

# **ELDER ABUSE; THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE.**

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## **SUMMARY**

This paper has tried to identify and conceptualize the problem of elder abuse in a wider perspective, while defining it in the context of the Nigerian situation. It explains elder abuse from the global and historical perspective, identifying the various forms of abuse, their prevention and intervention strategies, societal norms to confront it, the roles of individuals, family, the society and government and teaching the rights of the older person in addition to elucidating on where to go when seeking redress. This effort is to create awareness and sensitize the individual, family, society and government about the problems and consequences of continued, unabated gross abuse of our senior citizens as they live in silence and ignorance of their rights.

It is also to educate on the human rights of older persons while proffering solutions to the phenomenon of elder abuse. My intention is to expose the existence of this menace, how to detect such abuse and give strategies for intervention and healing. It will further show the lack of appropriate legislation on mistreatment of older persons and enlighten them on how to seek redress.

Principally, the effort is geared at educating the elderly in the Nigerian society who have been victims of abuse individually and severally without knowing what to do or where to go. It will also be useful to caregivers especially children of the elderly, relatives, the youth and even professionals at home and in institutions. Social workers, nurses and community health workers, health care providers, operators of primary healthcare, pension operators, civil servants, lawyers, and the government. Others include operators of NGOs for the elderly, widows, religious organizations especially those with programmes for the elderly, teachers and students of social work, adult education, sociology, psychology and nursing.

## INTRODUCTION

The immediate family members, trusted caregivers or the society often subject the elderly in Nigeria to abuse. They constitute the most vulnerable group after children. This group is highly marginalized. The society needs to begin to see the elderly holistically as a group like children or the youth or women. The elderly have always been seen as objects for welfare and a burden on the family and the system. They need to be seen as people who have rights, preferences and prejudices. What they want is nothing more than equal human rights, nothing more.

In the prime of their lives their contributions to the nation should be recognized and acknowledged. They want equality, which is a human right. They are repositories of wisdom. They have garnered experiences over the years that influence their thoughts especially towards the growth and progress of the nation. They built the country and made it what it is today. Without their collective efforts of the past, there would not be the Nigeria of today.

The history of development of Nigeria or any nation in all spheres cannot be written without the contributions of the elderly to national development taking the pride of place. Yet when they are expected to enjoy the fruits of their labour or reap where they have sown, they are marginalized and left to fight the most difficult battle of their lives – how to live well and cope with abuse in old age.

The most vulnerable amongst the elderly are the poor and disadvantaged ones who often times are on the receiving end. They are in the rural and urban areas, among educated and uneducated and in all the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are neglected and abandoned. They are subjected to all kinds of human degradation. They are deprived of respect and their rights. They are abused.

The level of awareness on the plight of the elderly is low. There is therefore the need to direct the attention of the society and the government to the phenomenon of elder abuse, create and sustain programmes that will assist the abused, and abuser in prevention and intervention strategies that will benefit all in the society.

To put a stop to elder abuse and some aspects of family violence, all hands must be on deck. It is a social issue that deserves society's attention. Old age is a stage that we all live and pray to

attain – to have and enjoy good health but what are all doing to make that stage a comfortable and pleasurable place?

Elderly persons do have rights, deserve to enjoy their rights, demand respect and should be protected by the society against all forms of rights' denial and abuse. The elderly that we individually, severally and collectively abuse become a burden on us all. Should the young who will one day be old and need to live in the unity and continuity of life grow to meet a society that exploits and abuses the rights of the elderly?

The issue of abuse has not been adequately addressed especially in Nigeria because it is not recognized as a serious matter. The acts of abuse are usually regarded as normal behaviour in the society. There is a 'secret-cult' silence on the issue of abuse of the elderly. The victims of abuse and others are reluctant to talk about it, and there is constant denial by victims and abusers. They continue to suffer in silence, enduring the anguish associated with the menace. What can we, as ordinary Nigerians, the government, families, communities do to open up this can of worms and bring succour to the elderly in our communities? After all, we all hope to be numbered among the elderly one day.

Abuse of the elderly is a serious problem that is not well known although it is global. The issue is often complex and linked with other problems in the society such as age-discriminating attitudes. It is unacknowledged and regarded as a taboo to discuss in the open. When reported it is often dismissed as family or domestic issue that should be resolved in the home. The phenomenon in the last few years has gained some prominence in the public glare and is now considered a social and human rights issue. The attention of the society is beginning to be drawn towards the consequences of the menace long suffered in silence by generations of the elderly.

## **HISTORY OF ELDER ABUSE**

The global attention on the phenomenon of family violence began not too long ago. Towards the end of the twentieth century interpersonal violence such as child or women abuse came up as a social issue and was referred to as 'baby battering' or 'wife beating'.

