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Domestic violence against the elderly – a modern challenge to social aid

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Abstract

Domestic violence against elderly family members is one of the many problems faced by the social aid system in Poland. It seems to have increased in recent years, which may be due to greater social awareness of the problem and the functioning of institutions providing aid in such cases, or to the growing courage of victims. It is reasonable to assume that the problem will only increase, as the society ages and the numbers of elderly increase and as the elderly themselves become more aware of their rights. The legal system has to be ready for this.

The aim of the article is to explain why domestic violence against the elderly is a modern challenge for the social aid system. The problem will be presented in relation to research done in social aid institutions in Podlasie, presenting the scale of the problem of violence against the elderly, the characteristics of the victims and suggestions for improvements to existing regulations.

Introduction

The core document regulating social aid in Poland is the Act of 12 March 2004 on Social Aid and its amendments. Crucially, art. 2 of this documents presents a definition of social aid: “social aid is and institution of social policy, with the purpose of helping individuals and families overcome difficult situations, which they are incapable of overcoming using their own rights, resources and abilities”. Describing social aid as a part of the social policy of the state indicates that it is one of the state’s obligations

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and citizens have the right to expect the state to take responsibility for families and members of the community (Szarota 2010, Sierpowska 2007, p. 24). Furthermore, art. 3 of the Act states that: “social aid supports individuals and families in meeting their basic needs, allowing them to live in conditions consistent with human dignity and prevents difficult life situations by supporting the independence and social integration of families and individuals”.

Therefore, social aid is a deliberate attempt by the state to meet various significant social needs and solving problems. Andrzej Mielczarek refers to this by stating that: “social aid was created as an answer to the needs of society and its members relating to health care, education and improving living conditions. Optimally society should use social aid institutions to allow all people to fully participate in society” (Mielczarek 2010, p. 101). Different people have different needs and are therefore entitled to receive social aid due to poverty, orphanhood, homelessness, unemployment, disability, chronic illness, helplessness in matters of care and education, etc. However, currently one of the areas of social aid, which requires more attention, is domestic violence.

The family is the basic unit of society, the primary institution providing the biological continuation of society, as well as “transmitting the basics of cultural identity of the broader community” (Adamski, 2002, p. 27). These two functions are enough to show the significance of the family to society. However, the modern family faces numerous threats to its stability – financial difficulties, housing issues, difficulties with rearing children, etc. are conducive to the dissolution of marriages – divorce or separation. These are the most drastic results of difficulties modern families face. Many families continue despite the problems they face. One of these problems is violence. Physical, emotional, financial or sexual abuse, as well as neglect of the weakest or helpless family members, are difficult experiences, with many negative results. The situation varies depending on who is the victim of violence in the family (Maćkiewicz, 2015).

This paper focuses on the situation of elderly victims of violence. The aim of the article is to explain why violence against the elderly within the family is a modern challenge to social aid. To that purpose the scale of the problems will be presented, evaluated on the basis of research performed in social aid institutions in Podlasie, as well as describing the characteristics of elderly victims of domestic violence and their situation.

Some Notes Concerning the Organization of Research

The empirical data forming the basis for this text was obtained through quantitative and qualitative research performed among the employees of social aid institutions in Podlasie.

The object of the research was domestic violence against the elderly, defined – following the WHO definition – as people aged 60 or more. Firstly, the scale of the

problem, the most common forms of violence, its distinguishing features compared to other groups of victims, etc., were evaluated based on a diagnostic survey conducted among the employees of social aid and crisis intervention centers in Podlasie. The next step was to conduct interviews with the same group of respondents, using a standardized list of points of interest (Konecki, 2000, pp. 169–170; Sołoma, 1999, pp. 65). Authors of the text followed a rule that one employee was interviewed in each of the social aid centers (city, borough, city and borough social aid centers, crisis intervention center) in the region, as well as a psychologist, if one is employed by a particular institution. Overall, there were 145 respondents in both stages of research, 133 social aid workers and 12 psychologists. The research was conducted in December 2011. The survey was subject to statistical analysis, while recordings of the interviews were transcribed for a deeper qualitative analysis.

