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Dutch translation

'Elder abuse'

mainly affecting women

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Background

On June 10, 2024, the 'Support Centre for Domestic Violence' reported that the number of registered reports of elder abuse has been rising again ⁱ. Last year, 1703 reports of elder abuse were received by this support centre. Other research ⁱⁱ shows that the reports mostly refer to psychological abuse and that 74 percent of victims are female. In half of the cases, the perpetrator is a child, grandchild or (former) partner of the elderly.

The national figures on elder abuse are outdated and come from a 1996 study ⁱⁱⁱ. In this study, it was found that 5.5% of the people over 65 years and living independently 65+ victims of elder abuse.

Because the population is ageing more and more and there is a shortage of social workers, it is to be expected that we will have to deal with an ever-growing group of vulnerable elderly people living in a position of dependency. Their network is also shrinking due to the death of important third parties. Because of this situation, it is likely that the extent of 'elder abuse' will increase ^{iv}. Recently, the State Secretary for Housing, Welfare and Sport announced that there will be a national investigation into the nature and extent of elder abuse.

What is elder abuse?

Elder abuse is defined as: all acts or omissions of all those who are in a personal and/or professional relationship with the elderly person, as a result of which the older person suffers or is likely to suffer (repeated) physical and/or material damage and in which there is a form of partial or complete dependence on the part of the older person ^v. In this study, the elderly are people aged 65 years or older.

Elder abuse includes

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse (e.g. if the other person thinks he has the right to sex, even if the other person is in a wheelchair. Or a demented spouse with sexual disinhibition).
- Psychological abuse (harassment, name-calling, excessive control, etc.)
- Neglect: Neglecting actions that an elderly person needs, such as not providing food and physical neglect and not giving medication.
- Financial exploitation
- Violating rights, such as the right to freedom, privacy, and self-determination.

Older people may be subject to abuse throughout their lives, but are at greater risk of being mistreated during the period when they are vulnerable, i.e. becoming dependent on others for

survival. Their network is shrinking due to the death of important third parties. They find it difficult to say anything the abuse because they are afraid of losing the bond.

Forms of abuse

- *Deliberate abuse*

There may be intentional mistreatment; The perpetrator is aware of the mistreatment or exploitation.

These abuses do not have to have arisen in the phase in which the elderly person has become dependent, but may have arisen in a lifelong history of 'family violence'. Additional risk factors for abuse of family members or close acquaintances are the persons who are struggling with alcohol or drug addiction or psychological problems ^{vi}.

- *Derailed care among Mantelzorgers (informel caregivers) ****

A distinction is made between intentional abuse and derailed care. This term refers to informal care that exceeds the limit of good care due to overload. The initially adequate informal care can be derailed over a long period of time if overloaded, i.e. there is a lack of the necessary care or there is matter of aggression. Examples of 'transgressive behaviour' by overburdened caregivers: belittling, name-calling, other verbal abuse; neglect, not doing enough or not doing enough shopping, forgetting medication, giving incorrect medication due to forgetfulness; giving a tap, confinement, tying to a chair of a person with dementia to do groceries.

Often this derailment is a sign that things can't go on at home. Of all informal caregivers, at least 1 in 10 is overloaded. We do not know how big the risk of derailment is in the case of overload.

For both forms of elder abuse, both the perpetrator and the victim may need help. But in the case of intentional abuse, the help to the abuser will look different than in the case of an overburdened caregiver. Both the caregiver and the 'elderly person in need' need help, but the best strategy is to prevent the overload.

Signalling

To get an idea of what elder abuse entails, Movisie has made a series of videos with the title 'You only see it when you believe it' ('Je ziet het pas als je het gelooft') ^{vii}. They have also written texts on the subject for this purpose ^{viii}. Initially, the reports were difficult to compare, but since 2019 there has been a tightened reporting code: 'Domestic Violence and Child Abuse Reporting Code Act', which is intended to ensure a unity in registrations ^{ix}.

