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General Introduction
Actieplan Ouderen in veilige handen [Action plan The elderly in safe hands]
Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport
30-03-2011

[State secretary Marlies Veldhuijzen van Zanten wants to put a stop to abuse. In the next few years she will allocate an annual sum of 10 million euro to the issue: elder abuse. The state secretary wants to stop the violence as quickly as possible by early detection, reporting and support of victims. With the Action plan “The elderly in safe hands” Veldhuijzen van Zanten wants to combat violence and abuse committed not only by professionals but also in the home setting].

Meer ouderenmishandeling gemeld [More elder abuse reported]
NOS News
10-06-2014, 21:07

[Last year there were increased cases of abuse reported over the previous period. In 2013 there were 1703 cases of abuse reported to the Support Centre of Domestic Violence. This is an increase of 66 % in comparison to 2012 as was reported by the National Platform to Combat Elder Abuse. The number of reports has steadily increased since 2010. Women become victims of abuse three times more often than men. Two-thirds of the reported cases involved psychological abuse of women. Financial exploitation (39%) and physical abuse (38%) were also often reported. Patterns indicate that most perpetrators are children, grandchildren or (ex-) partners. More than three-quarters of the victims live alone or with a partner. In 9% of the cases an older person lives in a health care institution. The amount of reports by victims themselves or their family members was low: the majority of reports were filed by police, social workers and professionals from health care institutions].

During the past few years, more attention has been paid to the issue of elder abuse. This interest appears to be more widespread as it is discussed in the media, scientific publications and has resulted in several policy documents and programs (information campaign “Safe at home”, prevention of financial exploitation, “Volunteers against elder abuse”). For example, the Dutch government has launched an action plan “The elderly in safe hands” which is targeted against abuse, exploitation and neglect of older persons and aims to improve prevention of elder abuse, victim support and firm action towards offenders, all to be achieved through the joint efforts of the government, municipalities and professional organizations (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, 2011). Elder abuse is now more often discussed in the news, where attention is focused upon the increase in reporting of abuse: types of abuse reported, perpetrators involved, frequent reporters.
Attitudes and perceptions towards elder abuse have changed throughout history. From being barely acknowledged in the 70’s and 80’s it has developed by being defined and recognized as an important social phenomenon and problem in the last two decades.

The wider relevance
Public attention for elder abuse coincides with the growing numbers of older individuals in our society. Concerns have been raised about how we ought to care for older people and whether we will be able to do so in a good way. Questions have been raised whether our individualized, “western” societies have resulted in decreased respect for our older generation, as their value waned with the growing reliance on IT and technological innovation. Nevertheless, elder abuse is a worldwide phenomenon, not one isolated to European or North-American countries, not a phenomenon merely present in OECD countries. It is a global social issue that requires attention and actions that need to be taken to prevent and eliminate it.

Studying elder abuse will help us understand the position of older persons in our society: how can we understand these abusive situations? Are they a sign of our times, or rather an incident that is unrelated to the demographic changes in our society? Is it related to transformed values and norms of current society?

Current knowledge on elder abuse
Not only in the Netherlands but also worldwide, elder abuse is becoming a high priority issue on the agendas, however there are still numerous aspects that have been left unexplored. Elder abuse is a complex issue with continuous controversies regarding its definition (as shown in chapter two of this thesis). Currently there is not an unambiguous consensus on the definition of elder abuse. Different academics, practitioners and policy makers use different definitions. The first question that this thesis therefore answers is how is elder abuse defined? This is done through a systematic review (chapter two) and later in other chapters of this thesis by exploring the definitions of those involved in the field of elder abuse. Nevertheless, one of the most commonly used definitions is the WHO definition that emphasizes the nature of the relationship between the older person and the perpetrator and the notion of trust is at the center of this definition (WHO, 2002). Another definition that is commonly used in the Netherlands diverges from the WHO-definition and uses the age limit of 65 for being considered as an older person (Comijs, 1999). We discuss the development of elder abuse definitions over time and which purposes they (could) serve in public and scientific domain.

