

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL EDUCATORS IN PREVENTING ELDER ABUSE

Veronika Pavlíková, Šárka Kopřivová, & Barbora Kuchtová

Department of Social Education, University of Ostrava (Czechia)

Abstract

The article focuses on the analysis of the role of social educators in the prevention of elder abuse, maltreatment, and neglect, with particular emphasis on invisible and latent forms of harm that often remain outside the attention of professionals. The objective of the present study is to ascertain how social educators perceive the issue of violence against the elderly, to what extent they encounter it in their professional practice, what strategies and competencies they use when working with vulnerable seniors, and what barriers prevent them from effective prevention and intervention. The research is conducted using a qualitative strategy involving semi-structured interviews with social educators working in various areas of social services, education, and community work. Thematic analysis of the interviews focuses on identifying professional experiences, perceptions of risk situations, approaches to prevention, and key factors influencing the effectiveness of their activities. It is imperative to note that a significant degree of attention is allocated to the matter of professional training and the opportunities for further education of social pedagogues in the domain of geriatric prevention. The anticipated outcomes indicate that social educators are only peripherally engaged with the issue of elder abuse. However, they frequently encounter inadequate methodological support, a limited interdisciplinary collaboration, and an absence of targeted training. It is anticipated that the study will also reveal discrepancies in the approaches adopted by individual workplaces, as well as in the perception of their employees' professional role. It is anticipated that the findings will inform the formulation of recommendations for the enhancement of professional training for social pedagogues. This will be achieved by means of the development of supervision and methodological support, in addition to the strengthening of community-oriented prevention strategies. The article will thus provide a theoretically grounded and practically oriented contribution to the development of violence prevention among seniors and highlight the potential of social pedagogy in protecting this vulnerable group.

Keywords: *Elder abuse, interview, prevention, social educator.*

1. Introduction

Elder abuse and neglect (EAN) have been identified as a significant socio-educational and societal problem, with considerable repercussions for the physical, mental, and social health of older adults (Cooper et al., 2008). In the Czech context, this phenomenon is defined as a single or repeated, intentional or unintentional act or omission directed at an older person, typically occurring within a relationship based on trust (Vidovičová et al., 2025). The result of such conduct is physical, psychological, material, or moral harm, although such conduct does not necessarily constitute a criminal offence (Korandová et al., 2023).

The issue of elder abuse is distinctly multidimensional and encompasses a wide spectrum of forms of violence, most commonly occurring in family or institutional settings. A particular characteristic of this phenomenon is its "invisibility," which is associated with low reporting rates, older adults' dependence on caregivers, and the frequent normalisation of adverse situations (World Health Organization, 2024). In the professional literature, this phenomenon is referred to as the "iceberg effect," which occurs when only the most severe and documented cases are captured, while latent forms remain concealed (Hubatková & Vidovičová, 2024).

In order to gain a more profound understanding of this phenomenon, it is imperative to differentiate between the various forms of EAN. The most prevalent forms of abuse encompass psychological and emotional maltreatment, encompassing verbal assaults, belittling, infantilisation, and enforced social isolation. Neglect is also a significant category, defined as the denial or failure to fulfil caregiving obligations. This can be either intentional or the result of ignorance or burnout. Another form of abuse is systemic (institutional) abuse, in which older adults are harmed by the care system itself. For example, rigid

institutional measures that prioritise the institution's needs over the client's autonomy can constitute systemic abuse. Financial and material abuse, which includes the unauthorised disposal of an older adult's property, is also a significant concern (Vidovićová et al., 2025; Lorman et al., 2023).

In view of these facts, the role of social pedagogy is becoming increasingly significant, as its scope is gradually expanding to include the elderly population in line with the concept of lifelong learning. Historically, the focus of this field has been predominantly on children and adolescents; however, contemporary approaches reflect the necessity for support and care throughout the entire life cycle. Of particular pertinence is the therapeutic concept of social pedagogy, predicated on the so-called Hansellmann approach, which emphasises care, assistance, and support for the individual (Mühlpachr & Bargel, 2011). Social educators possess the competencies to carry out educational, training, and activation activities aimed at the socialisation, humanisation, and normalization of the lives of people with specific needs. Concurrently, they should be capable of identifying the risks of secondary consequences of disadvantage, which include increased vulnerability to abuse (Zezulková, 2014).

