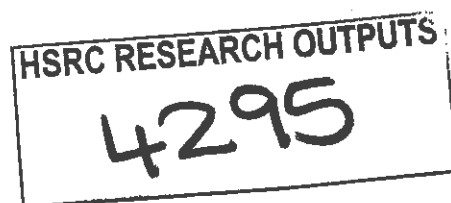


***Mpathekombi, ya bantu abadala:*  
elder abuse in black townships  
on the Cape Flats**

**Johannah Keikelame**

**Monica Ferreira**

**In partnership with Ikamva Labantu Project**



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**HSRC/UCT Centre for Gerontology  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of Cape Town  
Observatory**

**March 2000**

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# Acknowledgements

This report describes an exploratory, qualitative study conducted on the Cape Flats to investigate elder abuse in Xhosa-speaking communities. The study was conducted in partnership with the Ikamva Labantu Project. The research findings presented in the report will be disseminated in a workshop to be held in Guguletu on 15 March 2000. The researchers and the collaborators at Ikamva Labantu earnestly hope that the outcome of the study and the workshop will lead to further research being conducted for decision support and to a plan of action being implemented, to address this horrendous social problem.

The researchers wish to acknowledge the valuable contribution of the partners to the study. Special thanks are extended to Mr Siphon Puwani, Ms Helen Lieberman, and Mesdames Tutu Gcememe, Pumla Ndaba and Maggie Buqa at Ikamva Labantu. Thanks also go to Mrs Noluthando Mfunda of Vietnam, for competently and sensitively facilitating the group discussions. Ms Ishrene Davids at Ikamva Labantu is thanked for efficient arrangement of the workshop.

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**Mpoe Johannah Keikelame**

**Monica Ferreira**

Cape Town  
March 2000

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## Background

The abuse of older persons is a growing problem world-wide and one of great societal concern. Frequently referred to as a hidden crime, the abuse is locked in social taboos and is not easily recognized nor disclosed. Older victims of abusive acts are usually unwilling to report cases of abuse, especially when the perpetrator is an adult child - someone who is loved and trusted, and possibly also a carer to the older person. In some communities, older victims' disclosure of abuse is tantamount to hanging dirty linen in public; one must therefore strive to conceal the abuse and to cope with the effects alone, lest shame and social censure be brought upon the household. Older persons who are abused may therefore suffer in silence through fear of being further victimized, isolated or abandoned – and are open to additional abuse.

Substantial literature exists on elder abuse in developed countries but very little is known about the prevalence or manifestation of the problem in developing countries. Whilst the literature and legislation in Western countries typically define types of abuse as physical, verbal/emotional, material/financial, sexual and neglect, there is as yet no definition of types of elder abuse which occur in South African settings. To date there has been no research on the incidence of elder abuse in South Africa; only anecdotal evidence is available which indicates that the problem exists.

Since 1994, as the country is being transformed into a fully democratic state, far-reaching social change is taking place in several arenas. It is mooted that social forces, some linked to the transitional process and others to demographic processes (population ageing, urbanization, family nucleation, etc.) under way, are contributing to an increase in the incidence of abuse, especially in previously disadvantaged and now transitional communities.

The traditional view amongst black Africans has been that older persons should be cared for within the home and community, and not in a residential care facility. However, family structures in Africa are changing and stressors of urban living (poor housing infrastructure, poor physical and mental health, unemployment, poverty, alcohol abuse, violence and crime, etc.) are taking their toll on the capacity of families to care for older relatives. Besides diminished capacity, caregiving to elders places a heavy emotional and physical burden on households. Older persons in disadvantaged urban areas may thus be living out their last days in non-optimal conditions. As a consequence, they may be at increased risk of abuse – particularly from family members.

The South African government has recently developed a national strategy to prevent elder abuse, in partnership with non-governmental organizations and other role players (Department of Health, 1999). However, the strategy is not based on any local evidence - which indeed has not been available up to now. To our knowledge, the present study is the first and only study to specifically investigate actual elder abuse (as opposed to attitudes to elder abuse, or anecdotal secondhand reports) in the South African context.

The aims of this exploratory study were (1) to ascertain levels of knowledge and understanding as well as the experience of older urban community dwellers of elder abuse; (2) to determine ways in which these persons and communities may be empowered to protect themselves against abuse; (3) and to yield seminal information to guide future research, and for use in the design of interventions and for decision support.

## **Method**

The focus group technique was used to gather data from older persons recruited in three historically "black" townships on the Cape Flats who were willing to participate in the study. The technique is widely used to gather information from a sample population in a subject area in which little is known. Focus groups enable investigators to explore issues through observation of interactions in group discussions. The discussions are guided by a facilitator. The number of participants in a group is typically limited to between eight and 12, to maximise participant input. Participants in a group discussion usually share the same characteristics that are relevant to the problem under investigation, i.e. they fall in a specific age category, live in the same, or a socio-culturally similar community, and (in the case of some studies) share a culture and language. The discussions, conducted in the language of the majority of the participants in a group, are audiotaped.

In the present study an interview schedule was constructed by the researchers in consultation with the partners at the Ikamva Labantu Project, for use by a facilitator to guide the discussions. Items in the schedule broadly covered knowledge and perceptions of elder abuse, types and examples of abuse, and suggestions for interventions to prevent elder abuse and to support victims of such abuse.

