem należy objąć seniorów, dla których dom, rodzina, przestały być bezpiecznym miejscem. Niemniej, aby pomagać, trzeba mieć wiedzę na temat problemu i możliwych form interwencji. Na podstawie badań przeprowadzonych w instytucjach pomocy społecznej

²⁵ John Paul II, *LE*, 12.

w woj. podlaskim, w przedkładanym artykule omówiono skalę problemu przemocy w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i jej charakterystyczne cechy, jak też opisano uwarunkowania tego typu zachowań. Ostatnia część artykułu dotyczy najczęstszych reakcji seniorów na doznawane krzywdy, bo ich znajomość może być przydatna wszystkim tym, którzy dowiedzą się o przemocy wobec seniora i zechcą mu pomóc.

Słowa kluczowe: starość, ludzie starzy, relacje rodzinne, przemoc w rodzinie, pomoc społeczna.

Anthropology

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