



Abuse of Older Adults: A Study of the Prevalence and Type of Abuse and Its Relationships to Psychological Distress



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ABSTRACT

Several studies have investigated the antecedents of abuse against older adults in developed countries, but little is known about the prevalence, type, and psychological distress of abuse against older adults in Nigeria. This study examined the prevalence and type of abuse and its links to psychological distress among older adults in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was used to recruit 392 respondents ranging in age from 60 to 80 years old ($M = 70.77$, $S = 6.33$) using a convenient sampling technique. Data was collected using a standardized questionnaire. The data were summarized using descriptive statistics like frequency counts, percentages, means, and

standard deviations, and the hypothesis was tested using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Results showed a relatively moderate prevalence of abuse (28.3%) among older adults, while emotional (18%) and verbal (82%) were the types of abuse that the respondents experienced. Finally, psychological distress had a statistically significant main effect on older adults' abuse ($F_{3,388} = 28.69$, $p < .05$). The study concluded that the prevalence of abuse against older adults is below average in the study setting, with verbal and emotional abuse being the most common types among the respondents. It was also concluded that psychological distress influenced abuse towards older adults.

KEYWORDS: Older adults; abuse; psychological distress; prevalence.

KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGE

1. The study investigated the prevalence of older adults abuse in emerging countries like Nigeria
2. The study also examined the type of abuse in the study setting and linked it with psychological distress that older adults in this country also experienced
3. The present research discusses the incidence of abuse directed against older adults and the repercussions of this abuse on older persons, highlighting the need to assess abuse among older people by professionals who work with older people.
4. Older adults who are psychologically distressed are more likely to be abused, and intervention programs should include ways to ease their pain to reduce the risk of abuse.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation reported that the population of older adults is increasing globally (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). According to the World Health Organization, the number of persons aged 60 and above will have risen from 900 million in 2015 to almost two billion by 2050. According to the worldwide (Global Age Watch Index, 2015), Nigeria's population of persons aged 60 and above is anticipated to grow from 8.7 million to 28.9 million by 2030, up from 8.7 million. This increase in forecasts illustrates that older people make up a significant percentage of the global and Nigerian populations, and their well-being and life quality should be studied with the same zeal as other demographic sub-groups. Despite the high rate of older adults population in Nigeria there seems to be no available national policy for the care of the older adult in the public service to take care of them, thereby making them susceptible to abuse (Ajayi et al., 2015).

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) defined older adults abuse as a single or repeated act, or a failure to act, that causes injury or distress to an older adult in any relationship where there is an expectation of trust. Any act commissioned or developed by a person to create harm, either known or unknown, to an older adult to reduce his or her self-worth or self-esteem amounts to abuse. These behaviors may involve passive neglect, verbal, emotional, or violent attack on the older person. Abuse may take many forms, including violations of rights, material exploitation, castigation, battering, sexual abuse, using older people as the family's "watchdog," and neglecting the older adult's medical care, nutrition, and shelter (Cooper et al., 2008). In recent times, the prevalence of older adults abuse has continued to be a source of worry in Nigeria. This is not far-fetched, as many older adult cases of abuse are often reported in print and social media. This prevalence rate of abuse has negatively affected older adults' well-being in Nigeria and Osun State. Older adults abuse can occur in a variety of ways. Physical, financial, psychological, and sexual abuses and neglect are examples (WHO, 2010). Emotional or psychological abuse is the most often reported maltreatment and abuse, as noted in previous studies (Acierno et al., 2009; Iborra, 2008).

Likewise, there abound evidence of older adults abuse in Nigeria (Akpan & Umobong, 2013; Asogwa & Igbokwe, 2010; Ola & Olalekan, 2012; Sijuwade, 2008) reported different types of abuse among older adults in Nigeria, such as emotional, disrespects

from younger children, sexual, verbal among others. There is even more, unreported anecdotal evidence of older adults abuse in Nigeria. In Osun state, there are reported cases of retirees not receiving their pension as when due and sometimes not at all, older adults castigated as witches and wizards by family members, cases of older adults' abandonment, and psychological assaults, among others. This is exacerbated by the lack of social security accounts, which contribute to the even worsening situations of the older adults in Nigeria.