Nevertheless, a number of factors hinder the effective prevention and detection of elder abuse. A salient issue pertains to the dearth of educational programmes, as a mere fraction of social service workers have undergone targeted training programmes that are specifically designed to address the prevention of elder abuse. A further significant barrier pertains to the fears and obstacles associated with reporting such cases; staff may regard incidents as trivial, doubt the possibility of resolution, or fear negative consequences. The influence of ageism, defined as societal prejudices against old age, cannot be overlooked, as these lead to the trivialisation of older adults' needs and the tolerance of less visible forms of violence (Vidovićová et al., 2025; Lorman et al., 2023).

The theoretical framework presented herein demonstrates that social pedagogy has the capacity to make a significant contribution to the field of elder protection. Nevertheless, its full utilisation is constrained primarily by systemic deficiencies in methodological support and inadequate professional training in practice (Vidovićová et al., 2025).

2. Design and methods

The primary objective of this research project is to analyse and describe in detail the role of the social educator in the prevention of elder abuse, exploitation, and neglect, while also identifying specific opportunities for developing this role within the context of social services, education, and community work.

In light of the nature of the research problem, a qualitative research strategy was selected, enabling a more profound comprehension of individual experiences, meanings, and interpretations of the phenomenon under study. This approach is particularly suitable for capturing the subjective perspectives of older adults and their experiences of care, support, and potential risk situations associated with mistreatment (Creswell, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were utilised as the primary data collection method, as they offer a satisfactory degree of flexibility to maintain the thematic framework while allowing for a responsive approach to respondents' statements and the exploration of relevant topics in greater depth. The interviews were conducted on the basis of a pre-prepared interview protocol, the focus of which was on the experiences of the seniors with social services, their perception of the quality of care, their sense of security, their relationships with caregivers, and any experiences of inappropriate treatment or its prevention.

The research sample comprised seven senior citizens aged 69–78 who had experience of using social services. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the aim of including individuals capable of reflecting on their experiences with care and support. The sample size of this study is commensurate with the requirements of qualitative research, in which the emphasis is placed on the depth of data rather than its quantity.

The interviews were conducted in the respondents' natural environment or in a social services setting, depending on their preference, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. The research was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles, particularly informed consent from respondents, anonymity, and the confidentiality of the data collected.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006), which represents a systematic approach to identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) in qualitative data. The analytical process entailed the repeated reading of the transcripts, open coding, category formation, and the subsequent identification of overarching thematic areas. The procedure described herein enabled the capture of both the explicit and latent meanings contained within the respondents' statements.

The analysis yielded four overarching thematic domains that encapsulate pivotal aspects of the elderly population's encounters with care, assistance, and the mitigation of mistreatment. These thematic areas form the basis for the subsequent interpretation of the results and discussion of the role of the social worker in this field.

3. Results

The research focused on understanding how older adults perceive professional assistance, particularly from social educators, and what factors influence their willingness to seek out or accept such assistance. Based on a thematic analysis, four main thematic areas were identified: (1) seniors' experiences with assistance and awareness of the profession, (2) the development of willingness to accept preventive assistance, (3) technical, informational, and organizational barriers to assistance, and (4) the concept of ideal assistance.

Seniors' experiences with assistance and awareness of the profession

The analysis demonstrated that the majority of respondents were not acquainted with the profession of social pedagogue. It has been demonstrated that senior citizens primarily associate the necessity for assistance with a medical practitioner, a government agency, or a home care service. Moreover, they seek professional help exclusively in acute crisis situations, such as a deterioration in health or the loss of a loved one.

