

Preface

The issue of elder abuse in our society has not yet received the level of attention it deserves. The travelling exhibition entitled 'Stand up against elder abuse' is part of a broad-based educational campaign designed to raise awareness of this taboo among all sectors of the population.

Violence can take many forms that go far beyond physical abuse. There is a large number of ways in which older people can be offended, hurt or harmed. Violence can include, for example, neglecting basic needs, mental abuse, financial and material exploitation, restriction of free will, sexual violence, etc.

A variety of conditions play an important role in the development of violence: a sense of being unable to cope, personal problems or a lack of support from a caregiver, as well as societal norms, negative images of old age, a demeaning attitude, negative prejudices and organisational regulations.

Violence against older people often goes unnoticed or is not seen as such. A major challenge is the fact that not many of those affected seek help or make use of support services.

The travelling exhibition aims to make an easily accessible contribution to the discussion of the difficult topic of 'violence in old age'. It also provides room for thought and self-reflection and shows ways of how to prevent elder abuse and how to support those who have been affected by it. Let's not close our eyes to this important issue.



A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long vertical stroke on the left side.

**Johannes
Rauch
Your Federal
Minister**

Intro

Violence results in insult, injury and harm to others.

On hearing 'violence', we usually think of military conflicts, physical assault, personal injury or abuse. Older people are particularly vulnerable, especially when in need of help or suffering from dementia. Such persons are often unable to defend themselves or articulate their experiences.

Violence and abuse have many faces. **They may be expressed in the form of physical or emotional violence, neglect, disregard for an individual's wishes, sexual harassment or financial exploitation. Additionally, structures, norms and common values have restrictive and discriminatory effects on the older population.**

The overriding principle must always be: Violence is a violation of human rights and punishable by law.

It is difficult to formulate a universally valid and acceptable definition of violence. What people experience or see as violence depends on their social and cultural influences, upbringing and personal values. Direct physical force that causes bruising, broken bones or bleeding is clearly visible and recognised to have been caused by an act of violence. On the other hand,

helplessness, fear, shame or loss of dignity resulting from mental abuse often remain unseen by the outside world because it usually happens in secret. If caregivers neglect their duties by refusing or failing to provide the basic requirements, such as food, fluids, exercise or personal hygiene, it will have a lasting effect on the health and well-being of these older adults.

Intimate and

physical assaults through forced proximity or sexual harassment cause feelings of shame and powerlessness in those affected. 'Restriction of free will' means depriving the older person of their right to self-determined living, with other people deciding what is 'good for them' and imposing their own ideas of what they should be eating and drinking, how they should be spending their time and managing their households.

Financial exploitation occurs when a trusted person handles an older person's finances without ensuring that their needs are met, or makes unreasonable financial demands.

Acts of violence take place between family members in the home as well as in institutions. They can also take place between older individuals themselves. Violence is also perpetrated against caregivers. Boundaries between those who suffer and those who use violence, i.e. victim and perpetrator, are often blurred and forms of violence can overlap.



For example, financial exploitation and the restriction of free will often also involve emotional or mental violence.

There are a number of triggers for violent actions or violent situations, including physical or mental overload, a lack of self-determination, or a strong financial or emotional interdependency. Family carers often suffer from a lack of social interaction. The feeling of being locked up can generate aggression and bring about acts of violence. Violence and abuse cannot always be attributed

solely to the actions of one individual. Societal structures and the thoughtless implementation of inhumane or degrading rules can create situations of inequality, discrimination and oppression. Negative values and prejudices against groups of people of a certain age or from certain occupational groups can encourage misguided tolerance of social norms and result in attitudes that encourage disrespectful behaviour and assaults.

The triangle of violence

Direct violence in the form of abuse or neglect takes place between persons. In addition to the individual and personal level, however, it is possible to identify two other levels, the structural and the cultural. The triangle of violence (see Johan Galtung and Rolf Hirsch) shows the connection or interaction between direct acts of violence by individuals and social conditions. At the cultural level, we see the values upheld by society, the role models and guiding principles, the prejudices against older people and the language used. The structural level shows how laws, norms and regulations produce unequal chances in life

and how certain measures result in the oppression of individual social groups, leading to the manifestation of violence within the social structure. The existence of rules justifies the occurrence of violence as necessary and inevitable. These phenomena legitimise the occurrence of violence. The violent actions of individual actors against others are then assigned to the personal level.

Role patterns as an example for the holistic understanding of violence

Cultural level: In our society, a woman's family role still traditionally includes responsibility for the care and upkeep of elderly relatives. Due to social pressure and because many women have internalized this assumption of responsibility, they often feel compelled to put their own professional and personal development on hold when the occasion arises in order to be able to do justice to the task of care work.

Structural level: For economic reasons carer's leave and other statutory support measures are only available to a limited extent, and the costs of using short-term care or other external assistance, e.g. 24-hour care, are high and unaffordable for many families.

Personal level: If the responsibility ends up with the family, and usually with the female members of the family, this will result in economic losses and dependence on others, as professional activity often has to be restricted or abandoned. This also has negative effects on their own social security in old age. The resulting frustration and unavoidable stress of caregiving can trigger long-term psychological violence in the form of impatient and disrespectful behaviour, yelling at or isolating the person being cared for, and in extreme cases can lead to physical abuse.

