



Elder Abuse : Prevention and Intervention

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ABSTRACT :

Elder abuse is a serious but often hidden issue affecting millions worldwide. Many older adults suffer from physical, emotional, financial, and neglect-based mistreatment, yet cases frequently go unreported due to fear, stigma, and a lack of awareness. While efforts to address elder abuse exist, they are often scattered and reactive rather than preventive. This paper presents a framework that connects theory, research, and practice to create a more effective approach to prevention and intervention. Drawing from models like EMPOWER and RISE, the paper highlights real-world strategies that help protect older adults. It also explores the challenges of implementation and the need for stronger policies to safeguard their rights and dignity.

Introduction :

Elder abuse is not just a private issue—it is a societal concern that demands attention. Studies estimate that 10-15% of older adults worldwide experience some form of abuse (WHO, 2008)[4]. However, many cases remain unnoticed due to the reluctance of victims to report abuse, either because of emotional ties to their abusers or because they fear losing their support system. Many interventions are focused on reacting to cases after they occur rather than addressing the root causes of abuse. To protect older adults effectively, we need a comprehensive, multi-level approach that combines education, support services, and policy changes. This paper brings together different perspectives on elder abuse, emphasizing how we can move from isolated efforts to a coordinated system of prevention and intervention.

Understanding the Causes of Elder Abuse :

Elder abuse does not happen in isolation—it is shaped by multiple factors. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model helps us understand how abuse occurs across different levels (NIJ, 2015)[2]. At the individual level, older adults facing cognitive decline, physical weakness, or social isolation are more vulnerable to mistreatment. In family settings, caregiver stress, financial difficulties, and unresolved tensions can create situations where abuse occurs. At the community level, limited access to elder-friendly services and social exclusion make it harder for older adults to seek help. On a broader scale, societal attitudes toward aging, weak legal protections, and cultural stigma surrounding elder abuse can prevent cases from being reported and addressed.

Another key perspective is General Strain Theory, which explains how stress and frustration can lead to harmful behavior (OJP, 2020)[5]. Caregivers facing financial pressure or emotional burnout may unintentionally take out their frustrations on those they care for. Programs like EMPOWER focus on equipping both older adults and caregivers with coping strategies to prevent such situations. Cultural beliefs also play a role in shaping how abuse is perceived. In some cultures, family reputation is prioritized over individual well-being, leading to underreporting of abuse (PMC, 2020)[3]. In contrast, in societies where older adults live independently, social isolation can lead to neglect and financial exploitation. These insights highlight the importance of designing interventions that consider cultural and social contexts.

Identifying Risk and Protective Factors :

Understanding what makes older adults vulnerable to abuse is essential for prevention. Social isolation, declining health, and financial dependence increase the risk of abuse, while strong social support networks, financial literacy, and caregiver education can act as protective factors. Family members or caregivers experiencing high levels of stress and burnout are also more likely to become perpetrators. On a community level, the availability of elder services and social programs can determine whether older adults have access to support or remain isolated. At the societal level, stronger legal frameworks, public awareness campaigns, and policies that promote financial security for seniors can help reduce overall cases of elder abuse.

Strategies for Prevention and Intervention :

Preventing elder abuse requires action at multiple levels, starting with awareness and education. Primary prevention focuses on stopping abuse before it happens. National campaigns challenging ageist stereotypes and promoting respect for older adults can help shift public attitudes (PMC, 2020)[3]. At the

community level, programs that encourage interaction between younger and older generations have been effective in reducing prejudice and social isolation (NARI, 2020)[1]. Within families, caregiver education programs can teach stress management techniques and conflict resolution skills to reduce the risk of abusive situations (NIJ, 2015)[2].

Early intervention is also critical. Routine screening for elder abuse in healthcare settings can help detect warning signs before they escalate (OUP, 2023)[6]. The RISE model, which supports both victims and at-risk caregivers, has been successful in preventing repeated cases of abuse (OJP, 2020)[5]. Financial monitoring systems, designed to track unusual transactions, can help protect older adults from financial exploitation.

For those who have already experienced abuse, long-term support is essential. Trauma-informed care helps survivors recover by addressing the psychological impact of abuse (NIH, 2015)[7]. Legal advocacy initiatives play a key role in strengthening protections for older adults and ensuring perpetrators are held accountable (WHO, 2008)[4]. Long-term case management provides ongoing support, helping high-risk individuals access the care they need (MIDUS, 2018)[8].

Overcoming Barriers to Implementation :

Despite the availability of effective programs, several challenges prevent them from being widely adopted. A major issue is the lack of coordination between different sectors, including healthcare, aging services, and social welfare. Without collaboration, efforts remain fragmented and less effective. Strengthening partnerships between government agencies, non-profits, and community organizations can create a more unified response to elder abuse. Funding constraints also limit the reach of many programs. Community-based initiatives often struggle with financial sustainability, making it difficult to provide long-term support. Increasing investment in elder protection programs and securing government funding for prevention efforts are essential steps toward expanding these initiatives.

Cultural attitudes present another challenge. In many societies, elder abuse is seen as a private family matter rather than a public concern. Public awareness campaigns can help break this stigma and encourage victims and their families to seek help. Education programs for caregivers, families, and older adults themselves can empower individuals to recognize and report abuse before it escalates (WHO, 2008)[4].

Measuring the Impact of Policies and Programs :

For elder abuse prevention efforts to be effective, they must be regularly evaluated. Short-term measures, such as increased awareness and willingness to report abuse, can indicate whether prevention efforts are making a difference (NIJ, 2015)[2]. Long-term indicators, such as reductions in elder abuse cases and fewer hospitalizations due to neglect, help determine the success of intervention strategies (MIDUS, 2018)[8].

Stronger policies can also improve elder protection. Mandatory reporting laws, when paired with well-funded support services, ensure that abuse cases are identified and addressed (WHO, 2008)[4]. Integrating elder abuse screenings into routine healthcare assessments can help detect cases earlier (NIH, 2015)[7]. Additionally, cross-sector training for professionals in aging services, healthcare, and law enforcement can create a more knowledgeable workforce equipped to handle elder abuse cases effectively (MIDUS, 2018)[8].

Conclusion :

Elder abuse is a growing concern that requires a proactive, multi-sectoral response. Evidence-based programs like EMPOWER and RISE have shown that structured interventions can reduce abuse risk and enhance protective factors. However, to create meaningful change, we must go beyond individual programs. Strengthening legal protections, securing sustainable funding, and fostering collaboration between different sectors are crucial steps in ensuring the safety and dignity of older adults. As the global population continues to age, addressing elder abuse must become a priority in public policy, healthcare, and community development. A society that values and protects its elders is one that safeguards the well-being of all its members.

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