

# Help seeking behaviour of abused older women (Cases of Austria, Belgium, Finland, Lithuania and Portugal)

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This article based on a recent European study examines the subjective consequences of abuse against older women and their help seeking behavior. In 2010, survey data concerning experiences of abuse in domestic settings were collected from 2,880 older women across five European countries (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Lithuania, and Portugal). The results of the study indicated that overall 30.1% of older women reported at least one experience of abuse in the past year. Less than half of the victims talked about it in the informal setting or reported it to any formal agency. An ecological framework is used to explain factors influencing women's decisions to seek help. Some consequences of abuse (anger, tension, sleeping difficulties, and concentration difficulties), type of abuse (physical abuse and violation of personal rights), higher abuse intensity, and density are connected with positive help seeking behaviours. Victims abused by current partners or a spouse were more passive to seek help.

**Key words:** older women, domestic abuse, help seeking, Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

Previous studies indicate that prevalence rates of elder abuse in different European countries vary from 0.8% to 39.4% (De Donder et al. 2011; Luoma et al. 2011; Soares et al. 2010). It is evident that violence and abuse against elders is a complex social phenomenon and a

vital social problem, which is likely to be more apparent in future in the context of an aging European society (European Parliament 2010). Most studies agree that gender has an impact on extent of elder abuse as women more often become victims and experience more severe forms of abuse than men (Iborra 2008; Iecovich et al. 2005; O'Keeffe et al. 2007). Consequently research on elder abuse could benefit from a gender-specific analysis (Nerenberg 2002).

Abuse may have several long-term effects such as ill health, disturbed social relations, lower quality of life (McGarry 2011). Talking with one's informal network or reporting about the violent incident is crucial in the problem solution process for individuals who experience such mistreatment. There are very few studies specifically focused on older women's help seeking (Barrett, Pierre 2011; Belknap et al. 2009). The findings certainly underline the unique age-relevant needs that abused older women face, and stress the need for further research on aging and violence specifically focused on older women's help seeking.

*The main aim* of this paper is to examine the factors of the help seeking behaviour(s) of older women who experienced domestic abuse across five European countries.

*An ecological framework* is used to explain factors influencing women's decision(s) to seek help or not on the individual, family and community levels (Bliss, Cook, Kaslow 2006; Schiambergert et al. 2011). The decision whether to seek or not to seek help appears in the *micro-system* at the level of the victim's individual factors. The individual level focuses on perceptions, evaluation / meanings, intentions and actions (or non-action) regarding help seeking. To explain the help-seeking phenomenon the *individual level* for social and demographic variables of age, marital status, education, income, and subjective evaluation of quality of life were considered. The second group of variables on the individual level involved the subjective evaluation of consequences of the most serious abusive incidents. The last group of variables consisted of self-reported reasons for a choice not to report. *The meso-system* involves the relationship between victim / perpetrator, and the type of abuse and the impact of these on the likelihood of help-seeking. This level of interpersonal relationships is related to abusive relationships and the extent of available social support within family settings (Goodkind et al. 2003). *The Exo-system* involves factors on the community level. Belknap et al. (2009) considered that community level factors are related to social and institutional support. In the present study, the community level factors are related with formal and informal help seeking. *The macro-system* analyses are limited to differences across countries or at societal level.

*Methods applied.* This research was achieved as a part of the prevalence study of Abuse and Violence against Older Women (AVOW). The AVOW study aimed to provide knowledge about the prevalence of domestic abuse and violence against older women in five European countries (Austria, Belgium, Finland, Lithuania and Portugal) through an empirical multi-country study. Within the study, different data collection methods were used which were most appropriate for national contexts. Austria realized a telephone survey, Lithuania used a face-to-face survey, Finland and Portugal undertook a postal survey. In Belgium a combination of postal survey and face-to-face sampling strategy was used. Data were collected between March and July 2010.