01

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Violence against older people often happens in a place where they should feel safe and secure – within their own four walls.

I live at home but can't do as I please



Where violence is committed directly or personally in private homes, perpetrators and victims have a close relationship. Here spouses or partners, other family members, or caregivers or nurses commit violence actively and/or through neglect.

Impatiently jerking someone out of bed, gripping a person's hands, locking a person in a room and preventing them from entering specific rooms or leaving the house, are just as much violent acts as refusing someone certain foods or medicating them against their will (such as tranquillisers), or intentionally violating a person's privacy by touching their bodies without consent.

Refusing or failing to provide necessary help, including ensuring that an older adult is sufficiently hydrated, gets enough exercise or is properly washed and groomed, constitutes violence that leads to harm as well as physical and emotional suffering with lasting effect.

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Emotional pain is invisible

Psychological or emotional violence is the most common form, yet the one least often recognised, and mostly committed unintentionally. This kind of violence expresses itself in disrespectful or demeaning behaviour toward older persons, especially vulnerable family members. Humiliations and threats cause fear and lead to loss of self-esteem.

People who are not taken seriously, or who are ignored or ridiculed, or whose wishes and needs are neglected, become mentally and physically ill and may strongly react emotionally.



Emotional violence often goes a long way back and some families have a 'tradition of violence', while other risk factors include unresolved conflicts and certain personality traits. For older people, mental violence occurs when other people take control over their lives. Such experiences are common among those requiring care or suffering from dementia.

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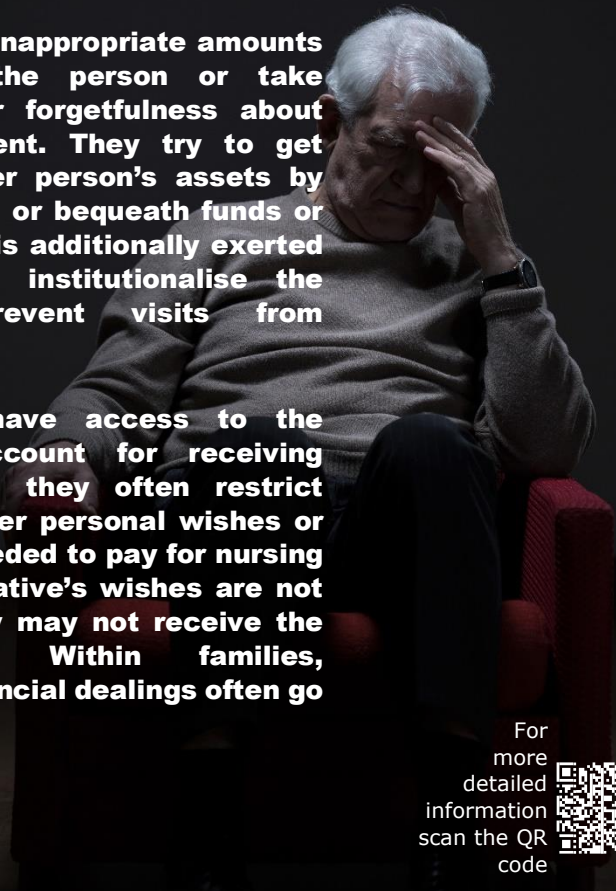
My family is more interested in my will than in me

Any sort of inappropriate use of an older person's financial resources or property constitutes harm and exploitation. Some relatives take advantage of an older family member's willingness to help out financially.

They may demand inappropriate amounts of money from the person or take advantage of their forgetfulness about sums previously lent. They try to get control of the older person's assets by forcing them to gift or bequeath funds or property. Pressure is additionally exerted by threatening to institutionalise the individual or prevent visits from grandchildren.

Where relatives have access to the person's bank account for receiving pension payments, they often restrict withdrawals to cover personal wishes or hold back funds needed to pay for nursing care. The older relative's wishes are not respected and they may not receive the necessary care. Within families, irregularities in financial dealings often go unnoticed.

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02

VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC

Older persons often associate public space with danger, difficulties and annoyances that can trigger violence.

Moving around in public can be dangerous.

Regardless of age or degree of mobility, everyone has a right to move around safely in public, thereby ensuring their standard of living and health, and allowing them to take care of their personal needs.

Heavy, fast-moving traffic and urban planning that fails to consider the needs of individuals with limited mobility make for insurmountable barriers for older people, and are often an indirect cause of accidents.

The relocation of local shops from town centres to the outskirts of town makes daily shopping a challenge for many older people. A lack of consideration for people moving slower than others, for instance in traffic or in public transportation, is a potential source of conflict that can spark verbal or physical violence. Older people feel that they are easy targets for theft and therefore avoid public spaces, especially at night. This fear of falling prey to crime leads to a loss of self-confidence and to voluntary isolation.



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Disrespectful behaviour can become habitual

It is not uncommon to encounter stereotypes in connection with advanced age, where older people are portrayed as being backward, helpless, slow or in the way, or costly for society.