The menace of elder abuse emerged later. The abuse of older people first came out as an issue around 1975 when some British scientific journals described it as ‘granny battering’, emphasizing on the physical assault of older persons. For a long while it was just a family affair, hidden from the public. Shortly after, the United States perceived it as socio-political and legislative process began on it. Other parts of the United Kingdom did not give elder abuse the attention it deserved until two decade later.

Since the seventies when it became an issue, a lot has been done especially in Europe and North America to focus upon rights, equality and pursuit of quality life for the elderly. Though elder abuse was identified in the developed countries it is a universal phenomenon.

This unfortunately is not the situation in Africa and Asia. The attention on abuse of the older persons in Africa started not long ago and not much as been done especially in the Sub-Saharan region where the group of the elderly is rapidly growing and new roles are expected of them.

Issues of elder abuse like other that concern the older persons have not always caught the attention of the Nigerian society. Industrialization and urbanization are now gradually eroding what is left of the long-standing patterns of inter-dependence between the generations of a family, resulting in material and emotional hardship for the older persons.

As family social supports are diminishing duet to rapid social and economic changes and new roles for older persons who had anticipated support from their children in old age now find themselves providing care to grandchildren without assistance from the family and the society, the prevalence of elder abuse continue to rise in the bus region. This rise has stirred the interest of academics, researches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in elder abuse, which was hitherto unrecognized.

## **WHAT IS ELDER ABUSE?**

Elder abuse cannot be defined in a broad context without referring to the cultural perspective and experience of the older person. Though a definition adopted by 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.” but this will depend on the frequency of occurrence, the duration, extremity, consequences and significantly, in the cultural context.

The abuse of the elderly is either an act of commission or omission and can be described as abusive, neglectful or exploitative, either intentionally or unintentionally but in most cases result in unnecessary suffering, injury and pain, loss or violation of human rights and a decreased quality of life for the older person. It can be of various forms – physical, psychological or emotional, sexual, financial exploitation, cultural, structural and institutional or can simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect.

Therefore, elder abuse is perceived by the older person from different background but with similar experiences in any of these categorized groups:

- Neglect consists of abandonment, isolation and social exclusion, which is common today due to the declining role played by the social support from the family and the society.
- Violation of the human, legal and medical rights of the elderly. They are vulnerable due to inability to enforce their rights because of inadequate laws to protect them or prevent them from being abused. Elder abuse however is a violation of human rights and a significant cause of injury, illness, lost productivity, isolation and despair.
- Deprivation though hitherto not prominent is now a constant experience of abuse among the elderly.

Elder Abuse however from a particular cultural perspective is identified as “having a victim, a perpetrator and others who directly or indirectly observe the principal players.” In most societies the neglect of the care of an older person is considered an act of abuse. The perception of elder abuse differs across cultures and countries. What can be termed or described, as elder abuse in countries in Europe and America might not be so in Africa or Asia. Within a specific country, perception also cut across many lines. In Nigeria, for example some cultural practices associated with the people of the Eastern part of Nigeria are not classified as abuse but in other parts they are. Many older persons in Nigeria believe that any action that diminishes dignity and respect expected to be accorded an elderly person constitute abuse.

## **Classification of Elder Abuse**

The classification of abuse is based on identified experiences and older person's own definitions especially from Nigerian cultural background. What is classified as elder abuse in our environment may not be in some others. A very good example is the issue of institutionalization of elderly. In Western countries such as the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom, it is not considered abuse when a member of a family takes an elderly member to an Old Peoples' Home or a facility for old people where care is given.

It is generally considered a taboo in Nigeria. Such facilities for old people mostly operated by religious bodies and some few non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or government as the case of the one in Lagos, Nigeria have most destitute as occupants. These are elderly people whose children and relatives have abandoned them. Some were picked from the streets and rehabilitated while others were removed from their homes on information supplied by neighbours on the level of neglect and abandonment suffered by these elderly ones.

Recently a top government official in an interview on national television was asked why government was reluctant to build such facilities for the elderly. His response was that the idea of old people's homes "was alien, unafican and a disrespect to the elderly". The premise of his argument is that it is the responsibility of the children or relatives of an elderly person to take care of such a person in old age, when his bones cannot work anymore – *Ti okete ba dagba omu omo e lo ma mu.* – "When the rodent grows to old age it depends on the younger ones for sustenance..." The officials concluded that if his children took him to such a home, he would curse them every morning till he dies. He also added that he would die in no time due to the psychological torment.

A visit to any of these homes will tend to support the argument of the government official. Many of the inmates of such facilities were picked up as destitutes and brought in for care. Others come from ancestral homes far away from where they are presently admitted. Very few have visitors who come to ask after them except for youth groups from religious bodies who come in regularly to keep their company and perhaps a few others who belong to their tribal or cultural community.

Therefore abuse of the elderly can be classified into the following categories – physical, psychological or emotional, neglect and abandonment, sexual, financial or material.