In 2021, Movisie wrote a special guide for municipalities with guidelines on how they can identify abuse of elderly, including a step-by-step plan for tackling this problem. This step-by-step plan was developed in South-East Brabant ^x.

In 2022, an expert pool was set up to support other municipalities in identifying elder abuse and to shape a local approach to elder abuse. Some 24 municipalities have made use of this ^{xi}. In addition, reports of elder abuse are also received by 'Support Centres for Domestic Violence', Consultation Networks and 'Hotlines for Care and Nuisance'.

Dependent elderly people are not in a position to report the abuse, yet 16 percent approach a hotline themselves. It is striking that the families of the vulnerable elderly are even less likely to contact a hotline (14 percent).

It is social workers who most often report elder abuse to the hotlines (70 percent).

Elder abuse is an important topic of discussion among social workers and there is the opinion that the problem is many times greater than the number of reports that come in to the hotlines. Many professionals find it difficult to discuss signs of abuse with those involved^{xii}. For example, professionals are afraid of falsely accusing someone or damaging the relationship with the client if they bring up dereliction or abuse. Talking about violence can be uncomfortable.

In part, the failure to identify elder abuse may have to do with the way in which the help is organized. Identifying is difficult when different social workers are deployed and the help is spread over various organizations.

Prevention

- *Prevention of financial exploitation*

The reports of elder abuse that are received by 'Veilig Thuis' (Safe Home) mainly concern financial scams reported by banks or housing cooperatives. The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport has issued a special information box 'Financieel veilig ouder worden' ('Financially safe ageing')^{xiii}. This includes measures that can be taken if you are not yet so vulnerable, such as:

- Arranging a power of attorney, appointing/appointing a confidential advisor. Never hand over your debit card to one person, but confide in several people.
- Opening an extra account so that figures do not increase too much
- Lowering the pass limit

Arrangements at the notary:

- Arrange everything properly with a reliable notary if you are not yet vulnerable (there are notaries who cooperate in forcibly changing a will of a 'vulnerable elderly').
- For example, appoint an administrator, arrange the material inheritance such as jewellery, etc.
- Arrange who is the first point of contact
- Drawing up a 'Levenstestament' ('living will')
- Arrange supervision of the finances, e.g. through notary, accountant, family member

These preventive measures deserve a proper information campaign by the government. So far, these preventive measures got not very much attention.

- *Reducing the vulnerability of older people due to social isolation*

- Older people become vulnerable to abuse if they live in social isolation and become dependent on one person. Single women, women without children, lesbian women and women with mental health problems are particularly vulnerable.

- In the book 'Voorzorgcirkels' ('Precautionary circles') it is advised to set up a network of possible contact persons in time^{xiv}. Precautionary circles are groups of about ten to thirteen people, often elderly, family members, neighbours, and volunteers. Within these groups, people support and help each other. This support can range from practical help such as transport and administrative support to providing companionship and a listening ear.

- In general, care for the elderly is set up at the district/village level. In the big cities, this is mainly organized from the libraries, community centres and community homes. The presence of a good hostess is in those circumstances essential. This

care has been evaluated by a study by the RIVM^{xv}. This is a qualitative study that shows that initiatives at the neighbourhood level can be helpful in reducing loneliness and vulnerability. It is not known whether all libraries in the Netherlands have taken such initiatives. Nor do we know how many vulnerable elderly people are reached.

- Another way to prevent loneliness is described by Christine Otten^{xvi}. She describes a nursing home in which all kinds of sensible initiatives are taken to create a pleasant living atmosphere and all kinds of limits are broken, for example by offering students a room in exchange for volunteer work in the nursing home.