The media focuses mainly on the negative aspects of the ageing process and references are often made in a condescending and polemical way: Older people are referred to as 'grandma' or 'grandpa', persons with support needs are called a 'nursing case'.

At the same time, 'over-ageing of society' or 'flood of retirees' are terms conjuring up images of a society swamped by 'oldies', standing in the way of progress and queueing up for undeserved benefits. Slighting expressions such as 'oldies discounts' for public transport fares or certain media channels being aimed at 'grey p' or 'wrinklies' because they are mostly used by 'elderly' consumers are perceived as demeaning.

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Not being tech-savvy means paying more

Many service-oriented businesses and companies have substituted online services and dispensers for personal customer contact. Phone enquiries are often outsourced to call centres, but it requires good hearing and quick reactions to respond to the information given.

Additional fees are charged to those doing their banking with a teller at a local branch. Cheaper rail tickets are only offered on the internet. To understand the steps needed to operate an ATM or ticket machine takes some practice. Unfamiliar users nervously punch buttons, while the presence of impatient people in the queue only makes matters worse.

Older people, fearful of ridicule, tend to avoid such situations.

Digitalisation and the transformation of public space not only lead to fewer personal encounters but also have negative financial implications for many older persons.

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03

VIOLENCE AT SOCIAL AND HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS

It is not unusual for violence to occur even in places that are supposed to offer support and help.

Too little time and attention can cause damage

While people can find support at social and healthcare institutions, these are places where they may also experience violence or abuse. Residents are highly dependent, and when caregivers expect them to 'behave', residents may be treated as children and even scolded and reprimanded. Daily stress at home or an emotionally unhealthy working environment contribute to violent behaviour on the part of caregivers.

Staff shortages mean constant pressure at work in residential homes and facilities, potentially leading to disrespectful speech habits and snippy responses. As result, caregivers may be rough when washing or bathing residents, impatient when handing out meals or neglect to accompany residents to the bathroom.



Care workers are put under pressure by having to unquestioningly stick to rules and daily routines, such as a rigid meal schedule.

These situations are made worse when mentally impaired older people or some of their relatives act aggressively against the staff.

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In a community yet alone

House rules for social and healthcare facilities are designed to allow a large number of people with varying backgrounds, habits and needs to share living space and interact while avoiding conflicts.

But giving too little thought to the individual habits of residents may lead staff members to act inconsiderately and disrespectfully toward them, in this way humiliating and hurting these older individuals.

To minimise costs, organisations responsible for residential facilities set out standardised processes that allow hardly any room for interpersonal contact.

Meanwhile, applicable legislation lends indirectly to creating a situation prone to violence. The management prohibit many activities out of unjustified fear of liability for damage or accidents that might ensue. This can seriously impair the ability of residents to lead an independent, self-determined life.



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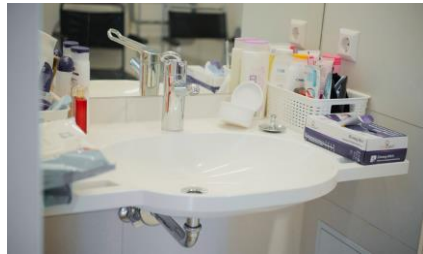


Cost-cutting can cause suffering

Retirement and nursing homes provide day-to-day support for large numbers of people. Unlike staying in a hospital, moving to a home means permanently relocating one's centre of interest and attention. It is thus all the more important to strike a balance between the needs to provide proper and efficient care and a comfortable living environment.

Where homes are designed and organised along the lines of large-scale institutions and with economy in mind, residents cannot continue their previous daily routines. Structural shortcomings such as inadequately soundproofed rooms allowing conversations to be heard outside, shared bathrooms or a lack of space can cause stress and result in conflict with other residents.

Where carers work on the principle that 'time is money' and follow a narrow working schedule that does not allow them to consider individual wishes and habits, residents' inactivity will lead to an even greater need for support and thus greater staffing requirements and costs. The label 'dementia' is often an excuse for inaction and often results in even greater workloads.



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Living without violence

Possible solutions

Violence is not only a problem for the victims themselves and subsequently also for the perpetrators; it is also a problem for society. We all have a role to play in preventing violence and abuse. The basic prerequisite for any prevention strategy is gaining an understanding of the various forms of violence, the mechanisms involved, and the consequences for those affected. This is the only way of improving the early detection of potentially violent situations.

The statutory regulations and an adequate level of funding form the framework for a life free of violence. This can only work, however, if the principles of social recognition, equality and an appreciation of old age as an important stage in life are universally accepted. Only then will it be possible to recognise risky situations at an early stage and address the tendency to violence before it crosses a critical threshold.

Family carers must be made aware of, and use, services that support calm and considerate care for older adults.

In care homes, building layouts, equipment and routines designed to suit the needs of the residents help both the residents and staff.

It is also essential that we develop a culture and working attitude that does not trivialise or conceal errors or shortcomings but recognises, calls out and actively works on improvements – something that supervision is ideally able to do.

Here are some points of contact if you, or someone you know, has been affected by violence.

