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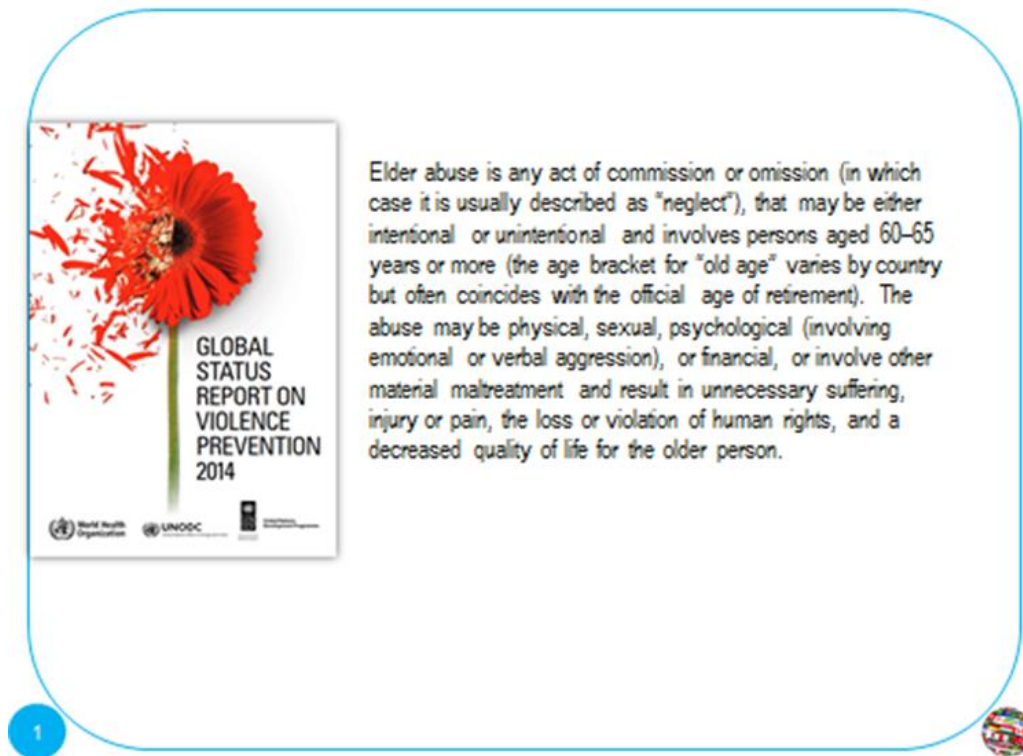
Preventing crime against the elderly: Does the United Nations
“succeeding generation” respond to elderly’s calls for help?

Statement at the side event “Elderly victims of crime”
during the twenty-fifth session of
the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal
Justice
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Introduction



Those familiar with Eastern cultures may recall a fictional island of immortals Penglai in the South Seas eastward from China. According to Chinese Taoist mythology people living there enjoy eternal youth, their rice bowls and wine glasses are never empty, they live in warmth, peace, health and prosperity. But according to Japanese mythology, the picture is less idyllic: the immortals suffer from cold, there are no rice bowls or wine glasses that never become empty. However, their hearts never grow old.¹

Much later, some three hundred years ago, an English fictional writer Jonathan Swift in his “*Gulliver’s Travels*” described the South Sea islanders off the coast of Japan who live forever on the island called Luggnagg. Gulliver exclaims: “*I cried out as in a rapture; happy nation where every child hath at least a chance for being immortal!*”.

It soon turned out that, yes, those islanders live forever but get older. Gulliver then reports about the evil of immortality without eternal youth, about the disgruntled and powerless difficult people. At the age of 80 and 90 by the force of law the elderly are gradually stripped

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Penglai



"The question therefore was not whether a man would choose to be always in the prime of youth, attended with prosperity and health, but how he would pass an eternal life under all the usual disadvantages which old age brings along with it..." Next, Gulliver reports how those elderly when they reached 80 years of age were stripped of their assets by the inheritance law and are declared "civilly dead". Only a small pittance is reserved for their support; and the poor ones are maintained at the public charge. After that period, they are held incapable of

management, of any employment of trust or profit; they cannot purchase lands, or take leases; neither are they allowed to be witnesses in any cause, either civil or criminal, not even for the decision on where are the boundaries or bounds. Otherwise they would have brought their nation to the ruins... They were not only opinionative, peevish, covetous, morose, vain, talkative, but incapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grandchildren. Envy and impotent desires are their prevailing passions. But those objects against which their envy seems principally directed, are the vices of the younger sort and the deaths of the old." Finally, Gulliver notes that the elderly "at 90 ... lose their teeth and hair..."; they "eat and drink whatever they can get, without relish or appetite.... In talking, they forget the common appellation of things and the names of persons, even those who are their nearest friends and relations."

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of their assets and incapacitated. They no longer are included in the society.

The United Nations on the welfare of elderly

The origin of the intergenerational crime prevention that involves the elderly is stipulated in the United Nations Charter. In 1945 the United Nations proclaimed to save "succeeding generations from the scourge of wars" and in art. 55 it stipulated:

- (a) higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
- (b) solutions of international economic, social, health, and related problems; and international cultural and educational cooperation.