- For highly isolated elderly people, it is recommended to appoint a 'social service buddy', whereby elderly people who do not have assets are reimbursed for this buddy. 'Saar aan huis' can serve as an example for setting up such a system. 'Saar aan huis' focuses on single lesbian elderly women^{xvii}. These women are especially vulnerable to all kinds of abuse because a social network is not self-evident and it takes energy to have to 'come out of the closet' again and again in every new situation. The caregivers for lesbian elderly women at this organization are also lesbians themselves. This reduces loneliness among this group because they can call on 'emotional peers'. These social buddies are not reimbursed.

- *Own initiative to set up a network*

In this context, we would also like to mention the role of WOUW, a network of 'older women'^{xviii}, founded in 1981. It is a network of women aged 50+ (without an organization), which advocates for more attention for and participation of older women in society. Among other things, it focuses on mutual support, information and publicity.

For example, we produced a publication called 'Baas in eigen zorg' ('Boss over own healthcare'), after which a video was recorded about 'The Brave Patient'^{xix}. In addition, an initiative has been developed and realized of a form of cohabitation for the elderly at Akropolis on the Zeeburgereiland in Amsterdam^{xx}.

- *Preventing overload among caregivers*

It is to be expected that there will be a great demand on informal caregivers in the future due to the increasing ageing of the population and the shortage in the labour market^{xxi}. Already, most caregivers are 65+ themselves. Currently, 1 in 10 caregivers suffers from overload. In Amsterdam, this has already risen to 1 in 8. If no precautionary measures are taken, there is a risk of further overburdening of the caregiver which comes with the associated risk of derailment. Based on research, the Council of the Elderly has given advice about the way the organisation of informal care be best guaranteed. In this, the caregiver is the pivot and the care must join the caregiver and not the other way around. Many caregivers, as well as frail older people, would like to share their care with more people, but often find it difficult to ask for help when they need it. There are various 'Steunpunten van Mantelzorgers' (support points for caregivers) and there is an Association of Caregivers^{xxii xxiii}.

A survey by the Council of the Elderly shows that most elderly people are not very concerned about the future 'who will live who will care', while in the case of informal caregivers they are very concerned. The majority of informal caregivers are now between 60 and 80 years old. They are especially concerned about feeling 'abandoned and isolated' in the future^{xxiv}.

As a municipality, Amsterdam offers the following care options:

Home care, daytime activities, short-term stays somewhere else, lodging, respite care, a case manager, neighbourhood teams, household help, courses for informal caregivers, contact with fellow sufferers, ambulatory support (with, for example, students), book tips and if it is no longer possible, nursing home care.

The support of overburdened caregivers depends on the city district and/or the region where they live. We have not found an overview of the different forms of support per district/region. We also don't know whether overburdened caregivers find their way to these forms of support.

It is also unclear how many overburdened caregivers will work less or give up their jobs. Caregiving is usually unpaid and when giving up paid work, these caregivers can run into financial problems. If the government adopts the advice of de Raad van Ouderen' ('The Council of the Elderly') and chooses the informal caregiver as the pivot of its policy, it will also have to consider the remuneration of the informal caregiver and certainly prevent her from losing out financially. In doing so, it could take a leaf out of the proposals of the female President Sheinbaum of Mexico^{xxv}. This newly elected president promises benefits for women over the age of 60, because they have taken on the majority of the care responsibilities. This gives women more freedom to work as informal caregivers.

Professional assistance

- *Home care, district nursing, general practitioner*

Signs of elder abuse are usually noticed by social workers who visit the elderly at home, such as home care, domestic helpers and the district nursing. These social workers are not trained to identify elder abuse or to report it to the family. For more insight into the situations these professions are confronted with, we refer to the book 'Ouder mishandeling komt in de beste families voor' ('Parent abuse occurs in the best families') by Hetty Termeer^{xxvi}. *Derailed informal care turns out to be a difficult subject to discuss, because the caregiver does not have to be aware of the derailment.*

It is important to start recording the signals, what do I hear, what do I see, what is the relationship between care recipient and caregiver. Movisie has developed a signal card for derailed informal care that home care workers and others can use^{xxvii}.