The target group was defined as women aged 60 years or older who were living in private households. In total 2,880 women were surveyed or interviewed, and the composition of national samples were in Austria  $n = 593$ , in Belgium  $n = 436$ , in Finland  $n = 687$ , in Lithuania  $n = 515$  and in Portugal  $n = 649$ . Almost half, 47.8% of the respondents, were aged between

60 and 69 years, 32.5% were between 70 and 79 years old and about one fifth (19.7%) were 80 years or older. Around half (50.5%) of all older women in the total sample were married, lived in a civil partnership, or co-habited with another person. Almost a third of participants (31.8%) were widowed. 11.0% of respondents were separated or divorced, and 6.7% of the total sample population was single (never married). Just over one third (38.2%) of the older women lived alone, whilst just under half (49.7%) lived in a household with two persons; some 12.1% lived in a household with three or more people. With regard to education, 32.0% of participants had completed between 5 and 9 years of schooling. 26.6% of older women had between 10 and 12 years, 28.1% had 13 or more years of completed formal education, and 13.4% had less than 5 years of completed education.

The survey instrument was developed by the AVOW research team in the English language and then translated to other relevant languages (Dutch, French, Finnish, German, Lithuanian, Portuguese, and Russian). A standard pre-test was carried out in different national contexts ( $n = 102$ ). The results of this standardized pilot test were used to refine and improve the survey instrument.

The abuse was related to 6 different types: neglect, emotional abuse, financial, physical and sexual abuse, violation of personal rights. Abuse was delineated as violence committed by someone who was close to the respondent. The reference period was the last 12 months. Each form of violence and abuse was operationalised by several items representing different incidents, which were adapted from the Conflict Tactics Scale 2 (CTS2) (Straus et al. 1996). The answer format for each formative indicator was a four-point scale representing different frequency categories (1 = never, 2 = 1–6 times, 3 = once a month, 4 = weekly).

Such internal factors as tension, anger, hatred, feelings of powerlessness, sleeping difficulties or nightmares, depression, fear, concentration difficulties, shame, difficulties in relations with others, and guilt were part of our research tool. Women who experienced abuse were asked to answer what consequences were caused for them by the abuse.

Women were asked to recall the most serious incident of domestic violence experienced and to state if they had talked or reported it to somebody. A positive answer meant that the abused woman sought help. In order to measure informal help-seeking, women were asked to indicate to whom they had talked about the most serious incident. Possible answers were the following: talked to family members, friends, priest, help-lines, Caritas workers (or other NGO) and others. In contrast, formal help-seeking was measured by asking respondents to indicate which agency or organization they had reported the abuse to: police, professional health carers, professional social workers and carers, and lawyers. Women who did not seek help were asked to indicate the reasons for that decision. The reasons were listed as indicated in the Table.

We applied descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations with a chi-square analysis, and Pearson correlations between help seeking factors and factors relating to the individual, relationship, and community levels. Statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$  for all analyses, which were performed using SPSS (11).

## **PREVALENCE OF ABUSE AND HELP SEEKING RATES**

The AVOW study enables us to see the extent of abuse against older women trans-nationally according to different types of abuse. In total, 30.1% of interviewed older women across all 5 countries had experienced some kind of abuse in their own home in the last 12 months by someone who was close to them, as seen in the Table below.