The discussions were held at monthly intervals from July to September 1999 at venues in three townships on the Cape Flats: Khayelitsha, Langa and Vietnam. The facilitator, who is Xhosa speaking and was specially trained for the task, briefly explained the purpose of the discussion to the groups and invited the participants to talk openly and freely about the study topic. She gained their consent to audiotape the discussion and assured them of the confidentiality of the information which they would divulge. The sessions each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The recordings were later transcribed in Xhosa and the transcriptions translated into English by the first author, and were content analysed by both researchers.

## **Sample**

The participants in the group discussions were recruited from older people's clubs operated in the three study townships. In each case, club members willing to participate in a discussion were listed and participants were randomly selected from



the lists. The sizes of the groups were Khayelitsha 11, Langa 12 and Vietnam 10 - a total of 33 participants. Twenty-one participants were women and 12 were men. The ages of the participants ranged from 54 to 82 years; the mean age of the women was 63 years and of the men, 70 years. The duration that the participants had lived in the area where they were interviewed was between 3 and 15 years in the case of the Khayelitsha group and between 12 and 52 years in the case of the Langa and Vietnam groups. (Langa and Vietnam may be described as settled townships and Khayelitsha as a newly-settled township; Khayelitsha's inhabitants have mainly migrated to the area from the Eastern Cape province since the mid-1980s).

## **Findings**

The data are classified and analysed in two parts: (1) Recognizing elder abuse; and (2) Addressing the problem, or a consideration of opportunities for interventions to prevent and deal with abuse. The findings of the analysis are later interpreted in a broad discussion.

### *Part 1 - Recognizing elder abuse*

To start discussion, the facilitator posed the following questions to the groups: "What do you know about abuse of older persons?" "What types of elder abuse are there?" "Do you personally know of an older person who was, or is being abused? Can you tell me about this?" "In your view, why are some older persons abused?"

## **Knowledge**

First, it was important to establish a frame of reference for the ensuing discussion, particularly in as much as a Western concept of elder abuse, familiar to the researchers, may have been inappropriate for understanding the concept of such abuse in the study population, and a consensual, local frame of reference was required. The participants were asked to identify Xhosa terms for abuse in general, which they gave as follows:

*Ukuhlukunyezwa. Ukuphatheka kabuhlungu. Ukungakhathalaleke.*

They were thereafter asked to give a term specifically for the abuse of older persons, which they gave as follows:

*Mpathekombi, ya bantu abadala.*

The facilitator then asked the participants to give examples of what they perceive constitutes elder abuse, i.e. they should talk about types of elder abuse which occur in their communities.

## **Types of abuse**

Although the standard Western classificatory schema of types of abuse was not introduced to the groups, a preliminary analysis of the data showed that the schema could indeed be employed to classify and analyse the data gathered from the groups. The five categories of abuse in the typical Western schema - physical, verbal, financial, sexual and neglect - have therefore been used in the analysis for the purpose of comparison of the data with those of Western studies. However, three additional types of abuse, as perceived by the Cape Flats groups, were identified and are included in the analytical schema below: (1) Loss of respect (for elders); (2) accusations of witchcraft and consequences of being a witch; and (3) systemic abuse. (The category of systemic abuse is included in more elaborate Western classificatory schemas.) In the schema below, "loss of respect" has been grouped with "neglect," in as much as neglect was frequently perceived to be brought about through a loss of respect. Witchcraft and systemic abuse are given categories of their own.

### *Physical abuse*

Physical abuse was defined by a participant as "to beat [*ukubetha*] or to cause pain to a person [*okanye ukwenza intlungu emntwini*] that is physical." Only single examples of physical abuse were cited by the groups - mainly beatings, which were frequently linked to the extortion of pension money, and thus in addition, constituted financial abuse. Acts of physical abuse were often preceded by threats or intimidation – and thus verbal or emotional abuse.

*When an older person is beaten by his or her children, and children take an older person's pension money by force.*

*Sometimes you are abused when you come from [pension] pay; children want your pay ... to use it, and you remain with nothing.*

In one case, physical abuse was perceived to occur at a pension pay point.

*I fell there ... the pushing [in the queues]. I had an operation on this foot. I am still walking with a stick. To be pushed ... the way they [are] pushing there [is physical abuse].*

A participant in the Khayelitsha group reported that older people fear beatings from their children.

*We old people hide our problems. You see, when we talk, we can be beaten. That is why we hide them. Our children beat us.*

"Yes, we are afraid," another participant added. "[Our] children hurt us."

### *Emotional/verbal abuse*

Far more examples of verbal abuse than of physical abuse were cited by the participants. Verbal abuse was identified as "talk that comes from a person that is not good. ... [it] will cause your heart not to be happy." This type of abuse, typically in the form of denigrating words or insults, was frequently linked to fractious co-residential living arrangements - as well as to financial abuse.

*You stay with a child in the house. When he or she talks to you, you hear that those words are too painful. You are being denigrated.*

*This old woman [a neighbour]. ... When she comes from pay [has collected her pension] ... she is insulted and insulted by her own children. Poor woman. She cleans offal. Her children steal her money. They drink.*

Verbal abuse also occurred in spousal abuse, where false accusations (*atsho/we*) are hurled by one spouse at the other. Examples of such abuse are given under "Sexual abuse."

### *Accusations of witchcraft*

Closely linked to verbal abuse was another type of abuse: accusations of being a witch (*iqhwirakazi*) (in the case of older females). The consequences of being branded a witch are both emotional, resulting in ostracism and loneliness, and physical, where a victim's life might indeed be in danger – she may be killed or her home burnt down.

