

SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT: *Elderly people live real dramas because of their exclusion from social and economic life, but mostly because on several occasions they are abandoned in their old age by their own children.*

Moreover, once they grow older these people start confronting various health problems and need the help of someone else almost permanently.

Thus, they become dependent, experiencing strong feelings of frustration, insecurity, because of lack of control over their own lives, impatience, anger, when the care is inappropriate, guilt towards the caretaker.

The activities which have taken place up to the present in favors of elderly people were sporadic and without results, and concerning abandoned, isolated, and sick old people, they were practically inexistent. The elderly has difficulties in maintaining normal living standards because of economic problems which led to the apparition of an aggravating state of poverty among them.

Key words: *elderly person; exclusion; problems; social;*

1. Introduction

The ageing of the population affects social, economic, and even political structures in society. It inevitably affects more and more our way of thinking, education, work and free time, the way in which we organize our family life, and the way in which we ensure our future. Only those societies which successfully adapt their politics, laws, and a correct way of understanding the growing number and proportion of the elderly population will prosper in the future. This doesn't affect only the elderly but also the entire population because the elderly represents the minority most people will belong to eventually.

The young generation must know their future can be better if the elderly is active, creative, bringing their contribution and actively participating in the social life, and being protected in their turn. The

generations are interdependent in the exchange of feelings, services, and goods, because as far as existence is concerned, they form a sole entity. In our country, the elderly population has undergone important material difficulties for a long period of time, which has made most of this population group live under the limits of poverty. The last years have seen the creation of many Associations of the elderly, which sustain more and more energetically the right to a better life for those who have passed the age of retirement.

Considering the proportions of the necessary changes in Romania, determined by the current low level of subsistence conditions for the elderly, as well as the urgency of making these changes, the immediate elaboration and adoption of a national action program regarding the elderly, in concordance with international regulations in this area has become highly necessary.

2. The poverty of the elderly

Poverty is one of the problems felt most acutely by the elderly people in Romania, being known that the period of retirement is characterized by a smaller income and a drastic reduction of expenses.

“In the period which our country goes through right now, only a small percentage of about 5-10% of the people manages to live a life without wants from their income, about 15-20% can decently satisfy their needs, and the rest, meaning the majority, struggle with great material difficulties. Approximately a third of the population is confronted with severe poverty issues” [Radulescu, M. 2001, p.358]

The elderly, who have small incomes, form a great part of this category, which leads to a profound deterioration of living conditions. This lack of income is characterized by the lowering of the purchasing power and the orientation towards inferior quality consumption, with negative consequences on the health status.

Apart from the small number of sums received by retired people, the current pension calculus system according to professional categories and years of activity is characterized by a series of deficiencies, as far as, except modest re-calculations, there is no correlation between pensions and salaries.

The decrease of the purchasing power of pensions was mainly due to the growth in the number of retired people, considered by some analysts as a form of “masked unemployment” and in some Western countries known as “early retirement”.

As a direct effect of the decrease in the real level of income from pensions these can no longer cover the minimum necessary in most retired families. The calculations made by researchers from the Institute for the Quality of Life (Radulescu, M, 2001) have pointed out that the pensions cover only 50% of the expenses of retired families, especially in the rural area. The rest is covered from

other resources, like produce from own production. However, the supplementary incomes are very low, since in Romanian rural households the agriculture practiced is rudimentary and inefficient.

From the point of view of the extremely low level of income, the most vulnerable elderly groups are:

- elderly people affected by some degree of invalidity or disability.
- elderly people without legal sustainers or abandoned by their children and relatives.
- elderly women who have not worked during their active life period (housewives) and who have no income, not even inheritor’s pension from their deceased husband.
- elderly peasants who have worked several years in former farm cooperatives, as well as peasants in most areas without cooperatives, who support themselves from their own resources.

For a great part of the elderly, the most important sources of supplementary revenues are:

- income from agriculture.
- crafts activities.
- help from children or relatives.
- occasional help from strangers.
- trade.

Although many expenditures are allotted to food, there is an inequality between the elderly and the rest of the population regarding the quantity, quality, and structure of food consumption, which is situated at lower level, placing many of the elderly in the poverty area, a reason for this social category to feel isolated and marginalized.

The situation of the elderly is difficult, having small incomes, they are often forced to choose between food and medicine, and being educated to be conscious taxpayers they give up both to keep their houses, which represent for most of them safety and the satisfaction of a lifelong labor.

