



Examining different forms of violence against elderly women: A Case of Meru District

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ABSTRACT :

This study addresses the pervasive issue of violence against elderly women in Meru District Council, Tanzania, revealing its various forms and prevalence rates. From neglect to emotional, financial, physical, and sexual abuse, along with violations of personal rights, elderly women face significant challenges that compromise their health, dignity, security, and autonomy. The study used a mixed approach where data from 100 elderly women was collected. Through descriptive and content analysis, crucial insights into the characteristics of elderly women are provided, informing the development of targeted interventions tailored to their specific needs. Urgent action is needed, as evidenced by the research findings, emphasizing the necessity for comprehensive strategies encompassing prevention and intervention measures. Empowering elderly women, raising awareness about their rights, and fostering a supportive environment are pivotal steps in addressing this issue. Recognizing and challenging cultural norms and social structures perpetuating violence is imperative, requiring a multi-sectoral approach involving collaboration among various stakeholders. Prioritizing the protection and well-being of elderly women is paramount, ensuring a society where individuals, regardless of age or gender, can live with dignity and respect through evidence-based interventions and gender equality promotion.

Keyterms: Elderly women, neglect, abuse, sexual abuse, violation of personal rights

Background of the Study :

The enduring issue of gender based violence against older women has been reported throughout history. Various organizations and countries are currently engaged in ongoing efforts to eliminate this particular form of violence, mirroring their broader endeavors to address other types of violence. The recent increase in attention towards the issue of violence against elderly women, whether inflicted by current or former intimate partners, family members, or the community, has prompted a need for further strategies and research. This heightened focus comes in the wake of the global call for equality to all individuals (WHO, 2016). Globally, there is sparse evidence concerning patterns of and forms of violence against women aged 50 and beyond, and limited understanding of barriers to reporting and help-seeking amongst Elderly women who are subjected to violence (Meyer *et al.*, 2020).

According to Helpage (2023) violence against older women is driven by both ageism and sexism, but also affected by other characteristics such as marital status or having a disability. It is grounded in deep-rooted prejudices, dehumanizing stereotypes and social norms that tolerate and even condone awful acts of violence. HelpAge reports that “An older woman may be the victim of verbal and physical abuse in her home. She may be accused of “witchcraft” and attacked or even murdered by members of her own community. She may be denied the right to inherit land from her husband when he dies due to discriminatory inheritance laws. Or she may be deprived autonomy in a care setting, with other people making decisions for her that may not be her wish”. Gender-based violence (GBV) prevalence estimates vary across regions, ranging from 23.2% in high-income countries to 37.7% in the WHO South-East Asia region (WHO, 2013).]

In Africa, most of African Elderly women have experienced violence as Mba (2007) reports that “Old age in many African countries is a nightmare and a tale of woes. Although there exist legislative instruments that guarantee the rights of all persons including the older population in some parts of Africa, elder abuse is rampant because older persons are poor and voiceless. They lack basic healthcare, shelter and dignity. The rights of elderly persons are often trampled upon with impunity and they are looked upon with contempt”.

Violence against Elderly women in Tanzania remains the major challenge. Gender-based violence against elderly women in Tanzania is a multifaceted issue characterized by various forms of abuse and discrimination. Elderly women in Tanzania face numerous challenges, including physical, emotional, and financial abuse, as well as neglect and violations of their personal rights. These abuses often occur within the context of cultural norms and traditional practices that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination against older women (Helpa Age, 2011). One significant aspect of gender-based violence against elderly women in Tanzania is the prevalence of accusations of witchcraft, which are used to justify extreme acts of violence and abuse against older women. Additionally, elderly women may experience violence within their own households, communities, or institutional settings, with perpetrators ranging from intimate partners and family members to caregivers and community members.

Despite efforts by the Tanzanian government and civil society organizations to address gender-based violence, challenges remain in terms of awareness, reporting, and access to support services for elderly women. Cultural beliefs, stigma, and fear of reprisal often prevent elderly women from seeking help or speaking out about their experiences of violence.