*There is this abuse when a person despises you and looks at you and says you are a witch.*

*There is a woman who was killed by children. They set her alight. She was killed for witchcraft.*

*Sometimes a child says 'You killed my father.' You did not kill him. He makes you [out to be] a witch.*

*In this community [Khayelitsha] ... when a person sees us, they say 'There is a witch. That person kills people.' You see. Then you hear them say, 'Why doesn't she die?' Maybe it is when you stay alone in a house. They say, 'Why do you stay alone ... being happy and old?' Such things.*

## *Financial abuse*

Financial abuse was mainly reported to occur around an older person's pension. The abuse was often linked to the extortion and subsequent control of the money, by adult children, particularly sons, sometimes by force and even sexual abuse.

*A mother was getting pension from work. She sent [her son] to withdraw money and he withdrew it all and left R40. His mother started to become ill. I think she got a fright about her pension money that she will never get it ... she is old now. She lost her mind.*

*I stay with my brother's children. My stay is difficult. When I have my pay, it is said 'No, bring that money just as it is. You do not buy food, you do not buy anything.' I ask why. 'We control your money,' they say. I want to report them. They are very strict. They make my heart very sore.*

*[Financial] abuse is when a child stays with a mother, like a pensioner ... when the mother gets the pension, the child takes her pension, and again that child wants to sleep [have sexual intercourse] with his mother here in the house, you see. That is the other way of abuse.*

The financial dependency of (unemployed) adult children on their elderly parents may contribute to abuse. It is ironic that an older individual's pension may be a major source of income for a poor household. Pension sharing is the norm in multi-generational black households. Yet an older person is abused because of his/her pension benefits!

Financial abuse also took the form of exploitation of older women to render care services to grandchildren, or to extort pension money from the grandmothers to spend on the care of the young children. Female participants perceived this treatment as abuse.

*When a child does not want to go to in-laws ... She gives birth and gives birth, to children, and will ask 'Now, mama, how do you eat this money when government gives it to you and you cannot feed our children?' She will borrow some money. You give [it to] her. She does not bring it back. That thing worries.*

*Our children leave their children [grandchildren] with you. [The] children do not have a person who will bathe them ... make a lunch box for school for them. You have to wake up early in the morning, when it is cold, being an older woman ... to bathe the child ... dress the child properly. For us, those things are abuse.*

Another form of financial abuse reported was theft of property. While any home is at risk of being burgled, older persons' homes are particularly vulnerable. In some cases children steal their elderly parent's property.

*I had break-ins twice, while I was in the house. I lost a television, a watch, money. I went to report the case the same day. I was never cared for. It was*

*said 'Did you see the person?' I did not see anybody. I saw that the door was open.*

*We have children, they have their rooms and you have yours. They break open the door of your room. When you see, things are gone, or maybe the money that I have hidden is no more here. You ask, 'Who tried to open my room?' 'No, mama, we do not know.'*

## **Sexual abuse**

Although no specific types of abuse were suggested to the groups, examples of sexual abuse given outnumbered all other types of abuse. Reports of sexual abuse of older persons were thus spontaneous and were not solicited. Aberrant sexual behaviour, in the majority of cases incestuous, was unequivocally recognized by the participants as constituting abuse. However, it was very seldom viewed as rape, albeit incest rape.

*When you are a mother ... left behind with children who are boys. There is one amongst your children ... he wants to sleep with you ... and wants that you must not talk about it ... You are afraid because you do not have the strength. He does that thing as he pleases.*

*Do you know things about old people? Things are not being said. Mothers are being slept with by their sons ... slept with by their sons by force. She [a mother] will not say [talk about] that thing.*

"Some abuse is rape," added a female participant in Vietnam. "You meet [on the road] with a youth who is a criminal and he takes you to a field and rapes you. That is abuse." However, no participants appeared to equate incestuous sexual relations, even with force, with rape.

What emerged prominently in the participants' narratives on forms of sexual abuse was spousal abuse, often related to aberrant sexual behaviour and domestic violence in general within households in which older persons reside. Both older men and women, it was reported, may be abused by their spouse. Male participants perceived the abuse as symptomatic of a disjuncture in the relationship between the spouses, but did not elaborate on the nature of the poor relationship.

*Sometimes you do not agree with your wife. You stop her. 'Woman, woman, don't do this!' Like when you stay with her here in the house, the children are now big. The wife reports to your child ... that the father is abusing [the wife] in this way. You see the child just beating you [the father], because that thing is done by the mother [she claimed her husband abused her].*

Male participants referred to complicitous older women who (falsely) accuse their husband of misdeeds for which the husband is removed from the home, so that she may have a sexual relationship with their son!<sup>1</sup>

*[It] is [said to be] abuse, even when an older person has never abused his [adult] child. He is accused. He will be arrested by the police and imprisoned. When he is in prison ... she will take her own child [son] and make him a second man [husband] ... The father ... when he [sees] these things, when he talks and talks ... She will say, hey, get off! He is beaten [abused] by his wife at home.*

A male participant in Langa acknowledged that some older men, like some older women, also commit incest.

*Sometimes a father sees that, hey, that child [his daughter] is fat [mature, nubile]. She has to put on clothes [get dressed] ... By the way, the thing that I do in my home is mine. He is preparing [to do] what? The father abuses the child. The mother must not talk.*

Another male participant in the Langa group elaborated, but perceived the retort from his wife as spousal abuse.