Although there are discussions and debates about the exact definition of elder abuse, most of the studies distinguish the various types of abuse: physical, psychological, sexual, financial and neglect.

Lack of agreement about the definitions, makes it difficult to determine the extent of the problems of elder abuse. Prevalence rates vary in different countries. For example, prevalence rates of 4-6 % have been found in Canada, Great Britain,
and in Finland rates vary between 1-10% (Griffin, 1994; Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988). In the Netherlands, a prevalence rate of 5.6% was found (Comijs, Dijkstra, Bouter, & Smit, 2000; Comijs, Pot & Jonker, 1998; Comijs, 1999). Prevalence rates of abuse can range between 1% and 35%, depending on definition, methods and techniques used (Pillemer & Finkelhor, 1988; Yan & Tang, 2001). Despite the variation in prevalence rates, these studies shed light on the extent of elder abuse. That elder abuse happens is beyond doubt, and since it affects older persons it warrants attention. The prevalence rates also raise further questions: what is behind these numbers? Why are these older individuals abused and not the others?

Part of the answer to this question can be found in risk factor studies. We can categorize these risk factors for elder abuse as ones related to the victim, ones related to the perpetrator and those attributable to the environment. Among the characteristics of the victim are social isolation, dependency, vulnerability, loneliness, age and gender. The possible characteristics of the perpetrator that can contribute to the occurrence of abuse are psychopathology of the abuser, substance abuse, a history of violence, stress and dependence on older person. Risk factors in the environment can be, for instance, ageism, negative attitudes towards old age and cultural norms (Anetzberger, 2004; Comijs, 1999; Kosberg & Nahmiash, 1996; Pillemer, 1986; Podnieks, Penhale, Goergen, Biggs & Han, 2010). Still the question about what is behind the numbers is not entirely answered. Risk factors, despite their indispensable value, are associations, and do not prove a clear cut answer as to why and how abuse occurs. The second question this thesis answers is how older individuals experience and explain the process of abuse, how do those abused see the chain of events? And relate the risk factors to how they experienced the abusive situation? These questions are addressed in chapter five.

Even though attention to the research on elder abuse is increasing, there is still a lack of studies on perspectives of various groups involved in elder abuse, this is particularly the case for older persons’ perceptions and victims’ views on elder abuse. The majority of current studies still focus on risk factors of abuse, definition and forms of abuse, and its prevalence (Anetzberger, 2004; Bennett, Kingston, & Penhale, 1997; Biggs, Phillipson, & Kingston, 1995; Comijs, 1999; O’Keefe, Hills, Doyle, McCreadie, Scholes Constantine, Tinker, Manthorpe, Biggs & Erens, 2007; Penhale, 2008; Peshevska, Sethi, & Serafimovska, 2014).

There are few studies that focus upon researching older victims’ perspectives and older persons who do not have any experience with abuse (exceptions are for instance, Chen, Dolinsky, Doyle, & Dunn, 1981; Comijs, Pot, Smit, Bouter, & Jonker, 1998; Erlingston, Saveman, & Berg, 2005; Naughton, Drennan, Lyons, & Lafferty, 2013; Hightower, Smith, & Hightower, 2006; Hurme, 2002; Taylor, Killick, O’Brien, Begley, & Carter-Anand, 2013; Pillemer & Prescott, 1989; Pritchard, 2000, 2001; Thomas, Scodellaro, Dupree-Leveque, 2005; Yan & Tang, 2001, 2004). Therefore we delved into the exploration of these perspectives on elder abuse as they enable understanding abuse in the way older persons and older victims see and experience it therewith contributing to a conceptualization of elder abuse that allows a closer
convergence between the views of those involved in elder abuse and those investigating abuse.

**Methods**

This is a short discussion of methods used in the current study. For more detailed description of methodology and methods we refer you to Appendix F.