The Scale of Domestic Violence against the Elderly

Research conducted among the employees of social aid institutions indicates that the problem of abuse and neglect is analyzed by social aid institutions. Out of 145 institutions participating in the research more than a half (85–58.6%) had contact with an elderly victim of domestic violence within five years prior to the research (table 1).

The problem was most often recognized in urban areas (i.e. by City Social Aid Centers), while in rural areas approximately as many Borough Social Aid Centers had and had not encountered cases of violence against the elderly (53.2% and 46.8% respectively). Furthermore, even if an institution had had experience with an elderly victim of violence, most often (65.9%) it consisted of one or two cases. Fewer (34.1%) institutions had dealt with three or more victims of violence. It can be concluded that elderly victims of domestic violence approach social aid institutions, but only rarely. The problem is still taboo, a shameful experience which people are unlikely to share with others, not to mention notifying the relevant authorities. Nevertheless, when asked about the changes they have seen over the years, social aid workers most often (61.2%) stated that in recent years there have been more reports of domestic violence against the elderly.

Table 1. Various institutions' experiences with elderly victims of domestic violence

TYPE OF INSTITUTION	Has your institution had contact with an elderly victim of domestic violence in 2005–2010?				OVERALL	
	YES		NO			
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Borough Social Aid Center	33	53.2	29	46.8	62	100.0
City Social Aid Center	28	77.8	8	22.2	36	100.0

City and borough Social Aid Center	6	50.0	6	50.0	12	100.0
Social Aid Center	7	35.0	13	65.0	20	100.0
Crisis Intervention Center	11	73.3	4	26.7	15	100.0
Overall	85	58.6	60	41.4	145	100.0

$p < 0.01$

Subject literature indicates a number of factors allowing us to draw conclusions about the growing number of reports concerning cases of violence against the elderly. More frequent discussions of the issue play a major role. In the words of Jaonna Cichla: "The growing interest in problems of violence exposed by the media and the opening of the collective awareness to this issue, has led to a change in the perception of this problem as one restricted to marginal or pathological families. This change in attitudes makes it easier for women to take the decision to reveal the tragedy of their marriages" (Cichla, 2009, p. 119). Social aid workers participating in the study have made similar statements.

After the answers to the open question about the reasons why the number of reports of violence against the elderly has increased were divided into categories (the interviewees gave various explanations) we found that almost all interviewees (96.2%), who noticed an increase in the number of cases of domestic violence against the elderly indicated that this is the result of increased media coverage of this problem and it coming up more often in various meetings. It is worth quoting some of their answers.

The head of one of the Borough Social Aid Centers stated that: *violence was always there, it's not like it wasn't. It was there, but behind closed doors, now it's talked about more, so people are more aware* (GOPS, F, 46³), or a similar comment: *nowadays violence is spoken about more openly and maybe people are more educated about it and talk about it more. It was there before, but people didn't talk about it* (GOPS, F, 44). Another interviewee stated that *people talk about it on TV more and maybe that's why people are more willing to go to an institution and ask for help* (GOPS, F, 34). The head of one of the Social Aid Centers made an interesting comment: *I'll be frank, up to 2008, cases of violence here mostly involved young couples with children, where the perpetrators were alcohol abusing spouses. Elderly victims only started appearing after 2008 when we started receiving signals. Neighbors and acquaintances started opening*

³ Information in brackets indicates the type of institution – Borough Social Aid Center (pol. Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – GOPS), City Social Aid Center (pol. Miejski Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – MOPS), City-Borough Social Aid Center (pol. Miesko-Gminny Ośrodek Pomocy Społecznej – MGOPS), Crisis Intervention Center (pol. Ośrodek Interwencji Kryzysowej – OIK), the gender of the interviewee (M – male or F – female) and their age.

up and informing us about incidents. I think we have to thank the media, that people started talking about it, that this problem exists (OPS, F, 36). The situation is presented well by the following quote: “an increase in the number of cases of violence can be attributed to an increase in violence in modern households (...). Fictional and non-fiction accounts of child abuse and violence against spouses disseminate knowledge about the problem, let people know where they can find help and this makes them more likely to report such cases” (Herzberger, 2002, p. 36).