### **Physical Abuse**

Abuse occurs when a considerable level of force is used on an elderly person to cause unnecessary pain or injury. It is the infliction of pain or injury, physical coercion even when the reason is to help the older person. Examples of physical abuse include beating, pushing, kicking, pinching, burning, shoving, drug-induced restraints, over-or under –medicating, depriving the older person of food as punishment and exposing the person to severe weather. Many of these occur within the family but are most times unreported. The elderly are physical abused daily by trusted caregivers.

Due to old age older persons become physically and mentally dependent. This increases the incidence of physical abuse. Most personal duties they can no longer perform by themselves. They are also too weak and frail to defend or fight back when abused.

A wheel chair-bound, elderly man shared his experience on the mistreatment he daily received from the houseboy (male servant) employed to take care of him. He recounted that most times the mood of the boy determined the level of physical abuse he suffered. Said he, “The violent pushing of the wheelchair creates a lot of fear in me. Sometimes when I need to be exposed to some sunshine, the boy abandons me in the sun until such a time that is convenient for him to push me back into the house. I cannot complain to my only daughter who engaged the boy’s services because she once told me to endure all the mistreatment that getting a replacement could be very difficult. Care givers for the elderly are very difficult to secure.”

There are quite a lot of older persons who suffer similar fate in the hands of trusted ones whom they depend on for care. Due to the level of respect accorded the elderly in Nigeria, it is uncommon to have cases of beatings and deliberate infliction of injury on the elderly. Though most injuries suffered by the older persons could be unintentional, the abused fear reporting to other members of the family even when evidence is available.

## **Psychological or Emotional Abuse**

These are quite common and constitute a source of depressive moods in the elderly. Psychological abuse touches the self-dignity of the elderly person. Most times the abuser does not realize or consider his actions as being responsible for so much harm. Younger relations usually attribute indicators of psychological or emotional abuse to old age.

When a family member caregiver behaves in a way that causes fear, mental anguish, and emotional pain or distress to the older person, it can be termed psychological or emotional abuse. Such behaviour could be insults, jokes made to ridicule the older person, threats and indifference affecting the person's mental well-being. Others include name-calling, intimidating and threatening the individual with isolation and neglect and deliberately not talking to the older person, which is called the 'silent treatment' or 'keeping malice'.

An eighty year old confessed that the most disturbing moments for her are when her caregiver who is her youngest daughter, for one reason or the other, especially after being in opposite camps of an argument, decides to keep to herself. "I would want someone to talk to but my daughter would bury herself in a book or watch video tapes in her room. Sometimes, she will have younger friends at home chatting on issues that will not be of interest to me."

The older person with a disability and who depends on others to attend to his or her personal needs suffers grave instances of emotional abuse through insults and name-calling. Most people have a condescending attitude towards the elderly. Treating an older person as a child or calling elderly persons names so as to ridicule them or make them feel inadequate or incapacitated falls into this category of abuse.

A woman whose 70-year-old father is a widower, suffering from a mild stroke and dementia – a condition associated with loss of memory – came into our office asking for assistance because, like she said, the situation had become "unbearable". She tells her story.

"I am the only daughter in my family with two brothers, who are married, comfortable and life abroad with their families leaving the care of our helpless father to me alone. My dad is, educated, worked in the civil service for about thirty-five years before retiring but had never had a good relationship with the extended family. He seldom went to the family compound. He



was self-reliant and never thought he could need the assistance of anyone even in old age. Before he had a stroke, he did everything by himself – from driving to gardening and fetching water from the well whenever the taps went dry. Since our mother died he lived alone with my younger brother who had not yet traveled abroad. I regularly visited from my husband's house to do whatever I could to alleviate the situation but my brother traveled and our father now needs care all day round. Caregivers are very difficult to find and distant relations that he had never assisted when he was in the position to do so are not ready to help.

My brothers regularly send money home but our Dad needs more of care than money. He would soil his clothes, urinate and defecate on himself, in the sitting room, or his bedroom. I had to take him back to his house when my husband and children could not understand and tolerate him anymore. He behaves like a child. Many times I have to scold him, shout at him and even call him names especially when I am also under stress. I need to carry out my responsibilities as a wife and mother to my husband and children, keep my job and at the same time care for him (my father). Please, I need help!" she cried out in frustration.

Confronting her with allegation of gross abuse of her father, she denied ever abusing him. "How can I abuse my father? I respect him a lot, I cannot abuse him, it is not proper in Yoruba land or a child to abuse her father," she tried to explain. Her understanding is that of the average Nigerian whether educated or not.

Abuse, as was explained to the lady, is not just the act of pouring verbal invectives on a person. Most actions that cause infliction of pain on the elderly through mental pain or anguish constitute emotional or psychological abuse. She was adequately educated on abuse of the elderly especially her father.