Pay attention to signs such as bruises, scratches, fractures, swelling (physical abuse)/ weight loss, dehydration, unkempt wounds or poor hygiene (neglect)/ confusion, drowsiness or lethargy (psychological abuse). Focus on the facts and separate that from conjecture and conclusions.

The suspicions of elder abuse can be discussed internally with colleagues without violating the privacy law. Veilig Thuis (Safe Home) can also be consulted, but permission must be requested from the elderly person and/or informal caregiver in connection with the privacy law.

If the counsellor wants to discuss the signs of elder abuse with the caregiver/care recipient, there are good guidelines for this^{xxviii}.

It is important to come to the decision

- *'Veilig Thuis', Safe at Home*

When acute or structural elder abuse is the case, care providers are obliged to call in Safe Home.

Of all reports of 'abuse' received by 'Veilig Thuis', 2 percent relate to elder abuse. The other reports are usually about child abuse.

What does 'Veilig Thuis' do?

- They listen to your story that you can tell anonymously.
- The responsibility remains with the reporter, but the Safe Home employees think along with you about how you can tackle the problem.
- Based on the seriousness of the signals, the reporter of suspected elder abuse can decide to report abuse to Veilig Thuis and to the police.
- Based on the seriousness of the report, Veilig Thuis can consider whether it wants to conduct a broader investigation including other agencies with which the care recipient/informal caregiver/has contact.
- Together with the contact-seeking counsellor, they can see which other or specialist help should be used.
- They can call in the so-called 'Bemoeizorg' 'Meddling care' ^{xxix}. This usually happens when there are psychological problems.
- They can call in the police, the general practitioner, a forensic doctor and a bank.

Veilig Thuis and other organizations are in the process of developing a roadmap, with questions such as when and what help should be called in. This roadmap has not yet been worked out for elder abuse.

So far, no data are available on the extent to which the help provided by 'Veilig Thuis' has contributed to reducing or stopping elder abuse.

Police and criminal law

Elderly people often want to report abuse to the police, especially in the case of financial abuse.

If the financial abuse has been committed by children, grandchildren or close friends, acquaintances, etc., it is important to realize in advance that 'money is just money'. Disturbed relationships due to abuse in which criminal law is called in can no longer be repaired. In many cases, going to the police is considered less desirable. People prefer to focus on 'mediation'.

Conclusions

Elder abuse is relatively common, but one hears little about it, it is a taboo subject.

It is to be expected that in the future this form of abuse will become an even bigger problem as more people get older and become dependent on help. At the same time, there is an acute shortage of social workers and informal caregivers.

This problem of elder abuse mainly affects older women because they live longer than men and at the same time suffer from diseases at an earlier age.

This is a vulnerable group, with single women, women without children, lesbians and women with mental health problems being particularly vulnerable.

There is still a lot of work to be done in all areas, see our extensive recommendations.

Recommendations:

1. More research needed

- To gain insight into the nature and extent of elder abuse, a national study is important. This includes understanding the differences between older men and women in terms of vulnerability, nature of abuse, available care and so on. *Note: It is recommended that all studies be broken down by men and women.* Does abuse look different in older women than in older men? Are women more vulnerable to financial scams because they have less insight into money than men? Are women less able to express their needs than men? Does the lower income (40 percent less pension) for women influence abuse?
- According to the Council of the Elderly, informal caregivers play a pivotal role in providing assistance to vulnerable elderly people. In the event of overload, it is assumed that this will easily lead to derailment. The question is how often does overloading lead to derailment? And is there sufficient support available that informal caregivers can call in to prevent overload/derailment?
- Veilig Thuis (Safe Home) has a pivot role in the identification of serious elder abuse and this organisation has a central role in assisting social workers. At this moment, there is a lack of data on the effectiveness of their interventions and of the follow-up help that is called in by Veilig Thuis. How often does a report ultimately result in an adequate offer of help? Is the help offered able to reduce or stop elder abuse?