Furthermore, studies have shown that abuse against older adults is linked to serious adverse health outcomes and the risk of older adults mortality (Dong et al., 2012). Some of the risk factors linked to older adult's abuse have physical as well as psychological consequences (Dong et al., 2012) refer to the physical effects to include physical pain, soreness, sleep disturbances, dehydration, malnutrition, exacerbation of pre-existing health conditions that can increase the risk of premature death while the psychological effects on the older adults can increase their risks of developing fear and anxiety reactions, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression (Yan & Tang, 2016). Previous authors (Cadmus et al., 2015; Dangbin & Kyamru, 2014; Olasupo et al., 2020) have also conducted studies on older adults abuse, but there are still no sufficient studies that have fully explored the prevalence, type, and influence of psychological distress on older adults abuse in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria.

METHOD

Design and Setting

A descriptive survey research approach was used in this study. Federal and state pensioners in Ile-Ife made up the study population. The choice of Ile-Ife was made after careful consideration of major towns in Osun State, Nigeria, that are likely to possess both state and federal establishment. Likewise, the choice of this town was based on the availability of an enormous number of older adults who are retirees that can be found in this town, as observed by the researcher.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 392 older adults who are retirees were included in the research comprising 192 (49%) males and 200 (51%) females within the age of 60 years and above using a convenient sampling technique. However, 47% of the calculated sample size was shared out to Obafemi Awolowo University

retirees; 38% was apportioned to Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital Complex, while the remaining 15% of the sample size goes to the state retirees.

Instruments

The instrument consisted of one questionnaire and two standardized psychological scales: Hwalek-Sergstock Elder Abuse Screening Test (HSEAST) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (KPDS-10).

Hwalek-Sergstock Elder Abuse Screening Test (HSEAST): The elder abuse scale was adapted and modified from Neale et al. (1991) to identify older adults at risk of abuse. Thus, the original version of the HSEAST consists of 15 items; the version used in this study consisted of 17 items. This modification necessitated a pilot study to compare both versions of the scales. The test-retest of 6 weeks results of the pilot study showed a high correlation between each other ($r_{40} = .86$, $p < .001$). The items were scored on a “no” or “yes” forced-choice response format implying that “No” responses were rated zero (0) while the “yes” responses were rated one (1). Items responses were added together to get a composite older adults' abuse score. The higher the total score, the likelihood the respondent is at risk of abuse. The present study reported a Cronbach alpha of .65.

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (KPDS-10): The psychological distress scale was adopted from Kessler et al. (2003) as a simple measure of emotional states or to identify levels of distress. There are four distinct categories on the scale: no distress, mild distress, moderate distress, and severe distress. The instrument consists of 10 items. The scale was scored on a five-point, Likert-type response format ranging from 1 = None of the time, 2 = A little of the time, 3 = Some of the time, 4 = Most of the time, and 5 = All of the time. The present study reported a Cronbach Alpha of .89.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentage means, and standard deviations for objective one. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the single hypothesis in the study.

Procedure

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data in this study after permission was sought from community leaders and other major stakeholders. Before going for the fieldwork, the researcher trained an individual who serves as a research

assistant to administer questionnaires and collect data for the study. On getting to the field, the researcher and the research assistant explained the importance of the study to the participants; they also informed the respondents that participation was voluntary and they might so wish to withdraw at any time they so desired. They were also assured of their confidentiality and made to know that their information would only be used for research purposes. After all the explanation and procedures, the researcher and his assistant distributed four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire, out of which three hundred and ninety-two (392) were correctly returned. At the same time, the remaining eight (8) have either incomplete responses or were not returned. This indicated a 98% response rate upon which the analysis was based.