**Table.** Prevalence of abuse and help seeking behavior of older female victims in Europe

	Austria	Belgium	Finland	Lithuania	Portugal	Total
<b>Prevalence of abuse, valid % non-response, 2,880</b>						
Emotional	20.3*	28.9*	23.4*	18.6*	34.9*	25.3*
Financial	5.3*	5.9*	6.8*	9.7*	17.0*	9.2*
Violation of rights	3.8*	4.5*	5.7*	4.9*	12.8*	6.5*
Neglect	6.4*	5.5*	2.5*	2.5*	9.9*	5.5*
Sexual	2.2	2.4	5.0	2.3	3.9	3.3
Physical	0.5*	2.2*	2.9*	4.5*	3.1*	2.6*
Overall abuse	26.5*	33.0*	26.6*	22.8*	41.6*	30.1*
<b>Consequences of the most serious incident, valid %, N = 457</b>						
Tension	54.7	43.9	72.1	61.7	87.7	62.1
Anger, hatred	52.4	34.3	76.7	64.5	66.1	57.0
Feelings of powerlessness	42.2	38.8	65.0	43.0	87.0	52.1
Sleeping difficulties or nightmares	29.7	29.7	71.7	43.9	71.2	44.5
Depression	33.3	30.8	72.4	27.4	73.0	41.6
Fear	21.5	30.3	57.7	35.5	37.5	32.4
Concentration difficulties	15.1	17.2	36.7	25.2	62.7	26.5
Shame	7.0	14.3	44.5	19.6	62.0	22.0
Difficulties in relations with others	24.2	8.1	33.3	17.0	38.1	21.8
Guilt	10.9	9.2	46.0	11.2	28.9	15.4
<b>Decision to seek help, valid %, N = 457, p &lt; .001</b>						
No	54.8	45.6	50.0	75.7	36.0	53.0*
Yes	45.2	54.4	50.0	24.3	64.0	47.0*
To formal institutions	6.3*	30.9*	21.7*	12.6*	29.8*	18.8*
To informal network	42.9*	52.9*	45.7*	23.3*	57.9*	44.0*
<b>Reasons for not reporting the incident, valid %, N = 242</b>						
Did not want anyone to get involved	44.3	35.7	42.3	59.7	73.9	50.3
Did not want the perpetrator to go to prison	8.9	7.7	32.3	30.8	36.4	22.8
Was ashamed or had feelings of guilt	8.5	11.5	53.1	23.1	55.6	21.8
Did not think anyone would believe me	11.5	14.8	31.5	23.4	33.3	20.5
Was afraid the perpetrator might take revenge	5.0	31.0	41.9	26.9	37.5	20.1

Note: \*p < .001.

The rate of overall abuse in other countries varied from 22.8% to 41.6%. Emotional abuse was found to be the most widespread form of violence in all countries. The highest rates of emotional abuse were found in Portugal (34.9%) and Belgium (28.9%), with Lithuania having the lowest rate at 18.6%. Physical and sexual victimization of older women were the least prevalent forms of abuse in all countries, except Finland where sexual abuse was reported more often than neglect (5.0% as related to 2.5%). Significant differences between countries in the total prevalence rate and in the types of abuse were found among countries, with the exception of sexual abuse ( $p = .056$ ).

A very important issue in the context of violence is the reporting of abuse. Almost half (47%) of the abused women from all five countries talked with someone they knew about

the most serious incident of abuse or reported it to an official agency (see Table). Similar results were observed in Austria (45.2%), Belgium (54.4%), and Finland (50%), whereas in Lithuania only around a quarter (24.3%) of the total number of abused women indicated that they reported or talked about the abuse. Concerning the rate of self-reporting about the most serious abuse incident, it is evident that across five countries more than half of the older women (53%) decided not to report or to talk about the violence (although with some variation in Belgium and Portugal, where more older women selected a 'yes' response).

As seen in the Table, abused older women mostly prefer to contact an informal form of help rather than a formal one (44% vs. 18.8%). Nearly every second help-seeking woman approached an informal help source, but there were fewer of them in Lithuania. Overall, 18.8% of the abused women reported the most serious incident to a formal organization, but the situation in each country is quite specific.

As seen in the Table, the reporting rate to a formal institution is more than six times higher in Belgium than in Austria. Analyses showed that victims of abuse across all 5 countries preferred not to seek help at all (53%), but this situation depends on the country. For example, 75.7% of victims keep silent in Lithuania, but in Portugal this rate is three times lower. Moreover, just under half of the respondents overall indicated that they had reported to both formal and informal sources (47%). However, which factors are interrelated with help seeking behavior?

## FACTORS RELATED TO WOMEN'S DECISIONS ABOUT HELP SEEKING

We applied cross-tabulations with a chi-square analysis ( $p < .05$ ) and found that women's decisions to seek help or not to seek help have no significant differences in relation to age, marital status, education, income, or subjective evaluation of health status or quality of life ( $p > .05$ ).

The women who reported that they had experienced abuse were asked about possible consequences with reference to the most serious incident they had experienced; this included both the emotional and psychological effects of the mistreatment. As indicated in the Table, the most commonly reported effects at the European level were tension (62.1%), anger and hatred (57%), and feelings of powerlessness (52.1%). Tension was the most frequently observed effect in Austria (54.7%), Belgium (43.9%), and Portugal (87.7%), whilst anger and hatred was the impact most often reported in Finland (76.7%) and Lithuania (64.5%). We found significant differences between self-reported help-seeking and the consequences of the abuse. The Pearson correlation was significant ( $p < .05$ ) but low in the cases of such consequences (of the most serious abuse event) as anger / hatred ( $r = .179$ ), depression ( $r = .141$ ), tension ( $r = .170$ ), sleeping difficulties ( $r = .214$ ), concentration difficulties ( $r = .154$ ), and difficulties in relations with others ( $r = .202$ ). If victims of abuse feel such consequences of abuse as anger, depression, tension, sleeping difficulties, concentration difficulties, and difficulties in relations with others they are more likely to seek help.