### **Neglect and Abandonment**

This is another very serious type of abuse – the refusal or failure to fulfill filial obligations. It could either be intentional or unintentional. The lack of attention to meet nutritional, health, and hygiene, physical and emotional needs of an elderly relative. This is when sufficient and adequate care is not given to the elderly or withholding affection and general lack of interest in the older person's well being.

Neglect therefore is the withholding of appropriate attention and intentional failure to meet the physical, social and emotional needs of the older person such as food, water, adequate clothing, drugs, and assistance with the activities of daily living and personal hygiene.

Many young adults are guilty of neglect of their elderly ones. This is quite often ascribed to be downward turn of the Nigeria economy causing unemployment and lack of sufficient financial ability thereby making it difficult for members of the family to perform their filial obligations. Many adult children, who have elderly dependents complain of not having enough to pay school fees of their children, pay rents, buy food and afford the basic necessities of life to their immediate family, how then could they provide for their aged parents? The rural communities are filled with victims of neglect and abandonment. The cities have begun to welcome an array of elderly street beggars who are also victims of neglect. Most of them have children and relatives who have abandoned their responsibilities towards these elderly persons, as a result of rural – urban migration. Many others have children who are abroad and no one to care for them. The homes established and managed by religious organizations and the government has multiple cases of neglect and abandonment. Victims are brought in to these homes regularly when they can no longer cope without assistance. The homes are mostly populated with destitute older persons. It used to be a taboo in the African setting to abandon ones aged parents, the social support network was effectively in place to cushion the effect and the neglected elderly was therefore secure in the community. With the gradual breakdown of the extended family system it becomes difficult for the victim of neglect to cope with living in old age.

However, the older person do harm to himself through self-neglect by not eating properly, not visiting the doctor for needed medical attention and care, excessive use of alcohol, or drugs.

Self-neglect does not constitute elder abuse. Elder abuse has to be perpetrated by others. However, a difficult problem for family members is knowing and respecting the elderly person's right of autonomy and when to intervene before self-neglect, creates potentially dangerous situations and feelings of worthlessness and it isolates the elderly from those who can help.

Negative attitude of workers in health institutions especially health centers in the rural areas sometimes constitute institutional neglect. Elderly patients who need urgent attention are neglected “because they are suffering from old age sickness”. The belief of health workers in rural centers is that it is better to attend to the younger ones at the expense of the older persons because the former has hope but the latter has reached the zenith of their lives.

### **Sexual Abuse**

Not common in Nigeria but when it occurs it is seldom reported. Most cases are ritual – related. Adult sons wanting to be rich or seeking spiritual power rape their mothers. When they are victims of robbery especially those who live alone, also are often sexually abused. Sexual abuse is the non-consenting sexual contact of any kind with the older person. Sexual abuse includes inappropriate touching, forcing older persons to look at pornographic materials, posing nude for photography or any unwanted sexual behaviour. In Nigeria many believe that women might be victims of sexual abuse but that older men are sexual abusers. Many cases of elderly men raping young teenage girls are constantly reported in the society.

### **Financial Abuse**

Financial or material abuse is the illegal or improper exploitation or use of funds or resources of the older person. Financial exploitation of the elderly includes all forms of fraud, taking money under false pretence, forging of any kind of document to dupe the older person, illegal forced taking over of assets and property and the use of funds belonging to the elderly to purchase expensive and inappropriate items for either the older person’s use or the use of another person. Grandparents who ear some pension or social security allowance we forced into new roles of parenting orphaned grandchildren. What little pension or allowance they receive, which is barely enough to meet the needs of the elderly relative, are used by the family to minimally feed or survive on. The children who fail in their filial obligations also try to exploit their comfortable parents. They generally believe that the needs of the elderly are few so they (older persons) need little money to spend. Theft is a common form of financial abuse.

Children, grandchildren, caregivers and relatives steal from the older persons. Properties are sold without their consent and the proceeds spent without their knowledge.

### **Societal/Cultural Abuse**

This has to do with the attitude of members of the society towards issues of culture. Issues of culture as related to the elderly are sometimes used in abusing the elderly. Accusations of witchcraft based on fragility of an elderly women, her use of walking stick and her bent figure due to old age results to ostracism and stigmatization. Most women, who live alone, especially in isolated buildings, are labeled witches and any negative occurrence in the neighbourhood such as the death of young ones or epidemics are believed to be as a result of their witchcraft practices.

A woman and her daughter driving across a village in South West Nigeria, in a attempt to avoid crushing an elderly woman who crossed the highway without properly watching, swerved off the road, had a head-on collision with an on-coming truck and died on the spot. The elderly woman was accused of “donating” the blood of the dead woman and her daughter to the witch’s coven. She was beaten and lynched by the angry youths of the village. The woman driver of the vehicle had apparently been over-speeding and had found it difficult to control the car when she suddenly sighted the old woman.