To effectively address gender-based violence against elderly women in Tanzania, comprehensive strategies are needed that address the root causes of violence, promote gender equality, and provide support and resources for survivors. This requires collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and other stakeholders to create a protective environment where elderly women can live free from violence and discrimination. According to Country Gender Profile, 2016, the Gogo and Rangi tribes who are Dodoma occupants inflicted GBV against elders influenced by the existence of bad custom and traditions of those tribes which subject women to so many family activities such as grazing, fetching water from far distance catchment areas, cooking and denying them of right to education because they are bread winners” (Chai *et al.*, 2016). As for Mbeya region the main reason leading to the confined practice of GBV are witchcraft beliefs, people’s customs and traditions, lust, widowed orphanage (Chai *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, this study aims to systematically assess different forms of violence against elderly women in Meru DC.

Statement of the Problem :

Despite the government of Tanzania attempts to reconcile women’s issues, abuse against elderly women remains a serious problem. Violence against elderly women takes many forms that range from sexual violence to property grabbing and other such financial rights abuses. Additionally, extreme violence increases against elderly women if they are accused of witchcraft. According to the United Nations, witchcraft accusations are used to warrant extreme violence against Elderly women in 41 African and Asian countries, Tanzania is among.

Elderly women experience different types of violence exclusively; psychological violence, physical and verbal abuse while younger women experience more of physical and sexual violence (Meyer *et al.*, 2020). Different forms of violence that elderly women experience, eventually, tend to undermine the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. Victims of violence can suffer sexual and reproductive health consequences, including forced and unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, traumatic fistula, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and even death (UNFPA Tanzania, 2022).

According to the Tanzania Legal and Human Rights Centre, over 2,585 elderly women were reported killed in eight regions of Tanzania on allegations of witchcraft. This figure has surged from 630 in 2012 (WHO, 2016). Meru DC, located in Arusha, Tanzania, is characterized by deeply entrenched cultural practices where women have limited autonomy compared to men, despite governmental efforts to enforce legal equality among all citizens. This context spurred the researcher to investigate the forms of gender based violence against elderly women in Meru DC.

Definitions of key terms :

Elderly Abuse

In the 2002 Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elderly Abuse, Elderly abuse was defined as “...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 elderly person.” It can be of various forms: physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and financial or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect (WHO, 2018)

Elderly women

The precise definition of an “Elderly woman” is loose, ranging anywhere from ages 45 and Elderly to ages 65 and Elderly. Social definitions of aging argue that women (and men) are considered “old” when they experience treatment from society that differentiates them as elderly. Due to the paucity of global data collection on women after the age of 49, this brief suggests a focus on women aged 50 and above, while recognizing the heterogeneity of Elderly women as a whole population. In Tanzania setting, an Elderly person (men and women) is the one aged 60 years and above (Helpage, 2011).

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

GBV is common, it is an umbrella term for any harmful act that is perpetuated against a person that is based on their biological sex, gender identity, or perceived adherence to culturally defined expectations of what it means to be a man, woman, boy, or girl. It is one of the most widespread forms of violence, affecting individuals and communities everywhere, and defies class structure, age, religion, education levels, and geography (Conservation International, 2020).

Neglect, abuse and violence against Elderly adults

Also referred to as mistreatment of Elderly adults, or Elderly abuse, is defined further by different forms of abuse, and categorized for research, policy and practice purposes (Sethi et al, 2011). Main forms used to categorize abuse of Elderly women include: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological (also called emotional, verbal and non-physical) abuse, and financial (also called material) abuse or exploitation (Luoma et al, 2014).

Theoretical literature review :

With the aging population, it becomes increasingly crucial to prioritize the challenges impacting the quality of life and mental health of elderly individuals. Elder abuse, a widespread issue globally, carries severe consequences including a decline in quality of life and heightened morbidity and mortality rates. Despite being a longstanding issue, the awareness and investigation of elder abuse are relatively recent developments. This suggests that symbolic interactionism offers the most fitting framework for understanding the phenomenon of gender-based violence against elderly women addressed in this study.

Symbolic interactionism :

This study was guided by symbolic interactionism which postulates that symbolic interactions is the way people react and view the world through their interactions with others. This theory can be used to explain why gender-based violence among Elderly women exists and how culture plays an important role in the perception of abuse. According to this theory, every object has different meaning to each person, and everyone has his or her own way to find meaning. Therefore, perception and interpretation of an object is not always the same for all people. According to this perspective, cultural values and expectations influence what conduct is considered to be elderly abuse. For example, in some cultures, sending elderly individuals to nursing homes is considered to be a form of abuse, whereas other cultures define it as a sign of caring Abolfathi *et al* (2013). This study used this theory because it shows how interaction can help people to learn and adopt behavior, it can bring changes of mindset both in positive and negative.