*When it happens, maybe you talk with the [adult] child's mother [the older man's wife]. You see that ... no, let me better keep quiet, because sometimes when you talk to the child, she [the child's mother/the older man's wife] will shout at you and shout so that even next doors can hear them. Then you see that she really shouts at you ...*

### **Neglect/lack of respect**

Several participants lamented that adult children and the young no longer show respect (*mbeko*) to older persons as was the case in earlier times. In several cases a loss of respect was perceived to be why (some) older persons are neglected (*abandihoye*) by their children. A perceived lack of respect was frequently illustrated within the context of unsatisfactory multi-generational living arrangements. Loss of respect and its consequences were described as follows:

*To be abused by a child when you stay with him or her in a house. When there is no respect, even when you talk to him or her ... even when you reprimand them, they don't listen to you.*

*Sometimes your child says dirty words. He says 'You brought me by your own to earth.' I never wanted to be born. I came through you and my father. Trying to annoy me, the other one says 'I will never feed you, you will be fed by government.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Male participants' suspicions or allegations of their spouses' demands for sexual intercourse with a son were accepted as conjecture. No attempt was made to establish whether male partners in incestuous sexual behaviour with older women were biological or nominal sons.

*... children, girls. [She goes] away and stays in a place that you do not like. A wrong place ... This is abuse to you as a parent because you cannot stay without your child here at home.*

*Now I support that thing that it might be better when you stay alone instead of staying with them. They abuse you in this way, because they take everything from you so that you remain with nothing, not even something to dress yourself with. When you come from pay, you know that it is not your money anymore. You know you are not going to get even a cent from that money.*

A male participant in Khayelitsha said that although his family does not abuse him, he feels that they neglect him, because they no longer acknowledge him nor show him affection (or respect), or any interest in him.

*My children do not beat me. I stay with them well at home, but they do not satisfy me. They do not care for me. They do not know who raised them and from whom they were born. There is no one who says I am longing for my father. We do not stay happily because they drink alcohol.*

### **Systemic abuse**

Finally, the participants referred to abuse that is classified as systemic abuse. This abuse was mainly perceived to occur at health clinics, at pension pay points and at offices where application is made for a pension. Participants referred to dehumanizing treatment at health clinics.

*We are not well cared for [at health clinics]. We have highblood [hypertension] ... have to wake up early at 6 o'clock ... at 06:30 you have to be there. An old person becomes tired ... You sit there. They will come at 09:00, even though you arrived at 06:30. You will leave at 14:00.*

*A person submits an application [to government for a pension] and waits for six months. It is not approved, you have to come again. There are no computers. That person is hungry. It becomes painful to you.*

Several participants felt that systemic abuse is a function of the new government's marginalization of older people.

*We would not be abused at pensions [pay points], we would not be abused by doctors, at hospitals, at all places ... Social workers would be caring for us if government cared about us.*

### **Perceived causes of abuse**

In general, the participants did not identify specific causes of elder abuse, or factors which contribute to this type of abuse in their communities. The only causes, or

contributory factors which they identified were a lack of respect shown to them by adult children, alcohol abuse by members of the household, the presence of beer halls/taverns in the area, drug abuse, unemployment, poverty, beliefs in witchcraft and the government's marginalization of older persons. However, much of the abuse reported, it was noted in the data, occurred in the context of social disorganization, specifically domestic violence, exacerbated by crime, alcohol and drugs, characteristic of township life in some areas during this period.

A Langa participant specifically attributed the problem to alcohol and drugs.

*When a child gets those things of the head [is drunk] and those drugs. The thing in the head makes that the child does any dirty thing to a mother, or to anyone else. Doing it ... that you are always worried because he will come with something bad that he thinks of, being driven by this alcohol, and telling and swearing at you, as a mother. Tomorrow, he/she does not know about it. 'Sorry, mama. I did not do it by my own.' Those things are pains that stay in a parent, because she is old.*

## **Effects of abuse**

"What are some effects of abuse on older persons?" the participants were asked. Emotional effects were cited by a large number of participants. By implication, these participants indicated that abused older persons are fairly powerless to protect themselves from abuse. They also referred to a strong sense of being defrauded, specifically of their pension money. Some participants referred to physical signs of abuse.

*I have an older son. Do you see here [pointing to her forehead]? I was not born like this, I am like this here from being beaten by him in my house. But I feed him, with my own pension money. There is nothing that I do not do for him. He does nothing here. When he comes, its those beatings ...*

*Maybe you stay with your child. Even though he did not sleep [have sex] with you, he beats you and you limp. When people ask you what happened, you say 'I slipped and fell.'*

*There are signs that one can notice. You see that the person used not to be like this. There is something that worries him/her, even though he/she does not say it. Where can you see? On the skin and from losing blood.*

The effects of abuse may also impact an individual's health.

*He/she will end up being told that he/she has highblood [hypertension], has those veins, has that stroke. He/she will end up with those things. You see, it is because that person does not talk. A person keeps all these things to him-/herself. Ever since it was said that you should stay on top of them [cope with*



*and conceal the things]. A person does not even realise when they are hurtful to you.*

"You are not happy [aonwabe]. Even when you are among people, you are not happy," a participant explained. "You see here on the face. You see that even when the person is looking at you, even though not talking, you can see that there is something, a painful thing inside [*uya hluhlutheka*]. The thing is that I am unable to say it," added another. And yet another explained, "That thing is painful to you. You do not know what to do about it. At the end you will be told that you have an illness of the heart."

*The thing is that you feel hurt, alone and you keep thinking about it. You then see yourself wandering about and suffering from the heart.*

"The silent epidemic," is what elder abuse is commonly referred to in Western literature. A "hidden crime." Are older people in the study communities reluctant to talk about abuse or to tell others that they are being abused, the participants were asked, and if so, why?