Cultural abuse also includes the older person being forbidden to speak his/her own language. The situation is common among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. Children of educated and some uneducated people do not understand the language of their parents so when their grand parents come visiting they (the elderly) are forced to speak in the only language, which is usually spoken, in most cases the English language. Some adult parents will insist on the grandparents not speaking “vernacular” to their children. The older relative finds it difficult to communicate except through house helps and the domestic staff.

Traditional attires worn over the years by the older person are sometimes forbidden of the elderly. Some refer to this mode of dressing as “not current or out of fashion”. They conclude that it might embarrass them when worn by the elderly parents or relatives. The attitude of

drivers and conductors of commercial vehicles constitute abuse. They shout and bully the slow and sluggish older person. When angry they tell the older persons to “go and die at home!”

### **Structural/Institutional Abuse**

This is abuse by the systems. The dehumanizing treatment of older people who suffer in institutions and marginalization by the government. For those who worked in the organized private sector and the public sector and are entitled to pensions, the improper ways they are treated leaves much to be desired. Pensions are not enough to allow for reasonable quality of life. Irregular payment and long delay in payment of gratuities after retirement are examples of abuse. Periodic, hectic and improperly conducted verification and registration of pensioners is gross abuse of the elderly. For those who did not work in these sectors and are not entitled to pensions no social security system is available to cushion the effect of lack of income in old age. They also suffer difficulty in accessing government services due to mistreatment and harassment by government officials.

Age discriminatory policies and practices and the lack of adequate policies to cater for the needs and welfare of the elderly constitute elder abuse. Another very significant form of abuse of the older person is the insecurity and violence that older people are subjected to in conflict situations and emergencies and lack of provision for the older persons in relief programmes.

Man-made and natural disasters do happen and the elderly are usually not considered in rescue plans and rehabilitation processes. The situation of the elderly in Darfur in the Sudan is dehumanizing. The recent communal clashes in some parts of Plateau State are examples of mistreatment of elderly. Frail and feeble older persons were abandoned in the various homes, some burnt along with the buildings when help was not forthcoming. Government did not make any special arrangement or even consider the elderly in its rehabilitation programme after the crises.

In a harmless discussion with post-graduate students on the issue of elder abuse, the question: What is elder abuse? By one of the students surprised all. The question came with sincerity of the heart; unlike most people who fail to admit that this menace that daily constitutes living challenges for our elderly ones is a reality.

One said it was the act of passing insults to an older person. Another volunteered that it must be any behaviour that causes disrespect to the person of the elderly. Elder abuse, yet another concluded, must be when you take your aged parent to the old people's home. These questions and many more represent the different shades of opinion on the issue of the elder abuse.

Inquiring from the elders themselves with reveal a similar pattern of diversity of expression in the ideas on elder abuse principally based on individual experience. A retired civil servant who is made to go through the annual exacerbating ritual of verification

inability to be self reliant due to insufficient or complete lack of income makes the elderly to be financially and materially dependent. Many, during their active years, worked in the informal sector mostly as farmers, fishermen and artisans and have no pensions or any form of income in retirement, but depend solely on children and relatives. Even for those who worked in the formal sector the irregular, insufficient and often difficult to get pensions make them look up to their children for financial assistance.

The financial stress being experienced by the children due to the prevailing economic climate makes filial obligation very difficult. Most people who have dependent elders consign the needs of the elderly relative to the bottom of the list of issues to be given attention. Any increase in the financial allocation to any other responsibility affects that of the elderly. Most times the inability or failure to give is justified by the statement, “After all I am not his only child, other stood will give”.

Migration, urbanization and industrialization greatly contribute to the risk factor of abuse as many elderly ones live in isolation and loneliness. Children who should have provided strong companionship in old age are scattered all over the world in search of the proverbial Golden Fleece. The attraction of employment opportunities in cities has made them leave their parents and relatives in the rural areas where majority of the elderly reside and are therefore left to the vagaries of lack and poverty.

Festive periods such as Christmas, Easter, Sallah, are the only times when these aged ones get to see their children. Immediately after, families return to their places of work in the cities and the elderly are left alone to continue to face the hard realities of living. Taking the aged relative to the city sometimes could also constitute a risk of abuse. The dislocation from the natural habitation to a new unfamiliar terrain where the opportunity to socially interact with peers is non-existent adversely affects the older person. Therefore, whatever is provided for comfort for such an elderly person, which is likely to be different from what he or she is used to, may do more harm than good.

The elderly who have children abroad might enjoy the regular receipt of packages from across the oceans but does the content of such packages substitute for the presence and care from loved

ones? Many claim to have more than enough especially with most needs already provided for by income from investments but lack of companionship puts them at risk of abuse.

The plight of the older woman in our traditional societies is pitiable. Women often times outlive their husbands. The loss of her loved one notwithstanding, she faces many unpalatable experiences. Traditional burial rituals and horrific mourning rites subject the widow to inhuman and cruel practices. Having to dress in uncomfortable clothing for a long period of time, eat on the tombstone or graveside or drink the water used in washing her late husband's body to prove her innocence of accusation of killing her husband exposes her to abuse.