The most common reasons for not reporting were considering the incident as being too trivial (71.8%), distrusting the ability of somebody to be able to do anything about it (56.2%) and not wanting to involve anybody (50.3%) (see Table). Thinking the incident was too trivial was the most common reason provided in Austria (78.3%), Belgium (59.4%), and Finland (69.1%); whereas distrusting the ability of somebody to be able to do anything about it was the main reason given by women both in Lithuania (68.4%) and Portugal (78.9%). The lowest overall rates obtained were for the categories "did not think anyone would believe me"

(20.5%) and “was afraid the perpetrator might take revenge” (20.1%) indicating that although these are the lowest rates, overall one fifth of respondents held these views.

Analyses of abusive relationships in the family settings showed that a victim's current partner or a spouse (41.4%) was the most frequent perpetrator in the case of emotional (43.9%), financial (34.2%), physical (48.6%), sexual (54.7%) abuse, and violation of personal rights (59.3%). In the case of neglect, the most frequent perpetrators were adult children (41.6%). The analysis demonstrated significant statistical differences between the help-seeking behavior of victims of different types of perpetrators. Victims abused by current partners or a spouse were more passive (62.8% not seeking help,  $p < .05$ ) than women abused by a neighbour (40.6% not seeking help,  $p < .01$ ) or by paid home help or a paid caregiver (18.8% not seeking help,  $p < .01$ ).

There were also significant differences in help-seeking behavior of victims in the cases of physical abuse (63% not seeking help,  $p = .007$ ) and violation of personal rights (54% not seeking help,  $p = .033$ ). Women with experiences of these types of abuse were more likely to seek help than to remain silent.

A new variable on the severity of elder abuse consisting of three possible categories was formed using variables of density (number of different incidents) and intensity (frequency of the incidents) (after Bennett & Kingston 1993: 13f). Analysis of the severity of abuse by help-seeking rates showed significant differences ( $p < .001$ ). Women who sought help suffered multiple incidents seldom (55.9%) and frequently (34.8%). Only 9.3% of the women who sought help experienced a single incident seldom. Women who experienced lower density and intensity of abuse were more likely not to seek help.

The source of help such as a formal institution or an informal network is a significant factor, because victims chose to disclose the abusive incident mostly to an informal network (see Table). About half of all women who reported the most serious incident to an official agency stated that they found this to be helpful (51.0%). In spite of some small percentage differences, the results are not significant ( $p > .05$ ), and with the exception of Finland, all countries showed nearly similar results.

## DISCUSSION

Our study enables us to see the extent of abuse against older women trans-nationally in Europe in general terms according to different types of abuse. In total, 30.1% of older women across all 5 countries reported that they had experienced some kind of abuse and abuse in their own home in the last 12 months by someone who was close to them. We found that in Europe almost every second older woman had sought help but also that each second woman had been passive / chosen not to do so. It is noted that help-seeking rates are specific to each country; for example, in Lithuania only one quarter of abused women (24.3%) reported that they had been seeking help whilst in other countries the rate is twice higher, and in Portugal three times higher (64%).

Micro-system analyses showed that socio-demographic factors of the victim do not appear to play an essential role in help-seeking behaviour. Nevertheless, our current analyses showed significant differences between the help-seeking behaviour of victims overcoming different consequences of the most serious event of abuse. The analysis of the causes of not reporting the most serious incident revealed that older women mostly decided to be silent because of their perception about the abuse, because of the feeling of hopelessness, especially in Lithuania and Portugal, or because of a view that this was a private matter.