3. The maltreating of the elderly

By maltreatment (ill-treating) we understand the actions of the children or other relatives of the elderly who, instead of taking care of the elderly person, abuse him/her physically, emotionally, sexually, or legally, or neglect him/her to such a degree that it endangers his/her physical and/or emotional health, or even his/her life.

In the last two decades, specialists have noticed that the elderly represent the most vulnerable age category in connection to different forms of aggression and violence manifested in contemporary society.

In the world, and in the last years in Romania as well, the most serious threat for the elderly security are the crimes committed by people specialized in acts of violence against this exact age category. The main crimes are robbery and theft committed in the streets, in areas which do not offer any security for the elderly or other people, theft, robbery, violence or rape committed inside the victims' houses.

Therefore, many older people are afraid to go out in the streets or allow strangers into their homes, remaining locked inside the house most of the time.

Although the elderly is the least victimized by these forms of aggression and violence, they consider however that these possible crimes are some of the most serious of their problems, which threaten their lives and personal security, as serious as the problems related to living conditions and poverty [Harris, L, in Radulescu, M., 2001].

Among other offences or crimes committed against the elderly are cheating funds through dishonest means, fraud, or swindle. In Romania there are numerous cases where people, often gathered in crime organizations, take advantage of the naivety or even senility of elderly people, buying their houses for derisory sums or, after the passing of Law 17/2000, contracting maintenance agreements which then they do not respect [Radulescu, M., 2001].

One of the most severe forms of violence against elderly people is neglect, abuse, or maltreatment coming from their own children. Aggression towards the elderly comprises a multitude of forms, from neglect of their material and spiritual needs to the administration of painkillers or alcohol to make them easier to deal with (especially for the purpose of signing papers).

The forms of abuse towards the elderly can be classified as follows:

- passive neglect – consists in simply ignoring the elderly person by his/her own children, without any material or affective support, without visits or any other form of interest.
- verbal or emotional abuse – consists of insults, offending, humiliations, treating them like children who have no right to personal dignity.
- active neglect – implies the deliberate isolation of the elderly person, the premeditated refuse to provide food or medicine, their forced admission in asylums or retirement homes [Hicheley, T., Douglas, R. in Radulescu, M., 2001];
- physical abuse – consists in ill-treating, beatings and hitting, often extremely serious and sometimes even fatal.

The maltreatment of the elderly represents significant product of negative social attitude manifested towards this age category. In most cases the abuser is part of the family or extended family and, from the results of several studies, has in turn been the victim of some sort of violence. The maltreatment of the elderly is thus a consequence of the abused child syndrome, mostly in families where violence represents a form of normative reaction to different frustrating and conflicting problems [Bassis, M.S., in Radulescu, M., 2001].

The classification of the different conflicting situations which involve the reports between the elderly and their children, between the elderly and their caretakers is very diverse, depending on a multitude of factors. The type of personality

of the people involved, as well as their cultural level, has a special importance.

Among people in their 70's or beyond, four main types of personality which represent extensions of the models existing in adult life can be distinguished:

1. The integrated type, which characterizes most elderly people, whose functions are physically and mentally adequate.
2. The protective type, oriented towards activity and achievement and protecting himself through work.
3. The passive-dependent type, who is inactive and dependent on others.
4. The indifferent type, characterized by the deterioration of the psychic, confusion, disorientation, forgetfulness, senility, and paranoia.

These types represent the reaction towards old age of people who belong to this age category, being not only biological characteristics, but also socio-cultural responses to the attitudes of others.

4. Suicide among the elderly

The elderly is forced to confront a serious of personal and family events, which they sense as highly stressful. At this stage the elderly person is separated from active social roles, must face problems related to the deterioration of health; expect the death of the life partner, of relatives or close friends or even his/her own. The drastic reduction of expenses, the reorganization of personal life can contribute to the accentuation of the feeling of dependence, social isolation, and uselessness of life.

All these events are favorable for the installation of a state of anxiety and depression which represents one of the most common psychiatric conditions claimed by the elderly. Suicidal tendencies of the elderly are higher than in other age categories.

There are numerous factors which can determine an old person to commit suicide. The most significant are difficult life

condition, the presence of chronic and degenerative diseases, retirement from professional activity, depression, social isolation, and lack of hope in the future, the loss of close ones and even sexual frustration.

K. Menninger according to Radulescu, M., 2001, classified the motivations of committing suicide in two main categories:

- the desire to die;
- the desire to be killed.

Elderly people are tempted to regard suicide as an act of liberation from constrains and humiliation to which they are submitted, and thus suicides among the elderly can represent a rational action and a premeditated decision. Unlike young people, the elderly tends to communicate less their intentions to the others and suicide attempts among the elderly result in most cases in actual suicides and very few failures.