*What makes 'mothers' not talk about this thing? They are afraid of shame. Because you will be ashamed about your child, whilst your child does that bad thing to you.*

Female participants explained that it is culturally expected that mothers (older women) must "stay on top of things" (cope with or contain the abusive situation, not hang their dirty linen in public, keep the abuse concealed in the home).

*There is abuse here in the house. It is said that as a 'mother' ... you must stay on top of it [*ulale phezu kwayo*]. Sometimes you stay like this, being worried. You just wipe off tears, because you stay with pain in your soul.*

*You see ... that person does not talk. ... keeps all these things to himself or herself. Ever since it was said that you should stay on top of them [those things]. A person does not even realise when they are hurtful to him or her.*

## **Part 2 - Addressing the problem**

At this point in the discussions the facilitator asked the participants what should or could be done to protect older persons from abuse. In addition, she asked the following questions: "Where can an abused person go to for help?" "How can families in which older people are being abused be helped?" "What can be done to make people in this community aware of elder abuse?" The suggestions made by the groups in these regards, and what interventions they felt would be feasible, are classified and shown below.

## Protection

Suggestions on how older persons may be protected from abuse pertained to transport and residential options. Throughout the discussion on action to be taken against elder abuse, the groups felt that the government has an important role to play in addressing the problem.

*Government should make a plan for older people that they can be taken [transported] by kombis ... taxis are not safe. You can be attacked [ungahlaselwa].*

*I do not know how it can happen, but it would be better if old people can have a place ... a home for old people.*

Although some participants felt that there was a need for an old people's home, so that people in abusive domestic situations may be removed and taken to a place where they can live safely, it was pointed out that it is not the norm in black communities for families to admit an older relative to a home; older persons are traditionally cared for by their families at home.

*We black people, that thing of a 'home' does not settle well in our minds because we are not used to it. We are used to the fact that when you are old, you are cared for at home. The thing is that in these times, people have lost **ubuntu** [a reciprocal caring ethos]. Our children have lost **ubuntu**. There is no care in the home. A person is left there, being wet.*

*Sometimes our children want to remove us from their homes. When we bought homes, we bought them together with our children. There is a case where an old woman died. Her son killed her for a five room [house]. Old-age homes are needed. We are struggling.*

## Causes

Some participants suggested that to address the problem of abuse, the root causes of abuse need to be addressed. They cited unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as the increasing number of taverns and beer halls in the townships, as causes of abuse. Some referred to basic needs of households going unmet as a result of poverty.

*The other thing that kills us is hunger. If government could help ... [adult] children do not have work. The scarcity of work causes all these problems ... I can say that the cause of all these things is alcohol, the beer hall.*

*What I can advise is that we must ask government to stop these taverns. These taverns made things worse. It can be better if alcohol and drugs can stop.*

## Family intervention

How can families in which older people are being abused be helped? Some participants felt that family members, including grandchildren, need to be made aware of the problem.

*Maybe through discussions, they can see that, no, now we are wrong. ... If there can be a talk that older people are complaining.*

Some felt that social workers should help such families. "Meet with social workers. They should be told all what we are saying." However, a participant pointed out that it is dangerous to involve social workers in cases of elder abuse, because it is the responsibility of children to care for their parents and intervention by social workers will be an infringement on children's rights in this regard.

*Social workers ran away from us and from our homes from being abused by our children. When they come to inspect on their own, they can be hurt [injured] because they have no right to remove my child's right ... It does not matter how I am cared for, I must accept [it]. They may not [interfere]. Social workers will die [if they try to intervene].*

A Khayelitsha participant took it upon herself to intervene in an abusive family situation.

*I went to them. I gave them my word. I said, 'with all this thing that you are doing ... you will reap from all that you are doing.' Poor woman, crying all the time and beaten for her money.*

## Help services

But where then can an abused person go to for help? "We go to social workers," a group replied. "To social workers, at our offices, to our police. There is sometimes help."

*[We must] meet with social workers. They should be told about all what we are saying. They should be the ones who go door to door, inspecting how we stay. All these things should come from social workers. It could be better.*

Thus, some participants felt that even though help may be sought from various agencies, often none is forthcoming. Some explained that not everyone will seek help from a social worker or the police, because one does not talk to others about one's problems. A participant mentioned that it is difficult to report problems because some service agents, e.g. the police and street committees, pay no attention. Others pointed out that if older persons report cases of abuse, they are discriminated against on grounds of their age.

*We go to social workers. They are young, of course, then you see that ... 'Mama,' they ask, 'don't you have a family?'*

*We do not all as individuals go to social workers and to the police.*

*You cannot of course talk about the affairs of your home. They [also] won't help you. Whether you go to the police, they will do nothing ... You keep quiet, and stay and sleep on top of it [keep it in the family].*

*It is hard to report because sometimes you go and report your hurt ... it will be said, 'Oh, no, that one is old ...' You become a joke now. Your case will not go forward ... It is said 'No, it is because of old age (*uyenzwa ubudala*). Don't you see that he/she is old?'*

*Sometimes it is said that you must meet with your family and discuss [the problem] with your family.*

*You go to street committees and put that thing [explain that you are being abused], but you get no help.*

*I took it to the street committee. I did not take it to the police station. It was said that we should start here in the community.*

Both street committees and the police are unwilling to investigate complaints of elder abuse, ostensibly because they will not violate the sanctity of the family, or else because they do not know how to deal with the problem.

## **Community action against abuse**

The groups generally perceived that "nothing" is being done about elder abuse in their communities. "There are things," it was explained, "that the community can solve and those that they cannot solve."

