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Violence and abuse against elderly migrants





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The Norwegian population is gradually becoming older and more diverse. In line with this development, the proportion of older adults with an immigrant background is also rising, particularly in urban areas. Despite these changes, we still know little about the specific challenges faced by this part of the population. At the same time, research on violence, abuse, and neglect in later life has to a limited extent taken into account the increasing diversity of ageing populations.

In this report, violence against older adults is defined as actions or omissions that cause harm, suffering, or violations in relationships characterized by expected trust and care. The phenomenon includes a wide range of abuses, including physical violence, as well as psychological, sexual, and economic abuse, and neglect. Research shows that violence in later life most often occurs within close relationships, and that certain groups may be particularly at risk. Factors such as living conditions, gender, migration and marital status, access to welfare services, and societal attitudes towards older people and minority groups constitute central vulnerability factors that may expose individuals to multiple and overlapping forms of violence. For older adults with an immigrant background, vulnerability may be further reinforced by low levels of trust in public services, language and information barriers, digital exclusion, and dependence on others to navigate the system.

The consequences of violence against older adults are severe. For individuals, violence and neglect can lead to significant health problems and reduced quality of life, both in the short and long term. Such experiences also often increase the need for public health care, generating substantial social and economic costs—although this is not a particular focus of the present report.

Previous studies of domestic violence have rarely included older adults with an immigrant background or considered the extent to which existing measures and support services are able to identify and address their needs. To our knowledge, this report represents the first systematic research contribution on violence against older people with an immigrant background in a Norwegian context.

Research Questions and Data

The study is based on a multi-stage exploratory design, combining a systematic literature review with focus group interviews in multicultural women's groups and individual interviews with key informants and older people who have experienced violence. We also conducted a nationwide survey of crisis centers and interviewed managers and staff at crisis centers, TryggEst coordinators, professionals in health and care services and the police. In addition, we examined central policy documents in the field, including national strategies and action plans against domestic violence.

The research questions underlying the study are based on the mandate provided by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) and are structured around three main themes:

1. **Background:** What does Norwegian and international research say about violence against older people with an immigrant background?

2. Understanding the phenomenon: What types of violence, abuse, and violations does this group experience, and who are the perpetrators?
3. Experiences of support services and policy development: How do voluntary organizations and public services identify and assist older people with an immigrant background who are subjected to violence? What barriers prevent victims from seeking help, and how can services be adapted to become more accessible and relevant?

Theoretical Perspectives

To address these questions, we apply three key perspectives. An intersectional perspective on identity and belonging, together with a life-course perspective on violence, enables analysis of what we term cumulative vulnerabilities, disadvantages, and marginalization. Alongside a socio-ecological perspective on violence, these frameworks make it possible to analyze how violence against older people emerges from the interplay of factors at multiple levels—where societal conditions interact with group and individual characteristics, including living conditions, gender, and migration background.

Polyvictimization and Revictimization

The report identifies and describes specific forms of violence, abuse, violation, and neglect experienced by older people, while also showing how these may occur simultaneously. This is referred to as polyvictimization. The report also supports earlier research demonstrating that older people who have experienced violence earlier in life face an elevated risk of violence in later life—a phenomenon termed revictimization. Revictimization may take the form of “violence that ages or grows old,” such as intimate partner violence continuing into old age, but may also involve new types of abuse. These may include physical and psychological violence, assault, and coercive control specifically linked to aging, such as deteriorating health, social isolation, and increasing dependence on others, including public assistance.

Cumulative disadvantages and contexts of vulnerability and marginalization

To highlight how exposure to violence constitutes both a disadvantage in old age and a result of accumulated disadvantages across the course, we use the concepts of cumulative disadvantage, vulnerability, and marginalization. These overlapping terms describe how individual, community, and societal factors interact over time, reinforcing disadvantages across different levels and arenas: in the private sphere, in local communities and groups, and in encounters with public institutions. These interactions may relate to age, health, and functional ability, but also to other factors such as living conditions, economic status, gender identity, religion, and culture. In this perspective, age, gender, and ethnicity are not risk factors in themselves; rather, vulnerability arises from their interaction with other conditions that shape individuals' autonomy and ability to protect themselves and seek help.

Limitations of Current Support and Reporting Systems

The study draws on immigrant women's own accounts of violence and care, while also illustrating the complex relationship between social marginalization and trust in public institutions. Previous negative experiences with public services, combined with perpetrators' strategic use of disinformation, can influence whether victims seek help.

The analysis further reveals that older immigrants' vulnerability may be reinforced by a fragmented support system, where individuals depend on others to access or even establish contact with relevant services. This includes both locating appropriate measures or overcoming barriers such as language difficulties and digital requirements, as well as physical obstacles like travel distance and lack of universal design, including stairs and thresholds.

Currently, there is no national model for identifying and following up older adults exposed to violence, nor are there central registers or surveys that allow us to assess the prevalence of violence against older people with an immigrant background. It is therefore not possible to conclude with statistical certainty whether this group is in fact more vulnerable to violence than others. Nevertheless, our data and analyses point in that direction. This relates not only to vulnerability factors and cumulative marginalization, as described above, but also to weaknesses in the support system itself.

Responsibility for identifying and addressing cases of violence and abuse against older persons rests with individual municipalities and police districts. The study shows that the division of responsibilities among local crisis centers, municipal TryggEst teams, senior initiatives, health services, police, and voluntary organizations varies considerably and is in some cases described as absent or underdeveloped. Lack of cooperation and coordination thus represents a significant barrier to following up suspicions of violence and may prevent victims from receiving the help and protection to which they are entitled.

Identification, Diagnostic Overshadowing, and Cultural Overshadowing

Because identification largely depends on older individuals recognizing themselves as victims and seeking help, the study reveals a high threshold for cases to be detected at the system level. This partly reflects the fact that some older persons do not perceive the incidents they experience as violence, abuse, or neglect, and that their contact with public authorities and other arenas for identification is limited.

The report employs the concepts of *diagnostic* and *cultural* overshadowing to describe the risk that service providers' age-related and cultural assumptions may obscure individuals' actual needs and experiences. This may occur when symptoms such as sadness, bruises, or wounds are interpreted as signs of ageing, or when isolation, silence, and control are normalized as expressions of cultural "difference." Such assumptions can divert attention from other crucial factors such as age, gender, personality, and mental or physical health.

Professionals in the health and care services report heavy workloads and time pressures and note that fear of making mistakes can leave them paralyzed in situations where building trust with minority communities requires long-term engagement. The express concern that allegations of violence or neglect may close the door to preventive interventions, such as public health care or respite services, making the issue particularly challenging both ethically and methodologically.

The Way Forward

The report describes various parts of today's support services, with particular attention to municipalities that have developed, or are in the process of developing, holistic and inclusive approaches. Initiatives to strengthen professional competence, improve coordination between public and private actors, and enhance linguistic and cultural facilitation have in some municipalities made the support system better known and more accessible to older immigrants. Although the effects of such measures are difficult to assess, given the limited number of concrete cases concerning this target group, the analysis suggests that targeted efforts can strengthen both protection and legal security for all older people exposed to violence. The report therefore concludes with concrete recommendations and proposals for policy development.

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