Furthermore, violence based on gender against elderly women presents a multifaceted challenge. Its complexity lies in its varying prevalence, patterns, procedures, and other operational aspects, which are influenced by factors such as time, environment, and demographic variables of the individuals involved. Its widespread occurrence can be attributed to its profound impact on women, men, communities, and nations alike. Scholars like Matseke *et al.* (2016) have linked gender-based violence to factors such as cultural acceptance, inadequate legal frameworks, poverty, psychological stress, and gender-based ignorance among both women and men.

Methodology :

Study area

The study was conducted in Meru District Council. Meru DC was selected for the study because it is among the areas where violence against women is considered to be high because of the culture of dwellers. Also, the area considered to have large number of elderly women (NBS, 2022)

Study Design

The study adopted a cross sectional research design whereby data was collected from the field at a single point in time using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The study was carried out in five wards of Meru DC; The wards were selected using a multi stage sampling technique. The wards were Kikatiti, King'ori, Malula, Imbaseny and Maji ya Chai wards.

Sample size determination

The population of elderly women in the study area was 41,019 (NBS, 2022). Since the population is known, the sample size was determined by using the formula developed by Yamane (1967) for this study at a 90% confident level.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Hence;

n= sample size estimation, **N**= Total number of households (N=41,019).

e=level of precision error (e=10%) was utilized to acquire conveniently respondent =0.01

The formula applied as follows;

$$n = \frac{41,019}{1 + 41,019(0.1^2)}$$

$$n = 99.76$$

$$\approx 100$$

Methods and tools of data collection :

For the purpose of obtaining views, opinion and information about the Violence against elderly women in Meru DC, three methods of data collection were employed namely household questionnaire, interview, and documentary review. Cohen *at el.* (2018) encouraged the use of many techniques so as to get the reality of what the researcher is interested to investigate.

Data Analysis :

Bogdan and Biklen, (2007) explained that data analysis is a systematic process that involves working with data, organizing them into manageable units and synthesizing them, such for patterns, discovering what is important and what to tell others. This study employed quantitative and qualitative data analysis technique. Descriptive analysis and content analysis was used to analyse the information obtained respectively.

Forms of violence against elderly women experienced in Meru DC

Violence against elderly women that exist in the study area was established using descriptive statistics. The indicators representing each form of violence against elderly women (Neglect violence, Emotional Abuse, financial, Physical Abuse, sexual abuse and violation of personal rights) was measured in terms of YES=1 score and NO=0 score. In which, neglect violence and emotional abuse have 9 indicators each, while, financial, physical abuse, sexual abuse and violation of personal rights have 4 indicators each. Then, the obtained total score for each form of violence was then aid into analysis using descriptive statistic of Mean for each form of violence.

Thereafter, the specific forms of violence against elderly women were classified using mean score, Whereby, those forms with mean and above was termed as the ones existing in the study area and the vice versa hold true to be non-applicable in the study area.

Qualitative analysis :

Qualitative information related to all three objectives was analyzed using content analysis whereby, pieces of information from the Key Informants of this study was condensed, coded and organized into different themes and compared based on study objective.

Study findings

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Respondents of this study were elderly women in Meru DC Council. The sample size had different characteristics in terms of age, marital status, household size, educational level and occupation as shown in Table 1:

Age of Respondents

From Table 1, it is clear a good number of respondents belonged to the age group of 65-69 years (42%) followed closely by those aged 70-74 years (39%). This means that majority of respondent were old enough and since the study aimed at reaching Elderly ones, therefore it obtained the appropriate information from the right respondents.