*God alone will drop it [stop elder abuse]. (*Uthixo yedwa ozaitoba.*)*

*We put [leave it] to God. (*Sibeka ku Thixo.*)*

## **Empowerment**

How may older persons in the study communities be empowered to resist abuse? Frequently, the participants stated that people simply do not take action to address abusive situations; they pointed out that there is less risk and fewer consequences if one does not complain and does not report the abuse. For example, at health clinics

staff are irritable and rude but if one says anything about this, one is at risk of going home without medication.

*These children [staff] are irritable. They talk as they please to you, being an old person. They do not care for you.*

*We do not report them because we do not know to whom we should go. You may come back without pills if there is something that you say there.*

Regarding perceived abuse at pension pay points, a female participant reported that she advised pensioners to transfer their pension money to a bank, to avoid abuse in the queues. It was this participant who had been pushed in the queue and whose leg had been injured and was subsequently operated on.

More specifically, the question was posed: "How may older persons be empowered to protect themselves from abuse?" A female Khayelitsha resident explained how she protects herself from victimization.

*I defend myself. I live by defending myself. I fight for myself because I know that even when you are on the train, no one will help you.*

Several participants suggested that older persons who are abused by children with whom they live should find another place to stay.

*We old people must talk together so that we can get our own place to stay together, so that they [our children] can get out of our lives. We do not want to stay with children.*

*I think it will be right when I stay alone. Especially when I am this old. I do not want to stay with a child. A grandchild can come for a time but must go back to the mother. Maybe we should be taken and put in a place where children will not be able to enter. They must come by law and leave thereafter.*

*I support that speaker that said we should have a place. It is better that we have our [own] place. I think there is no other way besides having a place of our own, for older people.*

## **Public awareness**

The participants suggested that awareness of the problem of elder abuse should be promoted through community workshops and media campaigns, and that the government should be involved.

*What I see is that this thing should be announced [publicized]. It should be said that there will be a meeting about abuse. Each member of the community must come to the hall, to share views about abuse and its types. Even rape*

*should be brought forward, because government said that rapists will be hanged, but we do not see that happening. It is just silent.*

*It must be in the news. Everybody must hear about it ... For example, one time a woman was raped by her child here in the house. She does not talk about it. She stays on top of it. It must come out on the radio and be known. Government will see what to do.*

*They should appear on television ... They should talk about rapists ... about abuse. People should come here to Seapoint [to the SABC studios]. It must be written in books, like publications, you see. People should read about them. A person must know where to go when abused. We must also be told about which places to go to when we want help, because sometimes you stay with this thing but you want a place where you can go and say it.*

One participant felt that although people should know about elder abuse, victims of abuse must remain anonymous.

*... because sometimes you want that your name should not be revealed ... Even at church, you cannot tell about your hurt, because they will take it [what you divulge] and bring it here at home and it will be another abuse on top of the one you already have.*

## **What government should do**

In broad discussion on how older persons should be protected from abuse, the participants were most prominently outspoken on the perceived *laissez faire* attitude of the new government towards older persons and the role that government should play to prevent elder abuse.

They referred to how in the past they had fought for democracy and had contributed to the new government being put in place. But now, they felt, older people have been marginalized (*usibekele ecaleni*). Most felt that the government was lax in showing little concern for the well-being of older people and that it should take more care of them. Numerous participants were critical of the new government and raised issues regarding the interface between the criminal justice, health and social welfare systems and older persons. Several participants in the Khayelitsha group felt that government should take a stronger stance on criminals and that the death penalty should be brought back for convictions of rape.

*He [a perpetrator] will be taken and imprisoned. Then one day, you see him roaming up and down, showing that he is around. That is what these people [rapists] are doing.*

*Even when we go to social workers to lodge a complaint, we realise that there is nothing going forward. An older person is being raped by these children, we*

*will see that person walking around, not knowing what was done about the case.*

*Yes, government must think about us older people. We come from far. We come from picking up mealies with pinafores. We come from East London, fighting for her [the new government]. Why is government now putting older people aside? Even when government talks, you will never hear government talking about older people [noba uyathetha, soze ... uve ethetha ngabantu babadala]. Government does not care for us [akasihoye].*

*We ran all over fighting to come out of this thing of oppression. Now we are seen as chickens or something. Why does government not care for us?*

*During the time of oppression, these things [e.g. elder abuse] were not there ... Do you know why? The rope [the noose, the death penalty]. When a person would do something like that, he would think of the rope, that he might be removed from his family and be sent to Pretoria for a death sentence. When the rope was taken away ... the thunder started.*

*I for one would say that the rope should be reinstated.*

*If the rope can be reinstated, rape can stop.*

*Truly, the government should listen to us: the rope should be reinstated.*

*Now a person is having no shame to say that I will kill you and I will be back again.*

*This thing of releasing people [from prison] is killing [others]. The law should be tough.*

*If the government was participating [to eradicate elder abuse] and was tough ...*

*Government should make a plan about us. Government has a duty to protect older people. They must have a safe place.*

## **Discussion**

All three discussion groups were knowledgeable about elder abuse (*mpathokombi, ya bantu abadala*) and spontaneously described types and gave examples of abuse which occurs in their communities. Several participants in the groups intimated that they themselves have been, or are being abused. The research technique used was successful in eliciting such sensitive information, through the operation of a group dynamic in a neutral, non-threatening setting, which information the researchers would have been unlikely to garner through individual interviews.

