

# Elder Abuse in Kyrgyzstan: Summary of the elder abuse survey

Photo by Malik Alymkuloff



*«You are senile»*



The project is funded  
by the European Union



The content of this publication does not reflect the position of the European Union

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**Based on the research report by Larisa Ilibezova**

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to Association of Crises centers and Older People's Groups for conducting the survey on which this paper is based.

This survey would have not been possible without the support of the following Crises centers: "Tendesh", Naryn; "Aylzat", Karakol; "Maana", Talas; "Darshaym", Bishkek; "Shans", Bishkek; "Altynai", Cholpon-Ata; "Ak-Jurok", Osh; "Meerban", Osh; "Aylkarachach, Osh province, village of Gulcho; "Aruulan", Osh; "Kaniet", Jalal-Abad as well as Older People's Groups from Kara-Kochkop village in Kuldja district; Tolokon in Kara-Suu; Gulcho in Alai; Myza-Aki in Uzgen; Jany-Dyikan in Suzak; Jany-Aryk in Ak-Suu; Kara-Oi in Issyk-Kul; Kenesh in Naryn; Sasyk-Bulak in Talas; Gavrilovka in Sokuluk; Panfilovka in Panfilov district; Besh-kungei in Alamudun.

We are also grateful to the representatives of local administration (Ayil okmoty), courts of aksakals, women's councils, social and health workers, neighborhood inspectors of the above districts, as well as old-age homes workers who took part in in-depth interview.

This survey was made possible through support and funding from European Union within "The right to life without violence in old age" project implemented by HelpAge International in partnership with the Association of Crises Centers.

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### **«You are a bad woman»**

*An older woman (68 y.o.) heard these words from her husband's relatives who she'd lived with for 26 years. When he died, his relatives kicked her out her house. They insulted, her saying rude and bad words.*



Photo by Malik Alymkuloff

# 1. Introduction

In Kyrgyzstan, as in many former Soviet republics, the problem of domestic violence has gained official and public acknowledgment only in recent years. Positive advances in both legislation and access to services have been driven to a great extent by women's organizations. But the question of violence and other forms of abuse against older people has gone largely ignored, despite international action plans and principles meant to ensure their security and dignity. However, through anecdotal evidence, organizations working with older people gradually have come to believe that such abuse does occur in the country and are endeavoring to learn more.

Tackling the problem of elder abuse, like domestic violence in general, poses difficulties for a number of inter-related reasons, cultural and institutional alike. One is the shame and stigma associated with intra-familial conflict, which often lead to underreporting by victims. Another involves the widespread perception, even among law-enforcement officials, that friction between relatives, no matter how brutal, is a private affair and outsiders should not interfere. A third obstacle is the lack of effective mechanisms to prevent or combat the abuse. Although Kyrgyzstan passed a law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence" in 2003, becoming the first Central Asian nation to acknowledge the problem in such an explicit way, measures for implementation have been in short supply.

Very little is known about the specifics of domestic abuse against older people in Kyrgyzstan—its scale, manifestations, causes and consequences, as well as the available avenues of recourse. This publication attempts to fill in some of these gaps in order to help improve protection mechanisms. It is part of a project called Right to Life Without Violence in Old Age, implemented by HelpAge International and Kyrgyzstan's Association of Crisis Centers with funding from the European Union. The aim of the publication was to gather and present basic information about abuse against older people: its magnitude, its forms and public awareness of the protections available to victims.

The research reflected here was carried out in 12 villages across six provinces of Kyrgyzstan<sup>1</sup> in December 2011 and January 2012, combining five sources of information: available statistics, a face-to-face survey, in-depth interviews with key informants (two of them outside the 12 villages), focus group discussions and case studies. The primary working language for the survey, interviews and discussions was Kyrgyz. Relevant statistical data was collected from police, healthcare institutions, regular courts, aksakal courts,<sup>2</sup> crisis centers and other specialized providers of socio-psychological counseling services. The face-to-face survey covered 500 respondents aged 18 and older,<sup>3</sup> selected through

<sup>1</sup> Chui Province: Besh-Kungei, Gavrilovka, Panfilovka; Issyk-Kul Province: Jan-Aryk, Kara-Oy; Jalalabad Province: Jany-Dyikan; Naryn Province: Kenesh; Osh Province: Gulcho, Kara-Kochkor, Myrza-Aki, Tolokon; Talas Province: Sasyk-Bulak.

<sup>2</sup> Aksakals are typically elders who enjoy respect in their communities. Under a 2002/2003 law, aksakal courts, numbering five to nine members, can be elected by local residents in villages, towns or cities to resolve minor, local disputes, often among neighbors.

<sup>3</sup> Respondent breakdown by age group: 18-19 – 1.2%; 20-24 – 5.2%; 25-29 – 8.8%; 30-34 – 8.4%; 35-39 – 11.2%; 40-44 – 11.6%; 45-49 – 14.4%; 50-54 – 16.2%; 55-59 – 6.6%; 60-64 – 8.4%; 65-69 – 3.4%; 70-74 – 2%; 75-79 – 1.2%; 80-84 – 1.4%.

probability-proportional-to-size (PPS) cluster sampling; the margin of error in quantifying the results is 5%. The in-depth interviews numbered four in each village: with a medic, a police officer, a social worker or representative of the local administration and the chair of the local aksakal court or women's council.<sup>4</sup> Two directors of old-age homes, both outside the survey villages, also served as key informants, bringing the total number of in-depth interviews to 50. The focus groups—three in all, made up of seven to 12 participants each—comprised people aware of elder abuse in their respective communities, divided by age group: 18-25 years; 26-49 years; and 50 and older. The case studies, a total of 12, were compiled based on information from key informants. Thus, this publication reflects information collected from a variety of institutional sources and 570 individuals.