The participants' experiences with helping professions range between two extremes: a positively perceived humanity and a negative experience involving a breach of trust. While the initial contact is frequently characterised as supportive and empathetic, it is precisely the closeness and informality of the relationship that can, in some cases, create an opening for psychological or financial abuse. This ambivalence gives rise to a pervasive mistrust of formal support systems, particularly when such systems are perceived to be impersonal, bureaucratic, and unresponsive to personal needs.

It can be concluded that awareness of the options for social-pedagogical support is minimal, and that seniors in difficult situations primarily rely on family or institutions with which they are already familiar. Consequently, the preventive aspect of assistance is considerably weakened.

The development of willingness to accept preventive assistance

The second thematic area highlighted the complex interplay of factors that influence older adults' willingness to accept help. These factors can be categorised into three distinct areas: family identity, the normalisation of loss of autonomy, and psychological barriers.

The concept of family identity emerges as a pivotal framework for interpreting one's own situation. It is evident that older adults place significant emphasis on the value of self-sufficiency, a concept that is intricately intertwined with their sense of dignity. Consequently, acceptance of assistance is frequently perceived as a sign of failure.

The process of normalising a lack of autonomy manifests itself through a gradual restriction of autonomy, which older adults often only reflect on in hindsight. The loss of decision-making authority, psychological pressure, or belittlement can lead to a weakening of identity and the development of passivity. However, the act of seeking assistance is frequently impeded by the prevailing fear of losing care or of the situation deteriorating. The intervention of a third party is often the catalyst for the articulation of the situation.

At the level of individual experience, psychological barriers come into play, particularly shame, self-blame, and stereotypical notions about old age. It is a common tendency among older adults to underestimate the significance of non-physical forms of abuse and to internalise the societal norm that they should not "burden" those around them. Conversely, the apprehension of solitude can supersede the necessity for safeguarding.

Technical, informational, and organizational barriers to assistance

The findings indicate that obstacles to accessing assistance are not solely attributable to a paucity of services, but rather, are predominantly rooted in a intricate network of constraints within the immediate and broader social environments of older adults.

Within the familial environment, a range of pressures are exerted, encompassing verbal aggression, manipulation, and the questioning of the senior's competence. These strategies have been shown to have a detrimental effect on the self-confidence of the subjects concerned, whilst also limiting their contact with the outside world.

At the systemic level, barriers emerge in the form of insufficient information, the complexity of administrative processes, the unavailability of experts, and digital exclusion. The support system is often perceived by seniors as confusing, impersonal, and difficult to access, which further reduces the likelihood of its use.

The concept of ideal assistance

The participants articulated a clear vision of what constitutes effective support, which is predicated primarily on the quality of the relationship. The fundamental principles that underpin this approach are humanity, respect, and a commitment to ensuring a safe environment.

The provision of effective assistance is characterised by a non-pressing approach, sufficient time for listening, and the use of clear language. Ensuring transparency in the assistance process is of paramount importance, as is the assurance that disclosing a problem will not exacerbate the situation. A proactive, outreach-based approach is imperative in order to move beyond the passive "wait-for-the-client" model.

Furthermore, participants emphasised the necessity of collaborating with the family system and promoting the senior's autonomy. The objective of assistance should not be to assume control, but rather to facilitate the return of that control to the individual.

4. Discussion

The study's findings highlight the complexity of the factors influencing older adults' willingness to accept help and confirm the conclusions of research on elder abuse, exploitation, and neglect (EAN). The limited awareness of the social pedagogue profession can be attributed to its inadequate institutionalisation and the absence of transparency within the support system (Vidovičová et al., 2025). The finding that older adults predominantly seek assistance in crisis situations is consistent with the nature of EAN as a hidden phenomenon with a low reporting rate.