The practice of forced levirate marriages, where the widow is passed on like a piece of furniture to the brother or male relative of the late husband as wife even when it is against her wish is very common. Disinheritance of widows continues unabated in some societies and gives way to their property being seized. She either moves in with one of her children or moves back to her own family house.

Unexplained negative occurrences in the society such as mysterious or multiple deaths, lack of success in human endeavours of children or relatives, epidemics and childlessness of daughters and daughters-in-law are believed to be enough reasons to accuse an isolated elderly woman of practicing witchcraft. Youths in the neighbourhood do not hesitate to take the law into their hands to deliver "judgment" by stoning such women to death. The accusation is more established if the woman looks frail and bent from the process of ageing in poverty. Many elderly women have been put at risk of this gross abuse of their person. With education, a lot of people are turning away from such beliefs but countless others still practice it.

The economic downturn has forced many adult children to turn to their older parents or relatives for financial assistance. Those who own assets and property are at the risk of being abused through financial exploitation by their younger relative. Though those with strong social contacts, solid economic base and material assets are better positioned to resist threats of abuse or to seek support when abuse occurs.

Diminished family roles could be a result of one or a combination of factors but this also puts the elderly in a position of risk of abuse. Those who live in fear of one impending danger or the other run risk of being abused especially when living with an adult caregiver also. When



consideration is not given to the problems encountered by the caregiver, the possibility of the caregiver also abusing the care recipient is almost certain.

Isolation and loneliness endanger the lives of the elderly. They might be unable to protect themselves from sexual and violent attacks. What defense can be put up in the advent of an attack when frail bones can barely move her around the house?

The lack of political will by the government to make laws and institute policies specifically to address issues of the well-being of the elderly, issues of prevention and interaction, and how to seek redress in cases of abuse of the elderly makes the elderly susceptible to abuse. The government in a ritual of shame also share the insensitivity and disrespect by subjecting the senior citizens to a regular sham called verification exercise for pensioners to physically present themselves before they are paid the peanuts called pensions.

The lack of a social security system to carry the burden of these people who have put in the strength of their youth to build the nation allows all forms of abuse to be constantly meted out on them. No respect or considerations are given even for those who are sick, tired, incapacitated, demented or poor. All have to regularly present themselves for verification. Government should devise a more humane and respectable method of carrying out such exercises to reduce the level of abuse of this group of people.

The attitude of our younger generation to the elderly is quite despicable. There is much intolerance and impatience for the elderly on the part of the youth. The middle aged adult, the sandwich generation saddled with the responsibility of caring for aged parents and young children exhibit some consideration but the young generation does not see anything good in the elderly. The issue of mothers and daughters-in-law can be likened to the relationship between rivals contending for the attention and love of one person. The intolerance of daughters-in-law has caused a lot of trouble in most homes and has led to abuse in several forms. The stability of some marriages has been rocked to the foundations when not properly handled. Sometimes extreme forms of violence, which could have resulted in murder, have occurred. A woman who could not absolve “the negative tendencies” of her mother-in-law pushed her down the stairs hoping that if the mother-in-law died it would be rationalized that she slipped while going down the stairs.

In public places buildings are not constructed to be elderly friendly. Social amenities are not provided for use of the elderly. They have to contend with the stronger younger ones. To enter a public bus or taxi, the elderly have to struggle to get a space. While crossing the roads the commercial drivers easily shout abusive words at the elderly. There are no specific crossing points for the elderly.

Finally, the elderly are acquiring new roles in the society part from being repositories of wisdom and knowledge. Parenting of orphans as a result of the death of one or two parents of young children due to the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other sources of death among young adults become the responsibility of the elderly. Therefore, there is the need to create awareness on this menace and sensitize the society and government on the causes, prevention and intervention strategies, the impact and consequences and how and where to seek redress when abuse occurs.

The paper has tried to identify and conceptualize the problem of elder abuse in a wider perspective, while defining it in the context of the Nigerian situation. It explains elder abuse from the global and historical perspective, identifying the various forms of abuse, their prevention and intervention strategies, societal norms to confront it, the roles of individuals, family, the society and government and teaching the rights of the older person in addition to where to go when seeking redress.

Principally, the piece is for the elderly in the Nigerian society who have been victims of abuse severally without knowing what to do or where to go but it will also be useful to caregivers especially children of the elderly, relatives, the youth and even professionals at home and in institutions. Social workers, nurses and community health workers, health care providers, operators of primary healthcare, pension operators, civil servants, lawyers, and the government. Others include operators of NGOs for the elderly, widows, religious organizations especially those with programmes for the elderly, teachers and students of social work, adult education, sociology, psychology and nursing.

