



Is there a lesser value type of violence? Older people abuse: “The silence of the lambs”

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes gender violence as a real global health problem with a major impact not only on the victims’ physical and mental health, but also on the economics of the National Health System. Gender-based violence has been also extended to all types of subjects defined as fragile: children, elderly, women, men and disabled people. Older people abuse, more frequent in women, is a far less socially debated issue, with many forms: physical, sexual, psychological, abandonment, neglect, economic-financial, pharmaceutical, discriminatory, institutional. An electronic literature research was carried out search using the keywords “elderly abuse” on various online sources. The research showed low number of results and little attention to this topic in the scientific literature. The paper highlights how the theme of older people abuse is little reported and not adequately addressed in scientific literature and in real life, being a form of violence certainly underestimated by the public.

1. Introduction

Violence against older people is certainly one of the least known forms of violence, despite being significantly represented worldwide. The 2015 WHO “World report on aging and health” describes a prevalence between 2.2 % and 14 %, including physical abuse (0.2–4.9 %) sexual abuse (0.04–0.82 %), psychological abuse (0.7–6.3 %), financial abuse (1–9.2 %), neglect (0.2–5.5 %) and other minor forms of harassment [1]. The known main risk factors are: female sex, age >74 years, disability and mental disorders, poor socioeconomic status, social isolation. Today, the most common types of violence are neglect and psychological or emotional abuse, which creates a picture that is clearly different from the past, dominated by physical and sexual violence [2]. Studies often fail to understand the data regarding the most susceptible older population, i.e. subjects with dementia or living in nursing homes, thus showing an incomplete evaluation of the phenomenon.

It is not surprising how particularly sensitive and involved could be the category of older women, certainly more easily affected than men. Also in this case, violence is obviously not exclusively physical, but also:

psychological, sexual, economic-financial, pharmaceutical, discriminatory, or institutional [3].

Nevertheless, there is no actual and univocal data about elderly violence and female gender.

An issue, already known in recent years, is the very low number of complaints from victims: it is a quite total “silence of the lambs” endowed with numerous non-specific clinical manifestations and an extremely complex social picture [4]. The problem is linked to the little attention that is generally paid to this issue, as also demonstrated by the few numbers of scientific studies and the poor media coverage that make it a hidden phenomenon, but not less important or less present.

2. Materials and methods

Our study focused on the comparison of the number of the papers about older people violence throughout the years, with a quantitative and qualitative approach.

The research was carried out using some well-known scientific dissemination sites (PubMed, Google Scholar, Web Of Science, Science

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Direct) using the key words: “elderly abuse”.

Then, articles were independently searched and reviewed. All articles in English that responded to the search for the cited keywords from the first scientific appearance to December 31, 2022 were included. Articles in other languages and not related to the topic were excluded. Titles and abstracts were screened, and then the characteristics and main results of included studies were recorded. This process yielded a total of 8439 articles made up of systematic reviewed articles, commentaries and publications on the subject topic. After this process, articles that did not adequately address the main objectives of the study were excluded.

3. Results

In literature, the keywords “elderly abuse” has led to a significantly low number of results, confirming that is still an extremely little-known topic.

These scientific articles could be read and quantified from the different online sources updated to 2022: PubMed: 78; Google Scholar: 5750; Web of Science: 85; Science Direct: 197.

4. Discussion

The first publication can be found starting from 1982, which lays the foundations for the analysis of violence against older people, but without deepening physical or psychological consequences [5].

In 1989, research was suggestive, indicating older people abuse as a new real “disease of the 1980s”, and firstly focused on possible risk factors [6].

Moreover, another perspective was offered by Lett’s article [7], in which an increase in reports of older people abuse was identified, but above all, a consistent government problem was recognized: the available economic resources resulted almost 10 times less than those allocated, for example, for child abuse, configuring an underestimated but rapidly worsening situation.

In the 1990s, the psychological, economic, social, and even political-organizational aspects of this form of abuse began to be taken into greater consideration, thus showing major changes in the approach of care, still not understood [8]. Only in 2002, academic questions were raised about how healthcare personnel could recognize victims of abuse, and how could prevent such events [9]. Over last decades, attention has poorly focused on older people abuse, and on the definition of the prevalence of the phenomenon, of the risk factors and of the tools to identify and prevent this violence [10,11].

This work is meant to be a starting point for more in-depth future argumentations. As limitations, we point out the very schematic description of the topic, and the remote possibility that less common synonyms have been used in the literature for this thematic and have not been considered in this discussion.

We are certain that it is necessary to broaden the theme by also considering other aspects, such as inadequate care and the safeguarding of the older population.

Moreover, the lengthening of life prospects and the longer female life expectancy cause the need of a special attention to this category and a better protection for the relative vulnerability.

5. Conclusions

Highlighted the presence of different types of older people violence, an electronic literature search showed how this type of abuse is little

reported and is not adequately addressed in literature and in real life, therefore it is necessary to greatly increase attention to this social problem.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Claudia Casella: Conceptualization. **Carmen Imma Aquino:** Writing – original draft. **Laura Sarno:** Supervision. **Gaetano Di Donna:** Writing – original draft. **Emanuele Capasso:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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