A significant factor influencing the acceptance of assistance is an identity rooted in self-reliance and family loyalty. In accordance with theories of aging and the concept of internalized ageism, it is common for older adults to perceive the act of requesting assistance as a sign of personal failure. Consequently, these individuals often modify their behaviour in a manner consistent with the prevailing norm of the "non-burdensome" individual (Vidovičová et al., 2025; Lorman et al., 2023). The process of gradual normalisation of a lack of autonomy can be interpreted through the concept of learned helplessness, whereby repeated experiences of being unable to influence a situation lead to passivity and persistence in risky conditions (Cooper et al., 2008).

The tendency to underestimate the significance of non-physical forms of violence is consistent with the prevailing evidence that psychological and economic abuse frequently eludes recognition and remains inadequately addressed. It is evident that shame, the fear of losing relationships, and concerns about institutionalisation play a significant role in this situation, thereby reducing the willingness to address the issue. Concurrently, structural barriers such as inadequate information, onerous administrative processes, and digital exclusion are evident, reflecting broader inequalities in access to services and manifestations of institutionalised ageism (Lorman et al., 2023).

From the perspective of social pedagogy, the results support the importance of relationship-oriented and supportive approaches that emphasise trust, individualisation, and respect for autonomy (Mühlpachr & Bargel, 2011). The optimal model of assistance is congruent with the tenets of empowerment, emphasising the enhancement of competencies and the cultivation of autonomy in individual decision-making (Zezulková, 2014). Concurrently, the findings underscore the necessity for a transition from a reactive to a proactive, field-based, and community-oriented approach, wherein the social pedagogue functions as a mediator, facilitator, and agent of prevention.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that the propensity of senior citizens to acquiesce to assistance is the consequence of a multifaceted interplay between personal history, family relationships, psychological barriers, and the structural availability of services. The preventive potential of social pedagogical work is currently constrained not only by a lack of awareness but also by pervasive social stereotypes about old age and assistance. In order to facilitate the effective development of this field, it is essential to strengthen the role of the social pedagogue as a professional who enters the natural environment of older adults, works within their life context, and supports their autonomy. The emphasis should be placed on the establishment of trust, the cultivation of a secure relationship, and the provision of assistance in everyday life.

Effective prevention, therefore, does not consist solely in the expansion of services, but rather in a fundamental shift in approach – from a reactive crisis management model to a proactive, relationship-oriented support framework. This enables senior citizens to maintain their dignity, safety, and a sense of purpose in life.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101.
- Cooper, C., Selwood, A., & Livingston, G. (2008). The prevalence of elder abuse and neglect: A systematic review. *Age and Ageing*, 37, 151–160.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Hubatková, B., & Vidovičová, L. (2024). Outcomes of elder abuse and neglect in Central Europe: Exploring the link between EAN and well-being among non-institutionalized older adults. *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 36(3), 265–290.
- Korandová, A., Řeháková, T., Řezníková, S., & Novák, J. (2023). *Aplikace principů restorativní justice do systému řešení seniorského abusu (RESTABUS)*. Praha: Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí.
- Lorman, J., Prchalová, J., Kalvach, Z., & Vidovičová, L. (2023). *Metodika: Široká definice a typologie seniorského abusu – fenomén týrání, zneužívání, zanedbávání a dalšího nevhodného jednání a zacházení s muži a ženami ve vyšším věku (EAN): Komentovaný průvodce (ver. 1.0)*. Praha: Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí.
- Mühlpachr, P., & Bargel, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Senioři z pohledu sociální pedagogiky*. Brno: Institut mezioborových studií.
- Nešporová, O., Petrová Kafková, M., & Vidovičová, L. (2024). *Jak se zkoumá násilí na seniorech v kontextu institucionální péče*. Praha: Výzkumný ústav práce a sociálních věcí, v. v. i.
- Vidovičová, L., Nešporová, O., & Petrová Kafková, M. (2025). *Násilí na seniorech a další formy špatného zacházení v pobytových sociálních službách (EAN): Výsledky empirické studie FEANCI*. Praha: Výzkumný ústav práce a sociálních věcí, v. v. i.
- Zeulková, E. (2014). *Speciální pedagogika v sociální sféře*. Ostrava: Ostravská univerzita.