Table 1: Demographic characteristic of respondents (n=100)

	Variable	Frequency	Percent
Age	60-64	10	10
	65-69	42	42
	70-74	39	39
	75-79	9	9
Marital status	Married	63	63
	Co-habited	4	4
	Divorced	11	11
	Widow	22	22
Education level	Non-formal education	70	70
	Primary education	30	30
	Secondary education	0	0
	Tertiary/college	0	0
Household size	1	3	3
	2	19	19
	3	21	21
	4	9	9
	5	16	16
	6	18	18

	7	6	6
	8	8	8
Occupation	Farming	100	100
	Employed	0	0
	Entrepreneurship	0	0
	Livestock keeping	0	0

Marital Status of respondents

A considerable proportion of the participants were married (63%), suggesting that most elderly women in the study were in marital relationships. Divorced individuals accounted for 11%, whereas widows constituted 22%. Only a minor percentage reported cohabitation (4%). These results imply that these participants are culturally influenced, as the majority adhered to the cultural norm of marital bonds. In Meru culture, marriage holds significant esteem, and married women are accorded distinct respect compared to single women.

Education Level of Respondents

The data indicated that 70% of participants had undergone non-formal education, while 30% had completed primary education. None of the participants reported having received secondary or tertiary/college education. These findings imply that most respondents had received non-formal education, suggesting limited access to formal education facilities during their upbringing.

Household Size

The distribution of participants according to household size exhibited a varied range. The prevalent household sizes were 2 (19%), 3 (21%), and 6 (18%). Smaller households with 1 or 4 members constituted 3% and 9%, respectively.

Occupation of Respondents :

Farming emerged as the dominant occupation of respondent in this study, with 100% of participants being engaged in this activity. None of the participants reported being employed, involved in entrepreneurship, or engaged in livestock keeping.

Forms of Violence Against Elderly Women Experienced in Meru DC

The study aimed at identifying specific forms of violence experienced by Elderly women in the Meru DC, utilizing descriptive statistics. The analysis encompassed various indicators representing each form of violence, including neglect, emotional abuse, financial abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and violation of personal rights. The mean score for each form of violence was calculated. Forms with a mean score equal to or above were classified as existing, while those below were deemed non-existent in the study area. The results are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Forms of Violence against Elderly Women (n=100)

S/N	Form of Violence	Mean	Violence Exist		Violence Do Not Exist	
			f	%	F	%
1	Neglect	2.34	60	60	40	40
2	Emotional	5.55	49	49	51	51
3	Financial	1.61	55	55	45	45
4	Physical	2.23	42	42	58	58
5	Sexual	1.68	57	57	43	43
6	Violation of Personal Right	2.03	47	47	53	53

Neglect

The research revealed that neglect, with a mean score of 2.34, suggests a moderate level of prevalence. Approximately 60% of participants reported

experiencing neglect, while 40% did not. Indications of neglectful behavior encompassed responsibilities such as shopping, purchasing groceries, clothing, meal preparation, household chores, travel arrangements, mobility assistance, bathing, dressing, toileting, and medication supervision. This suggests that a significant portion of Elderly women face challenges in basic daily activities, which demands targeted support and intervention.

According to Meyer et al. (2020), neglect and psychological abuse were notably widespread among women aged 60 and above compared to other types of abuse. Examination of research conducted in institutional environments revealed that women in this age group were considerably more susceptible to abuse, with psychological abuse being the most common form of violence, followed by physical violence, neglect, financial exploitation, and sexual abuse.

Emotional Abuse

The research unveiled that emotional abuse displayed the highest mean score of 5.55, signifying a notable prevalence of emotional mistreatment among the elderly population. Forty-nine percent (49%) of respondents reported encountering emotional abuse. The signs of emotional abuse encompassed diverse manifestations of verbal and psychological maltreatment, such as yelling, derogatory remarks, social exclusion, threats, and demeaning behaviors. This underscores the urgent requirement for interventions aimed at promoting emotional well-being and providing support for elderly women in the study region.

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse demonstrated a mean score of 1.61, indicating a relatively lower prevalence compared to Emotional Abuse. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported encountering financial abuse. Indicators of financial abuse included manipulation, coercion, control over decision-making, and theft. These results underscore the significance of implementing measures for financial empowerment and protection among elderly women vulnerable to potential exploitation. Violence against elderly women encompasses various forms, ranging from sexual violence to property usurpation and other violations of financial rights (WHO, 2016).