Further, our analysis of the meso-system related to the factors at the abusive relationship level showed some important differences. We found that except for neglect, the most frequent perpetrator for all types of abuse was the victim's current spouse or partner. Victims abused by their partner or spouse were more passive in seeking help (and less likely to do so) than victims abused by a neighbour, paid care worker or (adult) children. As suggested above, this may link to attitudes about abuse, or even lack of knowledge by older women about what constitutes the abuse, which would be comparable to findings from another recent European study on intimate partner's violence and older women in 6 countries (Nägele et al. 2010). Considering help-seeking behaviour by type of abuse, our study demonstrated significant differences only in the cases of physical abuse and violation of personal rights. In such cases women reported that they were more likely to seek help even although the perpetrator was most likely to be the partner or spouse. Emotional, financial, and physical abuse experienced for a longer period was also a significant factor leading to help seeking behaviour. The study also found that severity of abuse was a significant factor leading older women to seek help and this study's data supports other studies on women's help seeking behaviour in this regard (Davies, Block, Campbell 2007; Belknap et al. 2009; Leone et al. 2007).

Our study supports broad findings that informal help-seeking is the most common response to abusive relationships, 44.0% of help seekers reported seeking informal help. In a recent Canadian study, informal help-seeking was 80.0%, but with increased age, help seeking decreased (Barrett, Pierre 2011). Whilst in this Canadian study, Barrett and Pierre (2011) found that roughly one third of women (34.0%) reported using no formal support or services, in our study almost two-thirds of older women (67.5%) across the 5 European countries did not report even the most serious incident to formal agencies.

Our study established that just half of all women who reported the most serious incident to an official agency found this helpful. However, bearing in mind that in our study each second old women victim of domestic violence was passive, it is evident that many survivors of violence cut themselves off from potential help. This may be because they are not aware of the issue of abuse against older women (as suggested above), or that they lack information and knowledge about potential sources of help, or both factors. The results from this study clearly show that there is a need to raise awareness about elder abuse in Europe because half of mistreated older women do not report or talk about the incident with anyone. Awareness-raising should be at the level of the public and for the older population, perhaps with a specific emphasis or targeted focus on older women.

There is a pressing need to research this field further. In addition, further research on elder abuse needs to include a focus on understanding more about the help-seeking processes used by older women and the perceived effectiveness of the help, which is accessed so that appropriate assistance for those who experience abuse can be developed and targeted. This could also be investigated in relation to older men in order to determine inter-gender differences in both help-seeking and provision of assistance.

Despite the contribution of this study to learn about domestic violence experienced by older women and the extent of their help-seeking behaviour, this study has a number of limitations. First, the study was limited because it was not possible to relate the extent of help seeking with help-seeking processes used by the women, nor with the effectiveness of any help, which was accessed. Second, use of slightly different sample techniques and data collection methods used across countries could be seen as a limitation because it is not possible to indicate what influence different approaches may have had within the research. Third, we did

not explore the cultural differences, which might exist between the five countries in the study. These are all areas that would merit further exploration and research attention in future in order to gain additional knowledge and understanding about this complex area and to work towards finding much needed solutions.

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## **Vyresnio amžiaus moterų elgesys po patirtos prievartos (Austrijos, Belgijos, Suomijos, Lietuvos ir Portugalijos atvejai)**

### *Santrauka*

Šiame straipsnyje, remiantis europiniu tyrimu apie prievartą prieš vyresnio amžiaus moteris, atskleidžiama, kokie veiksniai nulemia aukų elgesį po prievartos. 2010 m. buvo apklausta 2 880 vyresnio amžiaus moterų, gyvenančių savo namuose. Nustatyta, kad 30,1 % vyresnio amžiaus moterų patyrė vieną ar kelias prievartos formas, tačiau tik kas antra tai atskleidė neformaliai tinklui ar / ir oficialioms institucijoms. Pagalbos ieškojimo veiksniams įvertinti taikyta ekologinė tyrimo prieiga. Nustatyta, kad prievartos pasekmės (pyktis, įtampa, miego ir susikaupimo sutrikimai), prievartos forma (fizinė prievarta ir asmeninių teisių suvaržymas), taip pat intensyvesnė ir dažnesnė prievarta ne iš kartu gyvenančio sutuoktinio ir partnerio skatino moteris ieškoti pagalbos.

**Raktažodžiai:** vyresnio amžiaus moteris, prievarta namuose, pagalbos ieškojimas, Europa