2. Improving information

- The Ministry of Housing, Welfare and Sport's good information box 'financially safe ageing' deserves to be better brought to the attention of the elderly^{xxx}.
- Only a small proportion of the elderly who are abused report it to a hotline. The question is whether, these elderly can find their own way to the hot lines? Better information could change that.
- Do the caregivers know how to find their way to those support agencies when overload is at risk? More information from municipalities about the possibilities to receive support is desirable.

3. Prevention

- There is a guide for municipalities with a step-by-step plan to tackle the problem of elder abuse^{xxxii}. So far, not all municipalities have embraced this guideline. (24 municipalities participated in the Expert Pool). New initiatives to encourage municipalities to implement the guide are necessary.
- For lonely and vulnerable elderly people, all kinds of opportunities are offered at the district/village level to expand their social network. These activities are subsidised at the municipal level and explained through the mandatory home visits to elderly people over the age of 75. If necessary, an elderly person will be picked up for an activity. The

question is to what extent these possibilities are known to the group of older people who could benefit from them.

- Housing offers opportunities to combat loneliness and vulnerability by reserving communal areas in existing flats and new construction. Also open up these common areas to neighbouring residents and to organize activities. The proximity of shops, public transport and healthcare facilities are important.
- 10% of caregivers are overloaded. Are there sufficient support initiatives at the municipal level and are they known to informal caregivers? In the event of a lack of such agencies, the caregiver will have to take his own measures to prevent derailment. For example, she may decide to relocate or reduce her paid working hours. Such measures are not always financially viable. It is necessary to implement a financial policy in which paid work is compensated for relocation or surrender. See also the plans in Mexico (see note xxv).

4. Improving care for the elderly

- To improve the detection of elder abuse, Movisie has created digital training opportunities for care providers. With the help of a list of signs, social workers can practice recognizing elder abuse^{xxxii}.
- Special attention to elder abuse is missing from the Roadmap^{xxxiii} drawn up by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. This roadmap now focuses on children.
- Counselling programmes designed to tackle domestic violence, such as the programme 'Geweld hoort nergens thuis' ('violence has no place anywhere'), could be adapted to elder abuse^{xxxiv}.
- Furthermore, more attention needs to be paid to specific vulnerable groups, such as lonely elderly people (without a partner, children), non-binary older people (lesbians, etc.), elderly people with mental health problems or dementia, elderly people with a foreign origin, and the like.

Additional information

* This article is inspired by the lecture given by Hiske Jaspers, who works at Veilig Thuis, on May 4, 2023 held at the Wouw-Nijmegen. In addition, she is chair of the National Platform for Combating Elder Abuse and is working with various parties, such as the Ministry of Health, to look at how more attention should be paid to this theme in the Netherlands.

** Authored for the Shadow Reports of CEDAW and GREVIO as background information on elder abuse. The emphasis is on the situation of older women who are most affected. Every four years, CEDAW surveys the Dutch government to what extent it has implemented the 1995 UN Convention on Women. GREVIO does the same, but on the Istanbul Convention on Abuse of Women. Women's organisations in the Netherlands are drawing up a Shadow Report for the purpose of interrogation.

*** More research is needed on the situation of informal caregivers. In due course, a next article will be written about this in which their situation will be explored in more depth.