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse received a mean score of 2.23, indicating a moderate level of occurrence, with 42% of respondents reporting experiencing physical abuse. The identified indicators of physical abuse in this study included actions such as restraint, physical assault, throwing objects, and excessive medication. This underscores the pressing need for interventions aimed at preventing and addressing physical harm while ensuring the safety of elderly women. These findings align with those of Kwagale et al. (2013), who highlighted that apart from the threat of physical or sexual abuse, the elderly face various forms of mistreatment, including humiliation, controlling behavior, withholding information, expressing annoyance when the victim disagrees, deliberately diminishing the victim, misusing the victim's finances, taking advantage of the victim, disregarding the victim's desires, isolating them from family or friends, restricting access to transportation or communication means, involving them in illegal activities, using their children to manipulate them, threatening custody loss, damaging property, withholding access to necessities, and spreading damaging information about them.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse was characterized by a mean score of 1.68. The signs of sexual abuse encompassed unwanted sexual advances, coerced exposure to explicit content, undesired physical contact, and attempts or acts of forced intercourse. These results underscore the crucial need for comprehensive strategies aimed at addressing and preventing the sexual exploitation of elderly women. The study conducted by Global Health Aging (2016) revealed that violence against elderly women manifests in various forms, spanning from sexual violence to instances of property usurpation and other forms of financial rights violations. Though these cases are merely reported sexual violence against the older women is happening worldwide as a study from Lazar (2021) reports that “the prevalence of sexual abuse reported by older victims in community settings was 0.9 percent. In institutional settings, 1.9 percent was reported by victims or their proxies, and 0.7 percent was reported by staff of social welfare. Not being reported does not mean the cases are not there but it means that the survivors are either shy or fear for their life as the following case reports

“I am always afraid and shy to report whenever I got abused since my abuser is family member”

In another study by Nobels et al (2020), the same findings were proved as the study reports that The results of the systematic review on public health research on Sexual Violence in older adults showed that 0% to 3.1% of older adults in Europe were sexually victimised in the last 12 months and Lifetime prevalence of SV was 6.3%, which is an underestimation of the true extent since 30% of European women.

Violation of Personal Rights

The findings reveal that breaches of personal rights attained a mean score of 2.03, indicating a moderate frequency of occurrence. Among the participants, only 47% reported experiencing such violations. Indications of this form of violence included impediments in personal decision-making, leisure activities, social interactions, and privacy infringement. Violations of human rights are predominantly reported, underscoring the significance of safeguarding the autonomy and rights of elderly women (Ortez and Sanchez, 2012).

The District Social Welfare Officer added further insight, stating:

"Violence against elderly women is evidently present but often underreported due to cultural norms in this area, where issues are typically handled within the confines of the home." Over a span of three years (2021-2023), data sourced from the District Health Information System (DHIS) indicated only 18 cases of violence against elderly women aged 60 and above. These cases encompassed emotional abuse, neglect, physical abuse, and violations of personal rights. Referral linkage is established depending on the nature of the issues, such as directing victims to the Policy Gender and Children desk (Interview with District Social Welfare Officer, Arumeru DC Hospital – September 2023).

Conclusion :

- In conclusion, this study delved into the pervasive issue of violence against elderly women in Meru District Council, Tanzania, shedding light on its various forms and prevalence rates. The findings underscored the significant challenges faced by elderly women, ranging from neglect and emotional abuse to financial exploitation, physical violence, sexual abuse, and violations of personal rights. These forms of violence not only undermine the health, dignity, security, and autonomy of elderly women but also perpetuate deep-seated inequalities and human rights violations. The study's demographic analysis revealed crucial insights into the characteristics of elderly women in the study area, including their age distribution, marital status, educational background, household size, and occupation. Understanding these demographics is essential for developing targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the specific needs of elderly women.
- Moreover, the research findings highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address violence against elderly women in Meru DC. These strategies should encompass both prevention and intervention measures, focusing on empowering elderly women, raising awareness about their rights, and fostering a supportive environment that condemns all forms of violence. Furthermore, the study emphasized the importance of recognizing cultural norms and social structures that perpetuate violence against elderly women. Addressing these underlying factors requires a multi-sectoral approach involving collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, community leaders, and healthcare providers.
- In light of these findings, it is imperative for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritize the protection and well-being of elderly women, ensuring that they live free from violence and exploitation. By implementing evidence-based interventions and promoting gender equality, we can work towards creating a society where all individuals, regardless of age or gender, can live with dignity and respect.

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