RESULTS

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample involved in this study are depicted in [Table-1](#). It shows that male respondents account for 192 (49%) of the total respondents, while female respondents were 200 (51%). The respondents' ages varied from 60 to 80 years, with a mean of 70.77 years and a standard deviation of 6.33 years. In the study, 73 (18.6%) were aged 60–69 years (young-old), 216 (55.1%) were aged 70–79 years (old-old), and 103 (26.3%) were aged 80 years and beyond (very-old or oldest-old). The majority of total respondents claimed to be 70 years old or older. In terms of marital status, 27 (6.9%) of respondents were widows or widowers, 346 (88.3%) were with partners, 11 (2.8%) were divorced, and eight (2%) were separated. [Table-1](#) also shows that 269 (68.6%) of the respondents were Christians, 111 (28.3%) were Muslims, while 12 (3.1%) of the respondents claimed African traditional religion. The monthly annual income of the respondents ranged from N12000 to N852000 (\$28.81 to \$2045.60), with a mean of N52560.20 (\$126.19) and a standard deviation of N73906 (\$177.44)¹. Income of the respondents was categorised as low income level = 35 (8.9%), middle income level = 267 (68.1%) and high income level = 90 (23%). The respondents' educational levels revealed that 83 (21.2%) completed primary school, 111 (28.1%) completed secondary school, and the bulk of the respondents, 198 (50.5%), completed postsecondary education.

The purpose of [Table-2](#) was to find out the prevalence of abuse against older adults in Ile-Ife. The objective was analyzed

¹ Note: \$1 (United States Dollar) = N416.50 (Nigerian Naira)

with item 7a of the personal information questionnaire (PIQ). Item 7a asked the respondent whether they had ever experienced any form of abuse. The item carried the forced-choice “yes” or “no” response format. The “yes” responses were coded one (1), and the “No” responses were coded zero (0). Therefore, a simple frequency count was used to analyze the objective.

Table-1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants

	Levels	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	192	49.0
	Female	200	51.0
Age	Young-old	73	18.6
	Old-old	216	55.1
	Very-old/Oldest-old	103	26.3
Marital status	Widow/Widower	27	6.9
	Married	346	88.3
	Divorced	11	2.8
	Separated	8	2.0
Income	Lower	35	8.9
	Middle	267	68.1
	Upper	90	23.0
Religion	Christian	269	68.6
	Muslim	111	28.3
	Traditional	12	3.1
Educational level	Primary	83	21.2
	Secondary	111	28.3
	Tertiary	198	50.5

Source: Field survey, 2018

Table-2 shows the findings of this objective which showed that 111 (28.3%) of the respondents had experienced abuse in the past while the significant majority, 281 (71.7%), have never experienced abuse ($X^2 = 73.72$, $p < .001$). This finding suggested that a significant majority of the older adults included in the study did not experience any abuse. Nonetheless, the level of abuse is high enough to give professional cause for concern.

Table-2. The prevalence of older adults' abuse

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Experience abuse	111	28.3
Did not experience abuse	281	71.7
Total	392	100.0

$X^2 = 73.72$, $p < .001$

Source: Field survey, 2018

The types of abuse encountered by older adults in the research are shown in **Table-3**. In terms of the percentage of senior persons who responded “yes” to the kind of abuse, the majority ($N = 91$, 81.98%) of retired older adults included in the research reported experiencing verbal abuse ($X^2 = 45.42$, $p < .001$). Twenty older adults have experienced emotional abuse (18.02%). For abused older adults in this region, verbal and emotional abuse was the most common type, but verbal abuse was more common than emotional abuse.

Table-3. The types of abuse encountered by older adults

Type of abuse	Frequency	Percentage
Emotional abuse	20	18.02
Verbal abuse	91	81.98
Total	111	100.0

$X^2 = 45.42$, $p < .001$

Source: Field survey, 2018

The data analysis is summarised in **Table-4a** and it revealed that there was a statistically significant primary influence of psychological distress (categorised into “no distress”, “moderate distress”, “mild distress” and “severe distress”) on older adults abuse ($F_{3,388} = 28.69$, $p < .001$). This finding suggested that either the older adults who felt distressed experienced abuse or that those who experienced abuse became psychologically distressed.

Table-4a. Influence of psychological distress on older adults abuse

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between Groups	822.87	3	274.29	28.69	.001
Within Groups	3708.39	388	9.55		
Total	4531.26	391			

Source: Field survey, 2018

Further analysis to determine the level of psychological distress that influenced older adults abuse the most was carried out with the Least Significant Difference (LSD) post-hoc test.

The post hoc test results are summarized in **Table-4b**. results indicated that older adults who reported severe psychological distress ($M = 29.71$, $S = 4.58$) reported higher abuse than older adults who reported no psychological distress ($M = 25.77$, $S = 2.55$), mild psychological distress ($M = 27.79$, $S = 3.68$), and

moderate psychological distress ($M = 27.14, S = 2.55$).