## **RIGHTS OF OLDER PERSONS**

The elderly also have rights and these are listed hereunder:

The importance of the rights of the older persons cannot be overemphasized. Denial of these rights is a form of elder abuse and this hinders the achievement of optimal potentials of the older person. The United Nations Organization has recognized that abuse, neglect and violence at any stage in life or to any group of people are human rights issues.

Therefore major United Nations Conferences and Summits have set goals, objective and commitments such as the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all older persons while ensuring the full enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights of older persons, the elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against older persons.

The promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to development, is essential for the creation of an inclusive society for all ages in which older persons participate fully without discrimination and on the basis of equality.

Also combating discrimination based on age and promoting the dignity of older persons is fundamental to ensuring the respect that older persons deserve noting that promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedom is important in order to achieve a society of all ages.

Human rights and individual liberty, especially the right to freedom from violence, constitute the most precious gift to a human being. Such rights and freedom have been subject to violation and there is need for their protection as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human rights emphasizes the importance of protecting the rights, inherent dignity of older persons and the equal and achievable rights of all members of the human family as a foundation for freedom, justice and peace.

Therefore the violation can be viewed from the three dimensions of the

- i. Right to know
- ii. Right to redress for victims (compensation, rehabilitation and restitution).

- iii. Rights of victims and society to adequate investigation and punishment of perpetrators of abuse and violation of rights.

In December 1991, the United Nations adopted a set of principles for older person recommending that all member governments incorporate them into their programs for older people. The principles are based on the following Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons which was summarized by the United Nations General Assembly as follows, “To add life to the years that have added to life, assuring all older persons: independence, participation, care, self fulfillment and dignity.” The **United Nations Principles for Older Persons (resolution 46/91) 16 December 1991**, are paraphrased below:

### **Independence**

Older persons have the right –

1. Of access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, and health care through the provision of income, family and community support and help;
2. To work and pursue other income generating opportunities without barriers based on age;
3. To retire and participate in determining when and at what pace withdrawal from the labour force takes place;
4. To access education and training programs to enhance literacy, facilitate employment, and permit informed planning and decision making;
5. To live in environments that are safe and adaptable to personal preferences and changing capacities;
6. To reside at home as long as possible.

### **Participation**

Older persons have the right-

7. To remain integrated and participate actively in society, including the process of development and the formulation and implementation of policies, which directly affect their well-being;

8. To share their knowledge, skills, values and life experiences with the younger generations;
9. To seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in position;
10. To form movements or associations of the elderly.

## **Care**

Older persons have the right –

11. To benefit from family support and care consistent with the well-being of the family;
12. To access health to help them maintain the optimum level of physical, mental and emotional well-being and to prevent or delay the onset of illness;
13. To access social and legal services to enhance capacity for autonomy and provide protection and care;
14. To utilize appropriate levels of institutional care which provide protection, rehabilitation and social and mental stimulation in a humane and secure environment?
15. To exercise human rights and fundamental freedoms when residing in any shelter, care of treatment facility including residing in any shelter, care or treatment facility respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy and for the right to make decisions about their care and quality of life.

## **Self-fulfillment**

Older persons have the right –

16. To pursue opportunities for the full development of their potential;
17. To access the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of society.

## **Dignity**

18. To be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, disability or other status, and to be valued independently of their economic contributions;

- 19.To live in dignity and security and to be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse and all forms of abuse.
- 20.To exercise personal autonomy in health care decision-making, including the right to die with dignity by assenting to or rejecting treatment designed solely to prolong life.

The basic rights of the elderly such as the right to life, liberty, right to work, to freedom from discrimination, are constantly violated, They are abused by Family members, caregivers and community members.

Generally in African and specifically in Nigeria the belief that traditions of respect mean that all people are well treated especially by the extended family system, helping to uphold their rights but it is not the case. Age based discrimination is pervasive and prevents older people from accessing basic rights such as adequate health care and legal protection. Older persons are abused daily. Though the situation is universal, it is most prevalent in developing nations such as Nigeria.

The Africa Union in its polity framework and plan of action on Ageing therefore recommended that member states recognize the fundamental rights of older persons and commit themselves to abolish all forms of discrimination based on age; that they undertake to ensure that the rights of older people are protected by appropriate legislation including the right to organize themselves in groups and to representation in order to advance their interest and they should also undertake all the necessary measures to ensure that older people can have access to all their rights.

To achieve this, member states are advised, among others things to provide direct and permanent legal assistance to older persons to defend their rights; ensure that the UN Principles for Older Persons (independence, dignity, self fulfillment, participation and care) are legally binding and implemented; develop and review legislation to ensure that older people especially women, receive equitable treatment from customary and statutory laws including reviews of legislation on property and land rights; inheritance laws; social security legislation; enact legislation which makes it an offence for family members, the community or other persons to

abuse older persons; and to ensure that sensitization and information programmes relating to the rights of older persons involve older people at all levels.