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Only one year later, in 1946, the newly founded Gerontological Society of America declared the need to concern ourselves to add “not more years to life, but more life to years.”² The statistics for the past 175 years supports it. Life expectancies have been increasing at a steady rate of 3 months per year, and in 15 years from now people will live 3.5 year longer than their today’s contemporaries.³ By 2030, older adults are projected to comprise 13% of the world population – one in eight people will be aged 65 years or older.⁴

As this process continues, political theorists and futurists (like Francis Fukuyama) warned that if we maintain our obsession with extending life at all costs, society may “increasingly come to resemble a giant nursing home”.⁵ Criminologists may add that nursing homes reportedly are becoming places of elderly abuse.

Anti-victimization programmes across the world

So let’s take an intergenerational look into the “South Seas” and elsewhere and find out through the lens of the WHO/UNODC/UNDP survey how the prevention of such an abuse looks like today, in comparison with child abuse.

² L. K. Frank. Gerontology. Journal of Gerontology 1946/1: 1-11

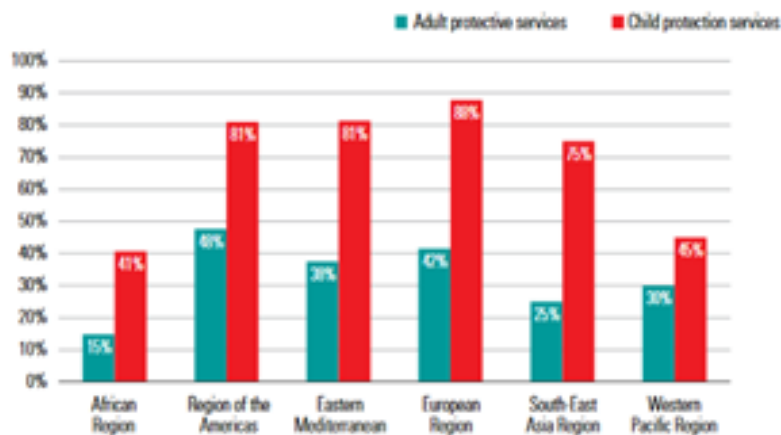
³ D. Steinsaltz, Will 90 Become The New 60? As our lifespans have increased, so too have our active years. Can that go on?, 19 May 2016, <http://nautil.us/issue/36/aging/will-90-become-the-new-60>

⁴ ST/ESA/SER.A/390, World Population Ageing, United Nations, New York 2015

⁵ F. Fukuyama, Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution, Picador. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2002:67



Figure 18: Proportion of countries with child and adult protective services, by WHO region (n = 133 reporting countries)



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As we can see, not in the South Seas but in the Americas and Europe first of all there is more adult protective services (green bars), and so is with child protection services (red bars). In either case African Region, South-East Asia region and Western Pacific Region fall behind. And these are low and middle-income countries from these South regions that will experience the most rapid growth in ageing, with increases of up to 140%, high-income countries are expected to experience increases averaging 51%.

However, the global response to these increases is quite bleak. The WHO/UNODC/UNDP survey informs that globally 60% of countries indicated that they do not have adult protective services in place to assist vulnerable older adults. Of all the services included in the survey, adult protective services were the least reported by countries. Only one third of countries indicated that they have adult protective services in place to investigate potential cases of elder abuse and assist vulnerable older adults. The prevention of elderly abuse through adult protective services of all the services included, adult protective services were the least reported by countries. The lack of adult protective services, particularly in contrast to child protection services, was consistent across all regions. Countries furthest along in efforts to protect and support older adults include these services as part of their national policy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, only in the South Seas idyllic Chinese Taoist story of an immortal island there is no elderly falling victim of crime or abuse. The true story is the wealthy part of the world has welfare returns from improved nutrition and basic hygiene, hence now has better chances for the intergenerational succession and better treatment of elderly.

Therefore two specific recommendations follow through this host forum to members of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice:

First, the UN Crime Commission should follow-up on the recommendations of the UN General Assembly’s resolution 67/187 of 20 December 2012 with the “United Nations Principles and Guidelines on Access to Legal Aid in Criminal Justice System”, especially on its Principle 10 on “special measures”. Specifically, these measures need to be taken “to ensure meaningful access to legal aid for women, children and groups with special needs, including, but not limited to the elderly and that such measures should address the special needs of those groups, including gender-sensitive and age appropriate measures.”

Second, the implementation of the 2016-2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda should indeed empower people who are vulnerable (like the elderly) still to be in a position to participate in civic life. While - given the social welfare evidence - it is obvious that the Agenda must start with fully meeting the nutritional needs of older persons (that is Goal 2 “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”), the empowerment of elderly should involve creating communities of the elderly, safe spaces through the urban design (Goal 11.7), confident living programmes and other community development initiatives. Save financial abuse and the issue of legal guardianship, to some extent these ideas for preventing victimization of the elderly may be the same ones as for those protecting the children.

This is how one may see preventing crime against the elderly and learn whether the United Nations “succeeding generation” respond to their calls for help - by adding “not more years to life, but more life to years.”