## 2. Key findings

- The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (71%) believe elder abuse exists in Kyrgyzstan.
- Nearly half the survey respondents (47%) and almost all 50 key informants believe the prevalence of elder abuse has increased over the past decade.
- More than one-third of survey respondents (35%) reported knowing of concrete cases of elder abuse.
- Because domestic abuse is severely underreported, it is likely that the data on elder abuse does not reflect the true extent of the problem.
- In the 12 villages where research was conducted, there is a widespread belief that elder abuse is an internal, private family affair, so many residents prefer not to get involved.
- While reliable statistics are not available, public perception suggests the most common types of elder abuse to be neglect, verbal abuse and financial machinations with older people's property.
- Survey respondents expressed the belief that numerous forms of elder abuse exist: 55% felt that older people's needs often go unmet (these include the need for medical care and medicine, adequate food, clothing and hygiene); 47% felt older people are often subjected to psychological pressure (such as insults, accusations, roughness, threats, being left alone or forgotten, involuntary institutionalization and deprivation of opportunities to socialize); 13% felt that they often fall victim to economic abuse; 6% that they often fall victim to physical violence; and 1% that they often fall victim to sexual abuse.
- At the same time, many respondents and interviewees have a limited definition of elder abuse, perceiving it only as physical violence, poor care and placement in an old-age home.
- The high prevalence of labor migration has left a growing number of older people without the care or support of their children.
- Elder abuse is a complex social phenomenon encompassing several forms of abuse at once, which occur with varying intensity and frequency; there is no consensus about its causes.
- In terms of public perception, the top cause of elder abuse identified by survey

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<sup>4</sup> Women's councils formally exist within each local government administration. As their name suggests, they are intended to address issues particularly pertinent to women.

respondents was poverty and unemployment (368 mentions out of 500, or 73.6%); however, some research participants emphasized that attributing abuse to material conditions alone would be a mistake. The second and third most often mentioned causes were alcoholism and drug use (322 mentions) and older people's helplessness (213). Others included an erosion of moral and ethical values (185), impunity (121) and self-affirmation at the expense of a weaker family member (83).

- Elder abuse occurs in both wealthy and poor families; it is not a problem only of the socially vulnerable, as is sometimes assumed.
- According to police and court records, a majority of those who committed violent acts against their parents were unemployed men aged 20 to 40.
- Cultural expectations place the burden of responsibility for caring for elderly parents on daughters-in-law, who traditionally move in with their husbands' families; perhaps as an outgrowth of this, 33% of survey respondents believed elder abuse was committed most often by daughters-in-law, while another 30% believed children were the main perpetrators. Other perceived abusers identified by respondents were spouses (17%), grandchildren (7%), sons-in-law (5%) and other relatives (8%).
- Research participants were insufficiently informed of legal and other means intended to protect people from elder abuse. A total of 40% had never heard of the law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence"; 31% do not know which government bodies to turn to for help; very few people know about restraining orders or the full range of state-run services available to victims by law; 45% do not know which nongovernment organizations can be of use.
- Greater public awareness of the rights of elder-abuse victims could help combat the view that domestic abuse is a private affair in which strangers should not interfere.



*«Your pension is barely enough for two days»*



Photo by Malik Alymkuloff

### 3. Existence and scale of elder abuse in Kyrgyzstan

In determining whether elder abuse exists in Kyrgyzstan, the authors first had to define both the acts and the population under consideration. Internationally, the age at which an individual is considered “older” varies from country to country and institution to institution. Kyrgyzstan’s June 23, 2011, law “On elderly citizens” sets older people’s age as 63 or more for men and 58 or more for women; however, because the collection of official statistics has not yet conformed to this definition, much of the data presented in this publication refers to people aged 50 and older, unless otherwise noted.

Meanwhile, to define elder abuse, the authors had to consult numerous scholarly and legal sources, both local and foreign. Kyrgyzstan’s legislation gives a more or less comprehensive definition of domestic abuse, separating it into three categories—physical, psychological and sexual; however, it does not identify older people as a distinct group of potential victims. This differs markedly from the law’s references to minors, regarded as a particularly vulnerable group: In the case of children, caretakers’ failure to provide adequate shelter, food, clothing and other necessities can be construed as physical abuse.

In sum, the definitions of elder abuse most commonly found in Western and Russian scholarly literature can be expressed thus: isolated or recurring incidents in which the individual(s) caring for an older person cause him or her to suffer physical or psychological pain or economic losses or fail to provide appropriate care, as expected of those responsible for the older person’s health and general well-being, even when said caretakers have sufficient resources to do so.

The starting point for assessing the prevalence of elder abuse in Kyrgyzstan was to collect official statistics; while these figures provide some understanding of the problem, many officials agreed that the data reflect only “the tip of the iceberg,” due to widespread underreporting of domestic conflicts. Some of the starkest numbers come from crisis centers, aksakal courts and official providers of psychosocial support. According to the National Statistics Committee (NSC), nationwide, the number of older people appealing for help to these institutions doubled between 2006 and 2010, rising from 752 to 1,516, and, respectively, from 41% to 55% of all complaints. These cases involve a very small fraction of the country’s over-50 population, which in 2011 numbered 802,825 (nearly 14.7% of the population as a whole),<sup>5</sup> but, again, it is unclear how many more cases go unreported due to the cultural and institutional reasons listed in the Introduction. It is also worth noting that crisis centers operate only in fairly large cities, so their statistics do not reflect the situation in rural areas, which are home to about two-thirds of the country’s population.

The cases of elder abuse registered by police, regular courts and medical facilities have been lower in number than the figures cited above, but they offer troubling insights nonetheless. As illustrated in the chart below, the NSC reports that police units fielded 131 complaints of domestic violence from people aged over 50 in 2009, 108 in 2010 and 148 in 2011; the complainants were predominantly

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<sup>5</sup> Statistical Compendium “Women and Men in the Kyrgyz Republic,” NSC (Bishkek, 2011), pp. 46-48.

women. Among court rulings in 2011, older people made up 32% of those deemed to have suffered from domestic abuse—258 of 794 cases, 24 involving criminal charges and 234 administrative offenses. A year earlier, courts issued 109 guilty verdicts against people accused of domestic violence against a parent. An analysis of police and court records shows that perpetrators of such violence are most often unemployed men aged 20 to 40. Meanwhile, in 2010, medical institutions, including everything from village clinics to forensic units, treated 222 victims of domestic violence aged 51 and older.