There are presently no specific laws to defend and enforce the rights of older persons in Nigeria, some institutions assist to monitor, enforce and seek redress as moral and statutory responsibilities or societal obligations on behalf of the elderly. These institutions include.

1. National Human Rights Commission
2. Legal Aid Council
3. Public Complaint Commission
4. The Media
5. Non-Governmental Organizations such as the African Gerontological Society (AGES)
6. The Centre on Ageing, Development & Rights of Older Persons (CADROP)
7. International Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA Nigeria) a coalition against abuse of Older Persons in Nigeria.

The elderly who has suffered any form of abuse can approach these institutions for assistance. It is imperative that enforcement of human rights leads to the eradication of abuse and better quality of life for all in the society.

## **PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION**

Prevention can only be successful where there is deliberate and concerted effort to educate and change the attitudes of individuals and the society to the special needs and challenges of the elderly. Information on causes and consequences will help to develop broad-based intervention strategies to tackle elder abuse. The older persons themselves need to participate in policy discussions to express how it affects them, ways of prevention and how to seek redress.

The most important aspect of preventing elder abuse begins with the recognition that no one should be subjected to violence, abuse, humiliation and neglect. Education should be given about elder abuse and its consequences and promotion of change in social attitude especially intergeneration relationships. Most times increased social contact and support from families can

prevent factors that contribute to abuse. There is a need for counseling and treatment as there are sure indications that the people involved themselves also need help. Education is portentous to preventing elder abuse, especially informing the older persons of their rights, responsibilities and support to exercise these rights.

The rights and responsibilities are contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights United Nations Principles for Older Persons, International Plan of Action on Ageing and National Laws and Policies. Older persons who know their rights would most likely not be abused and even when abused would know how to seek redress or prevent future occurrence or know who to report to. Many countries have organizations that are responsible for counseling where abuse has been committed.

The media is an important tool for mass education. The radio is a constant companion of the elderly, therefore it should air programmes in the local language to address issues of elder abuse. Other tools of mass dissemination include the television through which programmes of interest can be broadcast to the elderly.

Changing attitudes and behaviour of people is a fundamental preventive strategy. This can be achieved through public enlightenment programmes and regular talks and seminars in schools, public and private establishments, etc.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is the urgent need for countries all over the world to formulate policies on the issue of elder abuse. A comprehensive social policy should be made for upholding the rights and responsibilities of elder persons. All instruments for proper coordination of implementation should be made available and the policy adequately monitored. There is need for more action and less talk.

In Nigeria, a national policy on the care and welfare of the elderly with sections on elder abuse should be put in place with local state and Federal Governments enacting laws to suit the diversity of the cultural background in the country. Institutional rivalry within the Ministries of Health and Social Development has profound effect on the welfare of the elderly. There should



be better collaboration between the two ministries in the implementation of any policy or programme on the elderly at Federal and State Government levels.

The public should be educated and a campaign to abolish the various stereotypes and prejudices should be undertaken. The society should be made to know that the elderly constitute a positive force in the society. There should be more effective prevention strategies. Primary intervention and prevention methods can be established to build a society where elderly persons live in dignity and respect have access to the basic needs of life and with opportunities for self fulfillment. Prevention starts with awareness.

An important aspect of awareness is training those saddled with the responsibilities of providing professional healthcare and social services both in the community and in institutional settings. Older persons should be trained to know what to do in case of a threat or actual case of abuse.

Advocacy groups with members among the youth and some elderly ones should seriously fight for attitudinal change especially among the youth. This group should also enlighten the society on the consequences of the breakdown of the family support system.

Finally the pension system should be structured to be of great benefit to the elderly. The country should have a system that pays adequate and regular pensions. The issues of pension has generated a lot of controversy but when a pension system that works well is established, there will be less corruption in the private and public sectors of the economy.

## **Conclusion**

Like other members of the human race the basic and essential needs of the elderly such as food, adequate housing, healthcare, security, love and access to income in old age must be provided for the problems of elder to be solved. Policies should be formulated and resources allocated to provide for the well being of older persons.

Ageing is a natural process and the right to live in dignity, free from all forms of abuse and exploitation are all that are required from the society. The isolated, lonely life troubled probably by illness makes the elderly vulnerable as targets for fraudulent schemes and violent crime.

Therefore an enabling environment where the older person can feel free from fear, abuse, violence, neglect and abandonment must be created. It is not a crime to grow old. It is even

more of a privilege with the life expectancy of Nigerians put at 49 years for men and 53 years for women.

The need to capitalize on the skills, wisdom, experience and resourcefulness of our elderly cannot be overemphasized. They remain the source of wise counseling and our link to the past. Without them the future is not secure. For there to be continuity in the human race the elderly should be accorded the proper respect and put in the right position. They should therefore live in dignity without fear, abuse and exploitation.

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