The findings of an analysis of the data are discussed broadly, based on an argument that in the study townships, elder abuse is rooted in social problems, some of the problems which are a function of rapid social change at this time in the country's socio-political transformation. More precisely, it is argued that although the problems do not cause the abuse, the social context, or environment of the abuse cannot be ignored in our attempt to understand the dynamics of the abuse. Thus we argue that the problem of elder abuse needs to be understood against co-existing conditions and contributory factors: the influences of macrosocial forces, local social context, interpersonal processes, and the physical and mental endowments of the abused individuals (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good & Kleinman, 1995). In addition, it is recognized that older persons become increasingly dependent and vulnerable, and need protection from the environment and exploitation from forces in society (in several cases, from relatives).

What specific levels of knowledge and understanding of elder abuse did the participants have? Both surprisingly and disconcertingly good knowledge, it was found - in many cases firsthand knowledge. However, although numerous participants proffered suggestions regarding the causes of elder abuse in their communities, they tended to be less able to comprehend (they showed poor understanding of) the complexity of situations in which abusive acts occur. While they strongly perceived that the government has a critical role to play in addressing elder abuse, they appeared powerless to assert themselves in a response to the abuse, and to exercise their rights and to resist abuse generally. A number were even fatalistic: they perceived that a solution to the problem of elder abuse only lay with God. That abuse by family members must simply be accepted.

Cultural values, norms and traditions of the study population proscribe the disclosure of acts of personal violation, particularly when the abuse occurs in domestic settings (*ulale phezu kwayo*). Divulgence of acts of abuse and victimization will invite social approbation of a household and family. What clearly emerged in the study is that victims will go to great pains to conceal (and deny) the abuse; they will neither talk about it, nor seek help, and will suffer in silence and agony - and be susceptible to yet further abuse. Yet contradictorily, a strong call was made for (formal) "places" to which victims can go and be able to talk about their abuse.

What also emerged clearly is that in a very large measure, the elder abuse is part and parcel of endemic domestic violence. Numerous parallels may be drawn, for example, between the study data on elder abuse and child abuse - and indeed spousal abuse - in apparently dysfunctional families in the study communities. Thus, factors contributing to domestic violence, intrafamily abuse and elder abuse in the townships appear to be similar. Among contributory factors are no doubt the weakening of family structures, and thus insufficient family support, as well as several other effects of modernization, such as a loss of respect for elders, and urbanization. Urban environmental stressors as contributory factors are also exacerbated by political and social change resulting from the dismantling of apartheid and the aftermath of the struggle for democracy - some results of which are insecurity, pervasive poverty, the demise of state welfare, and the collapse of formal support structures following reprioritization.

The study data and findings are examined more closely.



## Recognition of elder abuse

The types of abuse identified by the participants and classified by the researchers were as follows: Physical abuse: beatings, pushing/shoving. Emotional/verbal abuse: age discrimination, hurtful words, insults, denigration, intimidation, false accusations, psychological pain and distress. Accusations of witchcraft: brandishment, stigmatization, ostracism, physical danger. Financial abuse: extortion and control of pension money, exploitation to render care services to grandchildren, theft of property. Sexual abuse: incest rape,<sup>2</sup> criminal rape, other types of deviant sexual behaviour. Neglect/lack of respect: loss of respect for elders, withholding of affection, a lack of interest in the elder's well-being. Systemic abuse: dehumanizing treatment at health clinics, and at pension offices and pay points, marginalization by government.<sup>3</sup>

The participants' perceptions of the causes of elder abuse were noted in Part 1 of the Findings (pp. 9-10). However, as is conceivable, the participants were largely unable to understand and articulate the interaction of older persons' vulnerability and wider economic and political forces, local institutional structures, and cognitive and interpersonal coping processes. At the root of the social ills, which we argue are at the root of the problem of elder abuse in these communities, are therefore the broad effects of absolute and relative poverty, or hardship, as a result of past apartheid structures, in a society in transition, which has led to a general culture of violence (murder, rape, assaults). The increasing violence thus reflects both changing social values and increasing levels of family discord - as well as an increase in child abuse and elder abuse. The end results are the combined effects of chronic levels of environmental stress, oppressive social arrangements, drug and alcohol use exacerbated by rapid social change and a lack of employment opportunities, as well as the weakening of traditional African family structures. In turn, in a downward spiral, the social ills have created a problem of social control, which is manifested in elder abuse, against which domination and control older people need protection. Older individuals at risk of abuse, or who are being abused thus need to be empowered: they need to be made aware of power relations, as well as their own capability to challenge and resist control and abuse.

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1 Incestuous sexual intercourse, albeit forced and non-consensual, was not viewed by any participants as rape. Rape was only viewed as criminal sexual violation if perpetrated by a non-relative, outside the household. In sum, the groups did not recognize the criminality of domestic (incestuous) sexual abuse - and therefore their rights not to be abused sexually by anyone, including family members.

2 In a study among older sample populations in the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and Kwazulu-Natal, Swart and Joubert (1998) identified a type of (perceived) abuse which the authors called political/ideological abuse - whereby older persons are marginalized in new social policy, in favour of children and the youth.

## **A response**

Given the limited capacity then of disempowered, vulnerable older residents of townships on the Cape Flats to protect themselves against abuse; and given the dislocated social environment and social forces which mitigate against healthy and safe living; and given fiscal constraints, new priorities and a new social welfare ethos of government: what could be a feasible and systematic response to the problem of elder abuse? What are conceivable and viable interventions to deter the abuse and to help victims and perpetrators?