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to evaluate the prevalence and type of older adults abuse and evaluate psychological distress and abuse relationships. The first research question revealed that older adults abuse in this study is relatively low. This research matched Ola and Olalekan's findings (Ola & Olalekan, 2012), who found reported that 72% of older adults had never experienced any type of abuse while 28% claimed that they had experienced abuse in Ado-Ekiti. Similarly, the result did not conform to the study of Akpan and Umobong (2013) in the Akwa-Ibom state, who found a high prevalence rate of various types of abuse, and about 44-47% of the older adults claimed that they had experienced abuse. Likewise, the findings also disagreed with the findings in South Africa (Bigala & Ayiga, 2014), which reported an alarming conclusion from their cross-sectional survey that 64.3% of males and 60.3% of women in South Africa had suffered from older abuse.

Table-4b. The prevalence of older adults' abuse

Distress	N	M	S	1	2	3	4
No	263	25.77	2.55	-			
Mild	49	27.79	3.68		2.02*		
Moderate	21	27.14	2.55			-	
Severe	59	29.71	4.58				2.56*

Source: Field survey, 2018

The second research question found that verbal and emotional abuse was the common abuse suffered by older adults in this study. The findings also revealed the types of abuse experienced by the older adults in the study. The statistical evidence strongly indicates that the most common abuse among older persons was verbal abuse in Ile-Ife. The study's findings are consistent with previous research from Ireland and the United Kingdom, which found that verbal abuse was the most often reported form of abuse among the study's seniors (Cooney et al., 2006; Cooper et al., 2009). The study findings contradicted (Acierno et al., 2009), who discovered that emotional abuse was uncommon (4.6%) in the United States. However, (Tareque et al., 2015) discovered that neglect was the most common type of abuse in the Rajshahi region of Bangladesh, followed by emotional abuse, abandonment, physical abuse, and exploitation. The

rationale for the finding could be unconnected with the rapid modernization and industrialization injected into the Nigerian culture. Nowadays, caregivers and family members verbally talk to their older adults as if they are chatting or relating with their peer mates. This invariably, consciously or unconsciously, could have led to abuse in one way or another.

The hypothesis revealed a statistically significant main influence of psychological distress on abuse against older adults. The findings suggested that severe psychological distress has higher older adults abuse than other forms of distress. The finding was following the study of (Luo & Waite, 2011), who found that psychological distress has a major influence on older adults' abuse. Also, it was reported that older women who reported to have suffered more severe forms of psychological abuse (particularly emotional abuse) had been significantly associated with higher levels of psychological distress. At the same time, those respondents who have reported violence in their marital relationship also had a higher level of psychological distress than those in non-violent relationships. The study is also in consonance with the recent findings of Dong et al. (2013) found that older adults abuse affects the quality of life among helpless older adults, and this contributed to their exhibition of depression, anxiety, fear, and unworthiness, among other forms of psychological distress. The rationale for this finding could be a result of the fact that older adults who are retired in Nigeria are often faced with psychological problems such as emotional distress, lack of a plan, lack of medical care, death of a caregiver, delay in payment of their pension and lack of applicable policy which invariably influence the rate of abuse among this set of population. This, therefore, serves as the basis for this study. Findings from the study can be used to reduce older adults abuse in Nigeria and throughout the world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that despite having a relatively low prevalence rate of older adults abuse in the study, it still calls for professional concern. It was also determined that the two forms of abuse encountered by an older adult in this study were verbal and emotional abuse. The study also concluded that older adults with severe psychological distress experience more abuse than other forms of distress. Based on this conclusion, it is therefore recommended that psychologists should develop intervention programs, especially for an older adult who has severe

psychological distress; such intervention should inculcate ways in which the distress could be reduced such that it would diminish the menace of abuse among the older adults.

It is also recommended that family members and caregivers take good care of their older adults and desist from verbally abusing them, considering that one day they would also become aged and would need support from people. Finally, state and federal governments should emulate the developed world by providing a better welfare package for older adults, such as free medical care, monthly salary, and housing allowances. This support package for older adults will help lower the possibility of abuse within this significant demographic group.

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