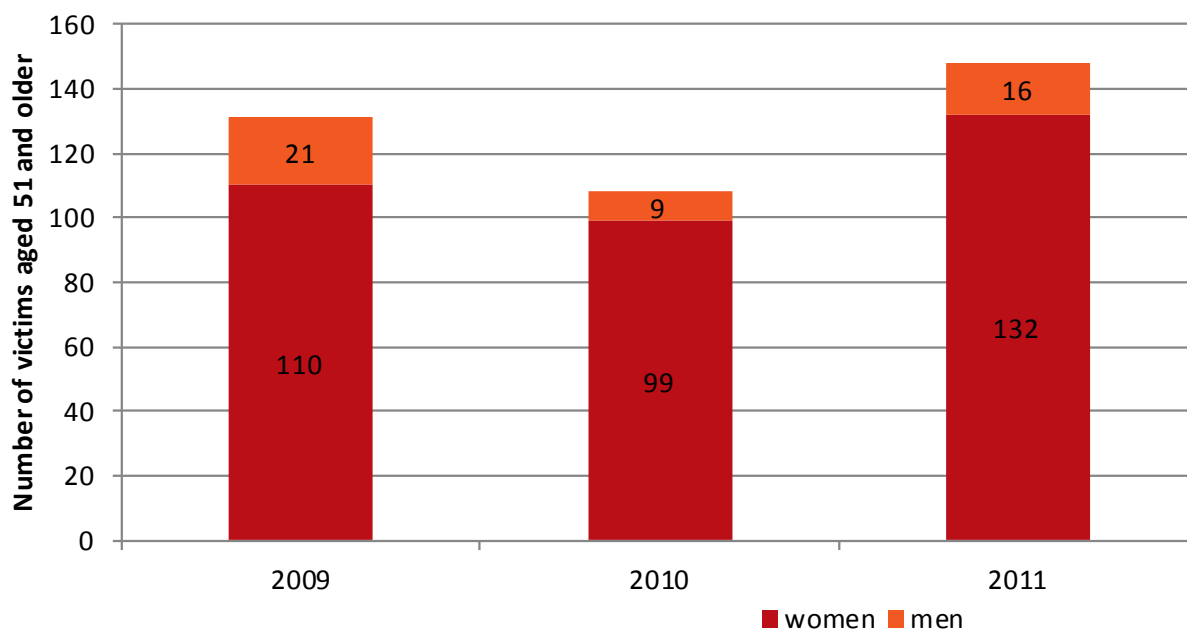


Chart 1. Number of people 51 and older who complained to police about cases of domestic violence

Nearly all those who gave in-depth interviews—including police, medics, court officials, aksakals and crisis counselors—noted that older people rarely agree to talk about problems of abuse or to press charges against perpetrators. The reasons cited most often were “mentality” and poor access to the justice system. Local government officials pointed out that many older people feel shame or guilt for failing to bring up good children or grandchildren and blame themselves for their relatives’ bad behavior. Police officers also said older people sometimes try to defend those who abuse them, adding that those who enter into a legal battle with their children run the risk of public condemnation. Medical personnel noted that older people turn to them for help only in cases when abuse results in severe health-related consequences. Some police chiefs felt that physical access to police precincts was problematic for older people living in remote areas, due both to distance and to poor health. However, another problem, which went unmentioned, may be Kyrgyzstanis’ low level of public trust in law-enforcement officials.

The culture of silence surrounding elder abuse manifested itself even in some of the interviews conducted for this publication. A number of respondents declined to identify known victims by name and some explicitly espoused a policy of non-interference, saying, “I can’t give the family names of older people suffering from abuse because the village is small; we are all either relatives or neighbors.



If I give their names, that won't bring them anything good, and their lives are hard enough as it is." In general, people frequently expressed the opinion that elder abuse is an intra-family affair and, for this reason, many prefer not to get involved. It is also worth noting that most interviewees perceived elder abuse as physical or psychological mistreatment, but did not acknowledge its other forms, like low-quality care, neglect or refusal to purchase medicines.

The research conducted for this publication yielded a number of interesting results suggesting that elder abuse exists but is not widely considered to be a truly pressing or common problem. As illustrated below, an overwhelming majority of the survey respondents, 71%, said they believed the country's older people do suffer from abuse, while only 14% felt they do not. It is noteworthy that the 40-to-49 age group gave less credence to the existence of elder abuse than other age groups: Only 62% believed it occurs in Kyrgyzstan, while 20% said it does not. Slightly more than a third of respondents, 35%, said they knew of concrete cases of elder abuse, while an equal number said they did not. Again, the 40-to-49 age bracket was a relative outlier, with only 30% aware of concrete cases (compared with 36% to 38% in other age groups) and 42% unaware of any cases at all (compared with 28% to 37%). It was interesting to note that a large proportion of respondents—25% to 35%—had difficulty answering the question about concrete cases of abuse, possibly confirming other indications that the problem is taboo and people are hesitant to discuss it.