Western literature typically makes recommendations for a response to elder abuse as follows:

- Broaden public awareness of the problem.
- Increase older persons' awareness of their rights and knowledge of available support services.
- Expand preventative, educational and interventive programmes and services.
- Determine the need for new or modified legislation.
- Understand and educate abusers.
- Conduct further research into the types of abuse in specific (cultural) settings, differences in domestic and institutional abuse, and community response networks.

How feasible, though, are these recommendations within the present political economic climate of dwindling resources and large-scale termination of formal services, especially in disadvantaged black townships? How culturally viable and attuned are the interventions with local values? Not at all feasible/viable, the participants would argue, based on their experience. Then where to from here?

First, consideration must be given to the apparent wide reluctance of older persons in the communities to disclose or report instances of abuse – for fear of retaliation, eviction, abandonment and other reasons. Abusive acts which incur shame, fear, indignity and a sense of worthlessness in powerless victims are simply “a thing” which the participants insisted one must stoically “stay on top of.” Thus, there is no doubt that abuse is a hidden problem, that it is kept behind closed doors. There is little opportunity for the lid to be lifted on elder abuse – except through studies and the dissemination of research findings, and public education and public meetings (fora) of older persons, as indeed were suggested by the participants.

Second, the gendered nature of elder abuse must be considered. Older women in townships are a subgroup at high risk of collective and interpersonal violence and abuse. The study findings showed how male adult children take their mother's pension money and “control” it. They also rape their mothers. Rape occurs in situations of societal breakdown and political violence, where there is an assumed

masculine prerogative to regard women as objects upon whose bodies to vent anger and frustration with impunity in acts of political domination. There has been poor realisation thusfar, through both concealment and a lack of evidence of the abusive practices, of the apparent widespread incestuous rape of older women in some black South African communities – as was found in the study.

Thus, there is a need to increase the older women's personal and political power, and capacity for self-protection - individually and collectively. Their relative powerlessness renders them vulnerable to abuse, victimization and exploitation. Their everyday lives are subject to continued and fearful dehumanization - which is pernicious and leads to collective demoralization. However, a dilemma exists in that the number of older individuals is rapidly increasing and with longevity these persons will become increasingly dependent on others – primarily adult children - for care. Yet at the same time there are fewer agencies to render care to older persons, and to detect and respond to abuse in domestic care settings, and fewer mechanisms for referral of abuse victims and family intervention.

The study showed clearly that under the post-apartheid government, formal services for older persons are perceptibly inadequate - both in extent of coverage and available resources, and in effectiveness. A reduction in insidious elder abuse requires recognition, referral and treatment of people at risk, or who have been abused - and timely intervention for families under stress and at risk of violence. Social work services for older persons, which were largely withdrawn under new social welfare policy, need to be reinstated as a matter of urgency, so that social workers may detect elder abuse, assist those who have been abused, as well as the perpetrators, and contribute to systems of prevention, protection and public education. (Cf. Manthorpe, 1997.) Community health workers, when specially trained for the task, also have an important role to play in these processes.

However, given present government fiscal restraints, for interventions to be feasible, they will need to depend on the co-operation of government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Optimal policy in this regard should also respond to cultural traditions, and involve individuals and communities, to maximize informal support services from family and neighbours. Care services to refer and treat victims and to prevent elder abuse must be integrated, and government must be involved. In truth, where government does not provide care, informal care structures will break down. If there is no service infrastructure, there can be no response.

In sum: there is a need to first understand the different, related issues, in order to understand elder abuse in the study settings and to be able to deal with the problem. There is a need to understand the complex interactions (interplay) of social, political and cultural forces that lead to the incidence of the abuse in these settings. Thereafter there is a need to design and implement intervention strategies, in consultation and partnerships with government, NGOs and communities. The task is daunting, given the enormity of the problem. The main challenges in South Africa in this case are diversity and scarcity: on the one hand a need to understand local and culturally based norms, values and traditions; on the other hand scarce resources and few formal services to support informal services.

Finally, there is a dearth of research data and hard research evidence - only anecdotal evidence and hearsay - on elder abuse in South African settings. Thus there is an urgent need for further research, to define the pervasiveness, patterns and consequences of forms of abuse in particular settings, so that we may develop analytic tools and technology, based on collective experience, to better understand and respond to the problem. Based on the study findings, there is a specific need to investigate (and address) dysfunctionality in domestic environments in which (incestuous) sexual elder abuse occurs, lest such abusive practices and violation of older women become a cultural norm.

## **Conclusions**

The study, the first of its kind to be conducted in South Africa, has succeeded in obtaining lay definitions of elder abuse in an older urban, Xhosa-speaking population. The study setting was conducive to eliciting spontaneous data which focussed on domestic elder abuse, other than abuse in residential care settings, which has received more attention than abuse in domestic settings up to now. (Some forms of abuse are manifested differently in institutional and community settings. Institutional abuse is an important area for research on its own.)

A variety of types of elder abuse which occur in the social environment of the study population has been documented. The definitions and classification of the types of abuse provide a rudimentary classificatory system for use in future studies of elder abuse in the South African black population. The study has importantly contributed towards cross-cultural knowledge on perceptions of what constitutes abusive and negligent behaviour, and towards understanding dynamics within social contexts which are conducive to elder abuse, how the abuse is manifested and what its effects are for this population.

However, the population's apparent inability to respond to the problem of elder abuse on an individual and a collective level, and to protect itself from abuse, are matters of grave concern. Broad parameters were sketched for the design of interventions whereby the further disclosure of the nature and extent of elder abuse in the population may be facilitated and individuals at risk of abuse may be empowered, supported and protected.

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