Another factor, which could have contributed to the increase in statistics concerning domestic violence against the elderly, often mentioned by the interviewees, are new aid tools dedicated to this group (38.5%). The following opinion came up during one of the interviews: *right now there is a lot of talk about the problem of violence, because ne programs have been introduced for counteracting it. And someone finally took interest in the elderly and made a variety of steps and programs for this particular group* (MOPS, F, 56), or a statement by a Crisis Intervention Center employee: *I've got a feeling that the procedures have been upgraded, people have been trained, and people pay more attention to the problem of violence. The Blue Card⁴ procedure had changed a lot of things, now interdisciplinary teams have been introduced, so I think that a lot has improved from a procedural point of view* (OIK, F, 41). One could therefore suppose that the novelization of the *Act on Preventing Domestic Violence* introduced on 1 August 2010 brings expected results. It may be a slow process, but most importantly, something is changing and for the better. And one more piece of information – among the other explanations for why the number of cases of violence against the elderly increased there were some which stated that the elderly simply cannot take the stress connected with their situation and that is why they decide to reveal their problem to the appropriate services. This opinion was held by 30.8% of the employees who had had experience working with elderly victims of domestic violence. Taking the presented information into account, it is clear that the problem of domestic violence against the elderly is a significant problem that comes up in social aid work more often than it used to. In the opinion of 53.8% of the respondents the scale of the problem may increase in the future. Why is that?

Employees of aid institutions explained that the number of elderly grows and there will be more of them, so the problem of violence may increase (GOPS, F, 50). Others noted that the mindset of young people now is different, with no respect for old age, which makes future acts of violence more likely (GOPS, F, 48). There were also opinions indicating that greater attention to the problem and increasing awareness of it will lead to an increase in the statistics concerning elderly victims of violence (OIK, F, 27). On the other hand, one of the respondents disagreed with the opinion that the number of

⁴ The *Blue Card* procedure has been followed by the Police in Poland since 1998 in the case of family violence interventions. Since 2004, the BC procedure has also been followed by social workers and since 2010 – by employees of public education, healthcare and local commissions for solving alcohol problems.

elderly victims of violence will increase, based on the assumption that future elderly will more often lead solitary lives (Błędowski, 2012, p. 17). She explained that in the future the elderly more often live alone, away from the younger generation, so there will be less threatened by violence (GOPS, F, 53). Therefore it is difficult to unambiguously assess how the scale of the problem of domestic violence against the elderly might look in the future. Nevertheless, the social aid system should be up to the challenge.

Characteristics of an elderly victim of domestic violence

Subject literature states that an elderly victim of domestic violence is usually a woman. Violence is less often directed at an elderly man (Halicka, Sidorczuk, 2010, p. 196), or men are “less likely to admit to being victimized” (Herzberger, 2002, p. 19). Does it mean that they less often are? Not necessarily. These observations are confirmed by the results of research conducted among the employees of social aid institutions in Podlasie. The profile of the perpetrator varies depending on the researched group. Research conducted in 2006-2009 by Małgorzata Halicka and her team have indicated that elderly women are most often victims of violence from their husband (43%), an adult child (son – 28.6% or daughter – 20%) and less often from other family members (Halicka, Halicki, 2010). The studied group consisted of elderly people. On the other hand, the experience of social aid workers suggests that a victim of abuse and neglect in the family is usually the perpetrator’s mother (75.3%), less often the wife (41.2%), mother-in-law (16.5%) or grandmother (11.8%). What else do we know about this woman? She is usually the victim of emotional and financial abuse from a single son with alcohol problems. The perpetrator’s alcoholism is the root of his failure in life, but the mother’s love will not let her leave him on his own. Elderly mothers are usually co-dependent, which leads them to protect their child, feed him and provide him with a home, despite the harm done to them. *But he’s my child* – as social aid workers report (GOPS, F, 45). In a way, by adopting this attitude mothers become absent from the family – everything revolves around the son and his needs.