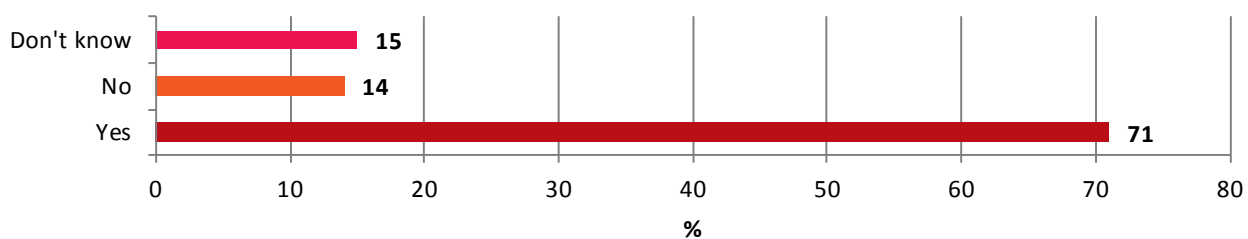


Chart 2. Survey responses to the question, "Do you believe elder abuse exists in Kyrgyzstan?"

There was some disagreement about trends in the prevalence of elder abuse. Nearly half the survey respondents, 47%, believe the problem has been on the rise in the past 10 years, while 29% feel levels have remained unchanged and 24% say they have dropped. Meanwhile, the majority of local officials who gave in-depth interviews expressed the belief that elder abuse has become more common over the past 10 years; nearly all of them told us of concrete cases within their jurisdiction. At the same time, a number of interviewees insisted that the problem was not widespread, and also emphasized that abuse varies in its severity and significance. Two comments to this effect included the following: "Yes, in my view, elder abuse exists. But this is a very small number of people, as our traditions include certain principles: that the youngest son must take care of elderly parents, respect for older people, honor, etc."; "Yes, there have been cases—people having their pensions taken away and being mistreated—but there aren't a lot of older people like that. For the most part, older people experience psychological abuse."

## 4. Types of abuse

Older people in the 12 villages researched for this publication have experienced virtually every known form of domestic violence and abuse. Survey respondents identified a range of mistreatment that can be classified roughly into six categories, which are elaborated using case-study material later in this section: physical violence, psychological abuse, financial and/or economic abuse, poor care, abandonment and sexual violence. These groupings were culled from responses to the multiple-choice statement, "Older people in my village often experience the following treatment in their families." In sum, 55% of respondents said older people's needs often go ignored by their families, 47% felt older people are often subjected to psychological abuse, 13% said older people often fall victim to economic machinations, 6% pointed to frequent physical violence and 1% noted instances of sexual violence. The share of respondents indicating specific types of abuse was the following:

- Sexual abuse – 1%
- Kicked out of the home – 3%
- Placed in old-age homes – 4%
- Refused medical care, not taken to a doctor – 6%
- Beatings, other forms of bullying and deeply demeaning treatment – 6%
- Deprived of opportunities to socialize with neighbors, friends, relatives – 8%
- Not provided with necessary medicines – 10%
- Pension, savings or property (home, cattle, furniture, land, etc.) taken from them without their consent – 10%
- Insults, harsh language and cursing – 11%
- Left alone, forgotten – 12%
- Pelted with accusations (i.e. "no one needs old people," "you're a burden") – 12%
- Poor care (dirty bedding, clothes and shoes; left unwashed) – 13%
- Poorly fed – 13%
- Not provided with necessary things (household items, clothing, shoes, etc.) – 13%

Here, it is worth noting that the placement of older people in old-age homes was perceived as a form of abuse even by the institutions' personnel. This view stems both from the culturally accepted maxim that grown children should take care of their aged parents and from the squalor that pervades old-age facilities. Throughout the former Soviet Union, there are almost no private institutions providing decent care to older people for a fee; the overwhelming majority of old-age homes are state-run, suffering from severe underfunding and, frequently, a lack of progressive thinking about old-age care. The two directors of old-age homes interviewed for this publication repeatedly pointed out that an increasing number of their wards have living children—circumstances under which the interviewees equated institutionalization with abuse. Even confronting older relatives with the prospect of life in an old-age home was described by one director as mistreatment: "Mostly, old folks experience psychological abuse, when someone threatens to hand them over to an old-age home or goes ahead and does it. This fills them with feelings of fear and guilt. After all, when older people hear accusations or harsh words directed at them, they blame themselves

for raising such children.” Another point raised by the director of an old-age home was that the ethnic make-up of the facility’s wards has changed over the past decade or so: “Before, Muslims rarely sent their parents to old-age homes,” said the interviewee, implying the practice had been more common among Kyrgyzstan’s Slavic population, which has declined precipitously since independence. “Now, in our home, 40% are Muslims, and many of them aren’t alone i.e. they have living relatives. This points to a degradation of our society. A disintegration of family values is underway. People don’t think about the fact that tomorrow they’ll be old themselves.”

#### **4.1 Physical abuse**

Physical violence can occur as an isolated incident or repeatedly and is almost always accompanied by psychological abuse. In one case, a 72-year-old woman lives with her heavily drinking husband who regularly metes out abuse—insulting, demeaning and beating her and forcing her to buy him more alcohol. Out of fear, she acquiesces and buys vodka. She does not seek medical care for her bruises and other injuries, saying they will heal with time. She is ashamed of the situation and does not talk about it with her relatives. Previously, she sought help from the police, but they regarded the couple’s conflicts as a family affair that the two should sort out on their own. While an officer suggested the woman file a complaint with the courts, the police provided her with no information on her rights or potential avenues of legal action. Today, she has resigned herself to suffering for the remainder of her life.

#### **4.2 Psychological abuse**

Psychological abuse involves emotional or psychological pain, usually inflicted through verbal aggression. As noted above, it often goes hand-in-hand with physical violence, though psychological abuse seems to be far more widespread. In one case, an elderly father died soon after a severe beating from his son; after this, the younger man and his wife, both heavy drinkers, intensified their verbal attacks against the widow (the younger man’s mother), berating her for continuing to live: “What did you do? Drink a magic potion? You’ll live to a hundred and won’t give us a chance to enjoy life!” they used to say. Nearby neighbors could hear the insults and pitied the older woman, but did not get involved, considering the matter a family affair. A few months later, the son died in a car accident; after this, the daughter-in-law’s abuse became even more intense. Every day, neighbors would hear her shouting, drunk and angry, near the gate of the house: “Hey, you old hag! Have you made me something to eat? Why isn’t there any food in the house? What am I supposed to eat? Where are you hiding your pension? Couldn’t you even bake some flatbreads?”