Given that the questions raised are primarily questions about the process and explanation of abuse, this thesis was based primarily on a qualitative study on elder abuse. Qualitative research allows one to explore and understand the phenomenon, which was the aim of this study. It allows the participant’s story to emerge and enables answering the questions about the “what”, “how” and “why” of elder abuse.

The data gathered through the diverse methods (see details below) were analyzed following a hermeneutic approach that helped to understand, explain and interpret the phenomenon of elder abuse from diverse perspectives.

The primary methods of data collection were in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups (for further details see also the chapters of this thesis). We also performed a systematic review on definitions of elder abuse.

The qualitative study was conducted among older persons, men and women age 63 and over, professional groups and experts involved in elder abuse. 35 in-depth interviews with non-abused ten older men and 25 older women (between the ages of 65 and 85 years) and 17 interviews with six older men and 11 older women (age range from 63 to 90 years) who experienced abuse. For non-abused older persons we adhered to the age limit of 65 years and for abused older persons we did not have the age limit (for more details see Appendix F). Additionally 35 expert interviews (six males and 29 females) who are currently working in the field of elder abuse were also conducted. All interviewees were contacted through reference of residential care facilities and the support center of domestic violence. In addition, older individuals, professionals and experts were contacted using a snowball sampling technique. Finally, abused older persons were also called upon via advertisements in freely distributed local newspapers in the larger region of the Randstad, the Netherlands. All the interviews were conducted between April 2012 and December 2013.

Interviews with older individuals lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours, with older victims of abuse between 2 to 4 hours, and with professionals between 1 to 1.5 hours.

We also held eight focus groups that involved experts, policy makers, managers, interest organizations of older persons, physicians, professionals from intramural and extramural care and older people themselves. Each focus group included one of these groups. The list with potential participants for the focus groups was made on the basis of known organizations in the Dutch field of elder abuse. Then, persons from different organizations who are involved in the field of elderly care were added to the list and asked for further referral and potential
participants. Following this, all the potential participants were contacted via e-mails and phone calls and invited to take part in a particular focus group based on their position, expertise, experience and skills. Older persons were contacted via interest groups for older persons. In total 42 participants were included in these focus groups. Focus groups were held in the period between February and March 2012 and lasted on average 1 to 2.5 hours.

Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed through signing an informed consent form or having an explicit oral agreement. With the permission of the participants, the focus groups and interviews were recorded.

For interviews and focus groups topic lists with main questions were used (see Appendices A, B, C). The list of topics and questions were first developed on the basis of existing research literature on elder abuse and also taken from the pilot interviews with older persons conducted before the study and adjusted while interviewing in order to be understandable and clear to our respondents.

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcripts were comprehensively and systematically analyzed using NVivo, a software program for qualitative analysis. The approach used for analyzing data was primarily inductive, in which analytical concepts are derived from the data through a coding technique based on a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1976). The key points were indicated with the codes, then the codes were grouped into concepts from which main categories were developed that were used as the basis for exploring and discussing the perceptions, ideas and experiences of the respondents.

For the focus groups and interviews with older persons, older victims and experts, we developed codes that totaled to 702, 886, 338 and 405 respectively. From these codes 5, 2, 4 and 3 corresponding main categories were derived.

Outline of the thesis

In the second chapter of this thesis, definitions of elder abuse and their developments are reviewed. Chapter three explores different perspectives on the etiology of violence in later life. Chapter four discusses older persons’ definitions of and explanations for elder abuse. Chapter five explores older victims’ ideas about the causes and effects of abuse, the ways of coping with abuse and how they currently feel about it. In the sixth chapter, the framing of elder abuse as a social and a health problem is addressed, with attention to the factors that influence societal context and the health care system. Chapter seven raises the debate about the distinction of system abuse as a separate form of elder abuse. Finally, key findings of this thesis on perspectives on elder abuse are summarized in chapter eight of this thesis.
References

Chapter 1