Elderly women are also often victims of violence from their husbands. This is usually long-term violence, which had started immediately after marriage; the trigger factor is also alcohol dependence. However, also in the case of these women, their co-dependence makes them submissive to the perpetrator to make cohabitation less difficult. Again, they become absent in some way. Reading research on domestic violence leads one to conclude that alcohol problems often accompany violence against the elderly. For example, research conducted in Podlasie, based on an analysis of court files concerning art. 207 of the Penal Code, indicates that in all of the 70 analyzed cases men abusing their elderly wives were addicted to alcohol. This is an important piece of information. It is also specific for the situation of violence in Poland. The problem of alcoholism in the family is often accompanied by violence against the elderly (Halicka, Halicki, Kramkowska, Szafranek, 2015).

It should be added that elderly victims of domestic violence are characterized by a passive attitude – they do not have the strength, courage or will to change their situation. And so they suffer in a toxic relationship for years, while their needs and wants remain unnoticed. However, if their problems become too bothersome, they start seeking help. Nevertheless, the victims usually lack the determination to really change their fate. They report to an aid institution, ask for a conversation and that is usually it. Even if, led by emotion and wanting to punish the perpetrator, they agree to notify the authorities, they quickly return asking to retract the charges. This is another quality characteristic of elderly victims of domestic violence – going back on the steps they have already taken.

New challenges in social aid

As it was mentioned above, social aid is a state activity with the purpose of helping people or families, who cannot cope with the difficulties in their lives on their own. The question arises – how can help be brought to elderly victims of domestic violence? What steps can social aid workers take to satisfy the needs of the victims, to help them be more present in their families?

First of all, one has to remember that working with the elderly has its specificity. Social aid workers need to have more patience with the elderly and have to understand the changes to the psyche brought on by old age. Old age is a time of reflection and recapitulation of life achievements. For an elderly victim of violence the balance may turn out less than satisfactory. Therefore one needs delicacy and a sense for the moods of the victims, patience for their indecisiveness and reluctance to change. It is therefore necessary to teach social aid workers about the peculiarities of old age and working with the elderly. It is also necessary to work with the elderly victims' families, to help them realize what the needs of the elderly are, to make the elderly more present in the family.

It should be noted that future generations of the elderly will be in many respects completely different from the elderly of today. They will be better educated, more aware of their rights and more likely to fight for them. Therefore it is possible that in the future the elderly will not allow violence against them to go unpunished. They will more frequently take steps to have the perpetrator punished. Therefore, the social aid system, along with law enforcement agencies, should be prepared for this. It is necessary to verify currently existing solutions. Efforts should be made to prepare a support system for elderly victims of domestic violence, such as support groups or therapy for elderly victims of violence conducted by adequately prepared individuals. The aforementioned peculiarities of the elderly clients of the system requires its employees to be appropriately trained. Furthermore, domestic violence is often accompanied by the problem of addiction. Therefore, therapy should be available to codependent victims of violence. Existing addiction therapy methods should be verified.

Research done so far indicates that victims of domestic violence often stay in toxic relationships because they have nowhere else to go and their financial situation makes it impossible for them to take decisive steps. It would be reasonable to introduce into the system financial and housing support for female victims of domestic violence. If they received additional means of support, they would not be financially dependent on the perpetrators and maybe they could become independent of them more easily. It would be worth considering the introduction of such measures.

Conclusions

The problem of domestic violence against the elderly is an important issue, which should be considered by various state entities, including the social aid system. This is a difficult, often shameful problem and perhaps that is why it is so difficult to help those afflicted by it. Nevertheless, the peculiarity of the problem cannot be a justification for a lack of a response. The social aid system in Poland should be prepared for work with elderly victims of domestic violence and their families. Leon Dyczewski believes that “the attitudes towards the elderly, which are prevalent in society as well as forms of care over the elderly, are a measure of spiritual and cultural development of a society, which means that the more a society cares for its elderly, the higher its spiritual and cultural development” (Dyczewski, 1994, p. 115). We should all care about the development of Polish society. This requires appropriate state regulations as well as a proper attitude from all of us.

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