In another case, which combines psychological abuse with an element of economic abuse (described in greater detail below), a 64-year-old woman has been receiving threats from her ex-son-in-law, a policeman who lives in the same village. He and the woman’s daughter had been married in an Islamic wedding ceremony not registered with civilian authorities, an increasingly popular trend in Kyrgyzstan. Then they split up, but the policeman is not providing any material support to his ailing ex-wife, who moved back in with her mother, bringing along

two small children from the marriage. The younger woman has sued for alimony and other compensation, in retaliation for which the ex-husband has been threatening her and her mother.

### 4.3 Financial and/or economic abuse

This type of abuse usually involves the illicit use or confiscation of older people's money and/or property, as well as the use of intimidation or force to make older people change their wills or other official documents and lose control over their assets. This form of abuse seems quite common. While 13% of survey respondents said it happened often, one director of an old-age home speculated that 60% to 70% of older people fall victim to such abuse; perhaps, this interviewee was swayed by the rampancy of the problem among the institutionalized. Documents and interviewees consulted for this publication provided a number of illustrative stories. In one case, a septuagenarian's relatives sold all his property, leaving him to live in a single room on his own. The man was always alone; every Saturday he would go to the public baths to wash himself and his clothes. Ultimately, he petitioned his local village administration to place him in an old-age home. In another case, an older woman (born in 1934) owned a large, five-room house in the capital, Bishkek.<sup>6</sup> Her sons traveled to Russia as labor migrants and one of them incurred a large debt there. He visited his mother and convinced her to sell the house, promising to buy her a studio apartment instead. She agreed, but her son did not buy the apartment and surreptitiously left for Russia again. His mother wound up homeless; the stress and pain caused severe damage to her mental faculties. Ten days later, neighbors found her, filthy and hungry, roaming near the house. She was taken in by a distant relative.

### 4.4 Poor care

This form of abuse can be described as inaction or insufficient action in meeting the vital needs of older people. This can include refusal to provide a clean and comfortable living space, adequate food, medicines, clean clothing, regular hygiene and access to social interactions with friends or other relatives. One doctor said that, during medical exams, it was always clear how well an older person was cared for:

*Often I see that their underthings are dirty, their bedclothes are ancient, their hair and body haven't been washed for a long time, their nails are uncut. When I ask why their children don't look after them, I usually hear that there is no place to bathe, or the children don't have time, or the house is too cold. Many old men are embarrassed: They don't want their daughters-in-law or daughters washing them, while the sons may be too busy. The same goes for old women. In general, in villages, especially in the winter, older people rarely bathe—some are afraid to get sick, others have no place to do it, and some have children who drink heavily and don't bother washing themselves.*

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<sup>6</sup> Case study source: Monitoring of a pilot model of inter-agency cooperation among departments/ organizations of the Bishkek mayor's office in implementing the national law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence," 2011.

Interviewees described numerous examples of this type of abuse. In one case, an older man (born in 1938), has been living for six years in the care of his daughter-in-law. The man's wife and son both died. He sold his cattle to pay for his grandson's wedding. The daughter-in-law treats him badly: She insults him, does not give him sufficient food, does not launder his things and has forced him to live in a shed. Fearing condemnation and gossip by neighbors, the man does not complain about his plight. In another case, a local official in Bishkek related the story of a woman who had been unkind to her young daughter-in-law, publicly accusing her of getting pregnant from someone other than her husband.<sup>7</sup> Then, the older woman had a stroke, and the younger woman took very bad care of her. "Nothing surprising there," said the official. "Every mother-in-law should remember that it's her daughter-in-law who will have to care for her, so don't be hurtful to daughters-in-law."

## 4.5 Abandonment

Abandonment refers to situations in which elderly parents have no contact with their children. While ties are sometimes severed due to domestic conflicts, another common reason for this form of abuse is labor migration, which is extremely widespread among Kyrgyzstanis, especially in rural areas. Older people left on their own often have no information about their children's whereabouts and insufficient income to provide themselves with adequate food, healthcare and shelter. In some cases, labor migrants leave behind small children, requiring the grandparents to spend their meager funds and energy on childcare. This has given rise to a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "skipped-generation households." In the words of one village medic, "Old folks are forced to care for grandchildren and households; often they come to me exhausted and dirty, with no time to be sick or to take care of themselves. I feel this is also a form of abuse against older people."

Even in cases when older people are not burdened with childcare, their separation from children can have dire consequences. In one case, an 87-year-old widow lives alone after her only son went abroad following the death of his father. She last heard from him three years ago, when he wrote that he was doing well and has no desire to return. The woman is deeply embarrassed that her son has abandoned her and does not share much information with those around her. When neighbors offer help with chores (fetching water, harvesting her garden patch, chopping wood), she gets very upset and irritable, as she does not want her problem to be public knowledge. At the same time, she is in poor health, has too small a pension to cover all her needs, has difficulty maintaining her home and fears there will be no one to bury her when she dies.

## 4.6 Sexual abuse

Many of the key informants interviewed for this publication were convinced that sexual abuse of older people does not occur either in their villages or in the country as a whole. Sadly, anecdotal evidence suggests this is not the case. One director

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<sup>7</sup> Case study source: Monitoring of a pilot model of inter-agency cooperation among departments/organizations of the Bishkek mayor's office in implementing the national law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence," 2011.

of an old-age home told us that, last year, a young, physically disabled man in the home's care,<sup>8</sup> while drunk, raped an elderly woman also institutionalized there. In another case, also last year, a woman in her late 60s was raped by a neighbor 34 years her junior. Information on the latter case was sent to a crisis center by the provincial administration. The local community had split into two groups: one supporting the woman and her intention to turn to police for help; another, made up of the suspect's friends and relatives, condemning the woman and claiming she had made it all up. The crisis center became deeply involved in the woman's case. First, it placed her in a shelter where she received counseling; later, it coordinated with local government and healthcare officials to get the woman treatment and rehabilitation at a hospital. All the expenses required for these services were covered by the crisis center. Finally, after a district court ruled that there was insufficient evidence to convict the perpetrator, the center helped the woman file an appeal to the Prosecutor General's Office and the man was eventually sentenced to five years in a high-security prison. This case illustrates not only the presence of sexual abuse against older people, but also the difficulties they face in defending their rights and demanding justice. Older people often require various forms of support in these cases—psychological, social, medical, legal and financial. This, in turn, is impossible without close coordination by a slew of government bodies and service providers.