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- ⁱ National Platform for Combating Elder Abuse, research ['More elderly people harassed and neglected'](#), on Nu.nl, 10 June 2024
- ⁱⁱ Movisie (2011) ['Registration of Elder Abuse'](#)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Comies, H.C. Jonker, C. Pot, A.M. & Smit, J.H. (1996) ['Aggression against and disadvantage of the elderly'](#) a study of elder abuse. EMGO/institute, VUmc
- ^{iv} Kriek, F. Oude Ophuis, R.J.M. (2023) ['An exploratory study of elder abuse'](#). Amsterdam, Regional Plan publication no. 1019
- ^v Trimbos, scientific knowledge institute for mental health (2023) ['National Platform to Combat Elder Abuse'](#)
- ^{vi} Kriek, F. Oude Ophuis, R.J.M. (2023) ['An exploratory study of elder abuse'](#). Amsterdam, Regional Plan publication no. 1019
- ^{vii} Movisie (2013): ['You only see it when you believe it'](#)
- ^{viii} Movisie (2019) ['Recognising signs of elder abuse'](#)
- ^{ix} Westerveld, N. van Delft, A. Schakenraad, W. ['Meldcode bij ontspoorde mantelzorg'](#), Movisie, revised version 2020
- ^x Movisie (2021) ['A guide to parental abuse for municipalities'](#)
- ^{xi} Kriek, F. Oude Ophuis, R.J.M. (2023) ['An exploratory study of elder abuse'](#), Amsterdam, Regioplan publication no. 1019
- ^{xii} Movisie (June 15, 2023) ['International-day-against-elder abuse'](#), article, 1 in 20-elderly-is-abused. Every year on 15 June, the International Day Against Elder Abuse
- ^{xiii} Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, (2022) Information box ['Financially secure ageing'](#)
- ^{xiv} Henk Geene, (2021) ['Precautionary circles as an answer to ageing'](#)
- ^{xv} National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, Evaluation of the project (2021) ['Elderly in the neighbourhood'](#)
- ^{xvi} Christine Otten, Sept 2024, ['care-home-as-hangout-for-the-neighbourhood'](#), Senioren Journaal
- ^{xvii} Saar aan Huis ['additional informal care'](#)
- ^{xviii} Network of older women [WOUW](#) 'wise old wives', since 1990
- ^{xix} WOUW Amsterdam, ['Boss of own care'](#) and video 2016 'The Brave Patient', *'If you want and can do something, become less self-evident', 'Not everything that is possible is necessary'*
- ^{xx} The Acropolis Tower. [Residents cooperative](#) on Zeeburgereiland
- ^{xxi} Council of the Elderly, Informal Care Panel (2023) ['Informal care for and by the elderly'](#)
- ^{xxii} [Caregiver support points](#) in your area
- ^{xxiii} National Association of Caregivers, [Mantelzorg NL](#)
- ^{xxiv} Council of the Elderly, Informal Care Panel (2023) ['Informal care for and by the elderly'](#)
- ^{xxv} Mexico's newly elected president, Sheinbaum, promises benefits for women over the age of 60 and a [care system for women](#) because they have taken on the majority of the care responsibilities. That gives them more freedom. From the Volkskrant of June 4, 2024
- ^{xxvi} Hetty Termeer (2019) ['Parental abuse occurs in the best families'](#), Boeken Gilde
- ^{xxvii} Movisie (2011) ['Registration of Elder Abuse'](#)
- ^{xxviii} Westerveld, N. van Delft, A. Schakenraad, W. ['Meldcode bij ontspoorde mantelzorg'](#), Movisie, revised version 2020
- ^{xxix} [Meddlesome](#), if you are worried about someone close to you
- ^{xxx} Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, (2022) Information box ['Financially secure ageing'](#)
- ^{xxxi} National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, Evaluation of the project (2021) ['Elderly in the neighbourhood'](#)
- ^{xxxii} Movisie (2020) ['Practicing with three situations of elder abuse, via e-learning'](#)
- ^{xxxiii} Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (2022) ['Roadmap'](#)
- ^{xxxiv} Violence doesn't belong anywhere, 2020, [VNG/violence doesn't belong anywhere/rijksoverheid.nl](#)

Websites with more information:

<https://veiligthuis.nl>

<https://www.veiligthuisgv.nl/hulp-nodig/ouderenmishandeling-melden>

www.ikvermoedhuiselijkgeweld.nl

www.aanpak-ouderenmishandeling.nl