In the case of the elderly, suicide is the combined product of several vital losses which appear often in a very brief period to time. These vital losses can be classified in four categories:

- economic losses – losing their jobs and incomes;
- physical losses – losing their health and the existence of certain infirmities;
- psychological losses – losing the self-esteem and self-confidence;
- emotional losses – losing the life partner or a child.

Several times, the suicides of the elderly appear to be determined by the existence of severe physical diseases or psychic disorders which appear often in old age [Radulescu, M., 2001].

In comparison with other age periods, old age is confronted most intensely with the problem of death, which dominates all the other dimension of existence. Some elderly people may have the feeling of fulfilled duty, being at peace with the act of dying, others may have the feeling of not having lived as they should have.

5. Alcoholism among the elderly

Some elderly people resort to alcohol, finding like that a way to escape reality, a reality full of discrimination and humiliations. Others who have no support find in alcohol a means to compensate loss. Alcoholism seen from this perspective doesn't necessarily represent an irrational behavior, but most likely a conduct of adaptation to a situation considered without solution.

"Drinking large amounts of alcohol causes serious medical complications, affecting virtually the entire human body. The effect of alcohol translates into a deterioration of the way the body and brain cells work, which are either immediately felt or after many years of abuse" [Bugnariu A., I., 2019 p.124].

The incidence of alcoholism is higher among men and lower among the elderly population than among young and adult population. Because of a precarious health status, the elderly develops a physiological intolerance to alcohol, which counteracts its positive effects when consumed in reasonable quantity [Davison, G., Neale, J.M., in Radulescu, M., 2001].

Alcoholic elderly people are divided in two categories:

- those who have started their "career" as alcoholics during early or middle adulthood, continuing to drink excessively in old age as well.
- those who have started to consume alcohol in large quantities after the age of 50.

In the first more numerous category we can include the elderly who live in family and social conditions which do not justify the excessive consumption of alcohol except as a form of manifestation of sociability. The second category is formed of lonely people who are widows/widowers, divorced or separated and for whom alcohol consumption represents a form of compensation for the loneliness.

Most of the elderly people who are addicted to alcohol present abnormal

conducts, having permanent conflicts with the family, the neighbors, or the authorities. A high proportion of the elderly addicted to alcohol present symptoms of senile dementia, psychic or neurological disturbances. These symptoms include manifestations such as: incoherence in speaking, delirium, memory difficulties, nonfunctional stereotypical actions, time and space disorientation, different bizarre and illogical conducts. As a degenerative disease caused among others by nutritional deficiencies, senile dementia is accelerated by excessive consumption of alcohol [Radulescu, M., 1994].

Alcoholism is higher among institutionalized elderly people due to association with psychic or neurological disturbances.

Many alcoholic old people are represented by those who have no shelter, wandering around and begging in the city streets. They are ignored by the authorities; they are generally not treated in institutions and most of the times they die in the streets without assistance and without their identities being known.

According to the opinion of doctors, alcoholism is most likely the symptom of a disease than a disease. Alcoholics are characterized by the urgent need to drink, regardless of if the alcohol though its consequences can physically or mentally destroy them. For the elderly, these consequences are felt at the level of the entire organism, making functional degradation processes associated with advanced age worse.

6. Conclusion

"As the global COVID-19 pandemic continues to advance at a rapid pace, the need for older people to feel valued and to wonder how much it really matters is a very important issue now, when anxiety is heightened due to concerns. On personal the effects of physical isolation on the elderly in

Romania, during the COVID-19 pandemic safety and uncertainty about how and when the pandemic will be resolved. Loneliness is already a public health problem, especially among the elderly, and physical isolation is exponentially added to social isolation, which is characterized by loneliness” (Bugnariu, A.,I., 2020 p.117).

The conclusion was reached that the elderly is a social problem, although it should not be so. If not long ago the interests of the elderly belonged to the doctor, today a whole team - doctor, psychologist, social worker, sociologist - come to meet the problems of the elderly.

For this age group, with white hair and a white beard, only knowledge is not enough, but the entire charitable, humanistic formation must have feelings of respect and affection. Most of the time, elderly people are disadvantaged, or at least they think so. They no longer have physical power, financial power. Many of them have mental disabilities.

In conclusion, we can say that although, in theory, there is a legal framework to ensure the effective functioning of the existing services at the local public administration level, in fact this does not materialize in the expected purposes.

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