Photo by Mailik Алымкулов



*«What can you do? The only thing left to do is to die»*

<sup>8</sup> A common problem across the former Soviet Union is that, upon coming of age, physically disabled youngsters are transferred from children's institutions to old-age homes, as there are no intermediate facilities where they can receive care.

## 5. Causes of abuse

There is currently no scholarly or expert consensus about the causes of elder abuse. Most likely, as with domestic violence in general, the phenomenon stems from a complex mix of psychological, social, moral and economic factors. Certainly, tensions within families have risen due to the entrenched poverty and lack of work that has plagued Kyrgyzstan since the collapse of the Soviet Union; this economic hardship—compounded by the disappearance of the Soviet-era social safety net—has ushered in new levels of stress and anxiety, which can sometimes translate into aggression or neglect. A related factor is alcohol use, which has accompanied many instances of elder abuse. (According to official statistics, 80% of those convicted of domestic abuse committed the crime when drunk.<sup>9</sup>) Another factor contributing to the prevalence of elder abuse is the absence of high-quality, affordable social services to help families care for older relatives.

In some cases, perpetrators may be continuing a cycle of abuse in which they had been victims or witnesses earlier in their lives. One interviewee relayed the story of an 83-year-old man who explained why he roamed the village begging for money, which he then spent on drink. The man said that, in their youth, he and his wife had had trouble conceiving; “finally, God gave us our only son.” The man was elated and hosted an extravagant celebration. Seven years later, “being a fool,” the man gave in to his friends’ jabs that a real Kyrgyz man must have more than one child. He took a second wife, who gave birth to two daughters, “but that wasn’t enough for me.” Occasionally, the man would beat both women, angry at the younger one for failing to produce a second male heir, and at the older one because “if she had given birth to more children none of this would have happened. My only son saw all this as he grew up; he must have been 10 or 11. During family fights, he would defend his mother, and he hated me.” The man went on at length about his failure as a father and husband. He said his fellow villagers pass judgment on his son for not taking care of him, “but they’re wrong. I’m to blame for everything myself. If I had lived honorably, my son wouldn’t have behaved this way towards me.”

In terms of public perception, the causes of elder abuse encompass a range of factors similar to those listed above. As illustrated in Chart 3, below, the majority of respondents surveyed for this publication—368 out of 500, or over 73%—identified “poverty, a low standard of living and unemployment” as a cause of elder abuse. A similarly high number, 322, or more than 64%, pointed to alcoholism and drug abuse as underlying factors. Close to half the respondents—213, or 42.6%—cited “older folks’ helplessness” as a cause, while 185, or 37%, blamed “the destruction of moral and ethical values in relation to older people.” About 24%, or 121 respondents, said that “impunity for domestic violence” contributed to elder abuse, while 83, or 16.6%, identified one cause as “dissatisfaction and the desire for self-affirmation at the expense of an elderly family member.” Interviewees also pointed out that, in some cases, older people either committed abuses themselves or provoked abuse with unkind or hostile behavior, which some of them later perpetuated in old-age homes.

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<sup>9</sup> Statistical Compendium “Women and Men in the Kyrgyz Republic,” NSC (Bishkek, 2011), p. 167.

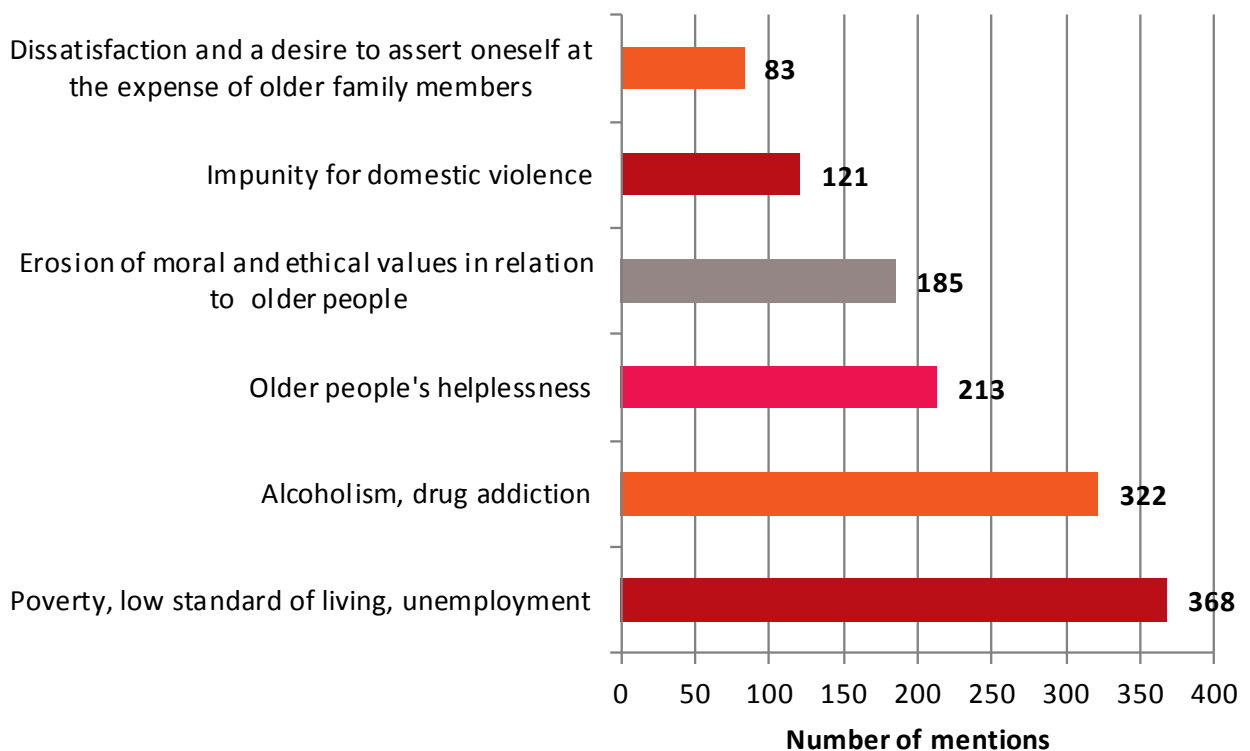


Chart 3. Causes of elder abuse according to survey respondents<sup>10</sup>

Survey respondents also shared their opinions on the perpetrators of elder abuse. A third of them (33%) believed that daughters-in-law were most culpable, while nearly as many (30%) thought older people’s children were to blame. This may stem from the tradition of women moving in with their husbands’ families and, also, from the cultural expectation that grown children must care for their elderly parents. At the same time, an analysis of the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews reflects a widespread social trend of placing responsibility for the quality of elder care on daughters-in-law, i.e. women, while not holding sons, i.e. men, responsible. Returning to the survey results, other perceived perpetrators of elder abuse included spouses (17%), grandchildren (7%), sons-in-law (5%) and other relatives (8%).

<sup>10</sup> Total exceeds 500, as respondents could give multiple answers.



## 6. Public awareness of existing services

Research conducted for this publication indicates that public awareness of services available to victims or potential victims of elder abuse could be much better than it is now. Nearly one-third of survey respondents, or 31%, did not know which government bodies people could turn to for help. Most of those who did know identified the justice and law-enforcement system (police, 43%; courts, 21%; prosecutors, 17%) and various local government representatives, including women's councils (cumulatively, 42%). About 7% mentioned the national pension and insurance fund. Only 3% of respondents identified the human rights ombudsman as a potential defender and none mentioned the healthcare, social protection or education systems—all of which are obligated by law to help in cases of domestic abuse. Respondents knew virtually nothing about their right to obtain a restraining order; nationwide, the number of such orders has grown dramatically in the past few years, rising from 116 in 2007 to 1,798 in 2011,<sup>11</sup> but it remains tiny relative to the country's population, officially 5.4 million. Of those surveyed, 40% said they had never heard of the law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence," while 22% said they know it exists, but not much more, and 38% said they were familiar with the law. Among people over 60, about half had little information about the law.

Key informants interviewed for the publication expressed the belief that people were not sufficiently aware of avenues for recourse in cases of elder abuse. "Older people have a poor understanding of their rights and the law," the director of an old-age home told us. "If they knew where to turn, they could protect themselves. If this information were given on the radio, on television and in newspapers, that would be very good." Other interviewees pointed out that better awareness-raising campaigns could help combat the prevailing view that domestic abuse is a private family affair. Meanwhile, according to one social worker, people have very little information about old-age homes, in part because "older people consider moving to a home the second-to-last step before death, although in some cases it's better than life in their families."

At the same time, more than half of the survey respondents (55%) were quite well aware of non-state institutions that could help in cases of elder abuse. The ones mentioned most often were crisis centers (51%) and aksakal courts (48%). Other organizations identified as sources of assistance included older people's support groups (4%) and nongovernmental organizations (3%). A total of 5% of respondents also mentioned neighbors, councils of elders, the Red Cross and even a popular political party.

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<sup>11</sup> Interior Ministry Center for Information and Analysis.

## 7. Recommendations

The following measures have been culled from recommendations by the research participants:

- To study the problem of elder abuse in depth, with the aim of developing mechanisms to prevent and mitigate it, and also to raise public awareness of the problem and substantiate the need to provide funding for its resolution.
- To train healthcare specialists, social workers, police officers and local government officials to identify elder abuse and to better understand their obligations in providing social and legal assistance to victims.
- To include materials on cruelty to older people in the training of medics and other specialists.
- To conduct trainings and provide support for caregivers of older people with long-term ailments (e.g. stress management, caregiving basics and so on).
- In developing programs for the prevention of elder abuse, to take into account that the mistreatment of older people leads to a string of negative consequences, including the potential for intergenerational replication of abusive behavior.
- To conduct information campaigns calling for an end to domestic abuse and violence beginning with kindergarten, school and college.
- To conduct public information/media campaigns promoting the right of people of all ages (with a focus on older people) to live a life free from violence or abuse.
- To develop booklets with information about legislative protections against domestic abuse and about organizations that can help; these could be distributed through post offices, which give out pensions and financial aid to older people.
- To create information stands about domestic abuse through local government bodies (via their public prevention centers or the aksakal courts).
- To begin considering cases of elder abuse at village councils.<sup>12</sup>
- To ensure that community older people's groups (OPGs) can supply victims with more information about their rights and about support services providing legal and psychological assistance.
- To amend the law "On social and legal protection from domestic violence," identifying older people as a distinct group of people particularly vulnerable to abuse and outlining special measures of protection and assistance for them.
- To more widely use mechanisms of public censure (such as aksakal courts) in response to elder abuse and other forms of domestic abuse.
- To include measures aimed at preventing domestic abuse into the work plans of local government bodies and their public prevention centers.
- To foster the development of services that provide assistance to older people in cases of domestic abuse.

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<sup>12</sup> Village councils are regular public meetings open to all villagers; they are typically held twice a year, but can be called in emergency situations as well.

## What to do in case of abuse?

Abuse can happen to people of any age and help is available. No one deserves to be mistreated or exploited, at any age.

### If you are being abused, you should know:

- You do not deserve to be abused.
- You have a right to live without fear.
- You are not to blame for the violence or the threats.
- You have the right to control your own life and make your own decisions.
- You are not alone. Many people are abused and many people have found ways to deal with these situations.

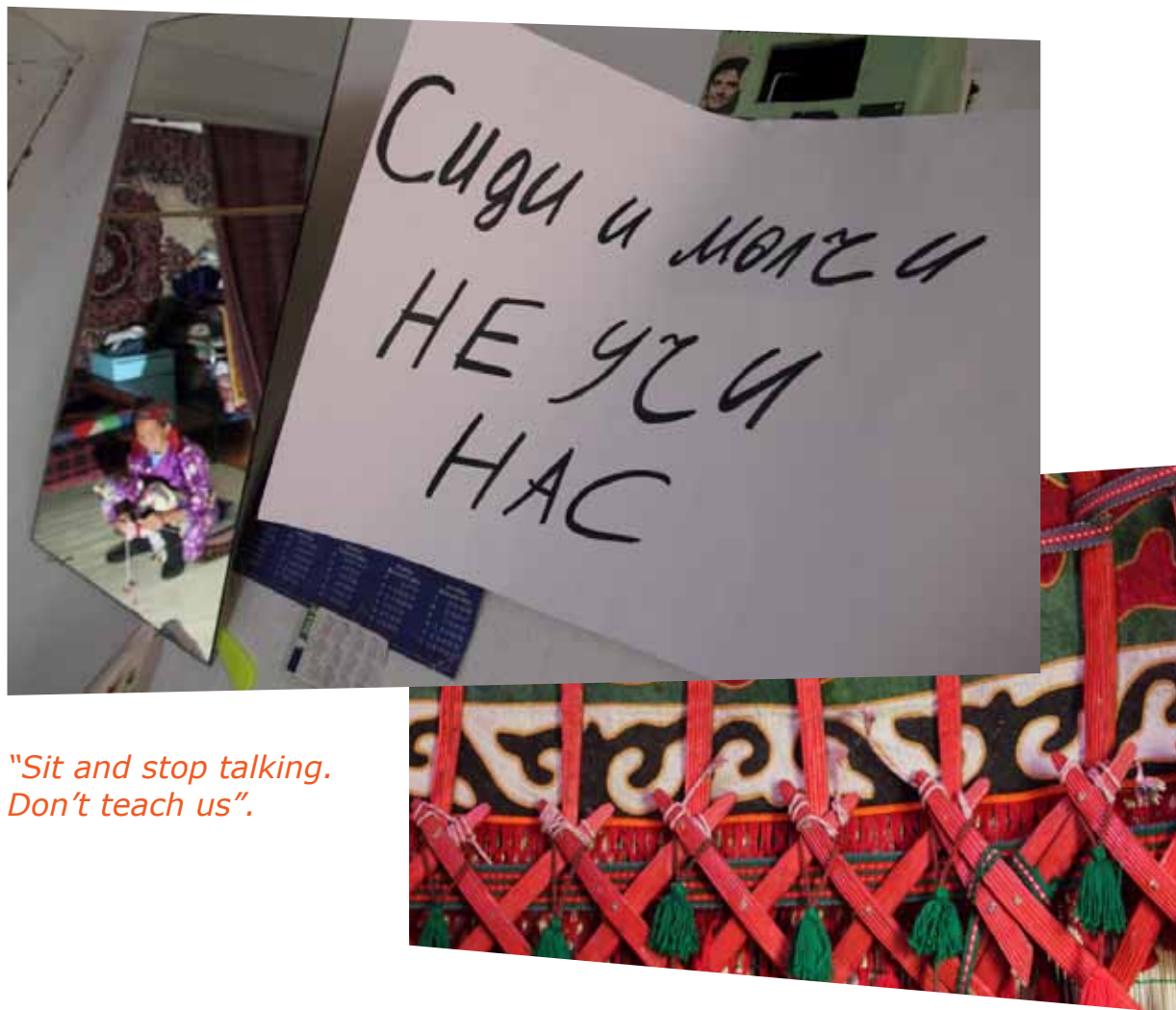
### If you are being abused, help is available:

- Tell someone you trust what is happening to you. This can be a friend, a neighbor, a local doctor, a neighborhood inspector, a social worker.
- Make a safety plan in case you have to leave quickly.
- Set aside an extra set of keys, money, passport, glasses, medication, and important papers. Keep this outside of your home or in a safe place.
- Find a safe place to go in the event of an emergency.
- Call crisis centers where you can get psychological and legal assistance.

### If you are being abused, you may contact the following crisis centers, all part of Kyrgyzstan's Association of Crisis Centers (country code +996):

- **Ak-Jurok**, Osh, (3222) 4 59 76 or 4 60 22
- **Aruulan**, Osh, (3222) 5 56 08
- **Meerban**, Osh, (3222) 4 96 74
- **Akylkarachach**, Osh Province, Alai District, village of Gulcho, (3234) 5 12 84
- **Kaniet**, Jalal-Abad, (3722) 5 50 84
- **Ayalzat**, Karakol, (3922) 5 10 91
- **Altynai**, Cholpon-Ata, (3943) 6 27 03, 6 26 69
- **Tendesh**, Naryn, (3522) 5 02 70
- **Maana**, Talas, (3422) 5 58 85
- **Shans**, Bishkek, (312) 43 53 01

Photo by Malik Aymkuloff



*"Sit and stop talking.  
Don't teach us".*

**HelpAge International** helps older people claim their rights, challenge discrimination and overcome poverty so they can lead dignified secure, active and healthy lives.

The newsletter is a part of "Right to life without violence in old age" European Union funded project.

The newsletter is published in Kyrgyz, Russian and English languages and distributed to all stakeholders for free of charge.