



CALL FOR INPUTS ON VIOLENCE AGAINST OLDER PERSONS
FOR THE REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT EXPERT
ON THE ENJOYMENT OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS BY OLDER PERSONS

Report submitted by: Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23)

NGO in Special Consultative Status

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) is an International Lay Association of Pontifical Right with legal status accredited with Special Consultative Status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 2006. The Association is present in 40 countries on five continents. Its members, of different ages and states of life, share life directly with the poor and disadvantaged and are committed to removing the root causes of poverty and exclusion and to being voice of the voiceless through non-violent actions and means.

The Association runs hundreds of family homes all over the world. It runs also emergency shelters, open families, houses of fraternity, cooperatives and day-centres, therapeutic communities for drug users, centres for alcoholics. The Association carries out awareness raising campaigns, micro-credit schemes, services for persons with disabilities, Roma and Sinti, homeless, migrants, older persons, people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, mothers in difficulty and women enslaved into prostitution. Furthermore, the Association has a nonviolent presence in both fronts in war zones to guarantee the respect of human rights and assist populations displaced by the war, and carries out activities aimed at combating the trafficking of persons and assisting its victims.

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) welcomes the decision of the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons to gather inputs to inform her thematic report on “Violence, abuse and neglect against older persons”, and would like to respond with the following written contribution.

In contemporary societies, especially western ones, older people are more and more sociologically relegated to the margins, in a dynamic that overshadows them. The prevailing logic of efficiency, productivity, of the primacy of economy over human beings, increasingly interprets belonging to older age as onerous and considers older people a social burden.

From our point of view, the sequence "violence, abuse and neglect of older persons" should be reversed; we should place in the first position the expression "neglect", which consequently produces "violence and abuse", not only openly physical but also subtle and hidden violence toward older adults. This pattern takes place in a logic that takes for granted the social marginality of older persons. Just consider one, exemplifying, fact: houses are getting smaller and smaller. Contemporary architecture justifies this trend with the need for efficiency and energy conservation, also linking it to lower income that, increasingly, families have at their disposal. Small spaces contribute not only to decreased birthrate but also to the lack of living places for older people to live in a family.

These increasingly prevalent trends and worldviews should prompt one consideration: the abandonment of older people, which is already a type of violence in itself, is progressively becoming part of current customs and traditions, which, as it is well known, have always been the basis for the subsequent elaboration of the Law. The diminishing relevance of the protection of Social Rights, increasingly bypassed by so-called Civil Rights, produces an unbearable "distraction" toward the person, French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier would say, especially the older adult.

Often, in certain societies, the dimension of older age is abandoned and neglected by politics, which is distracted and superficial, and by society itself: this practice, almost taken for granted, impoverishes the family in its essence. It is already violence; sociological violence becoming institutional violence. The older person is reduced to an exhausted factor of production because the time of life in which they were productive is behind them.

Especially in the western world the most serious and vicious acts of violence and abuse toward older persons usually occur in Nursing Homes and Social Welfare Residences, places where women and men are increasingly spending the last years of their lives. Crime news increasingly deals with such events. At the origin, there is always family abandonment, or lack of adequate economic means of support, especially with respect to the person's worsened health situation. In these institutes, older persons are treated essentially as hospitalised patients, and the distance of family members who love them almost never allows for the real care they need.

The best practice experiences are clearly those of families who keep older relatives inside their houses and families, as the first obvious place to live. Other families go so far as welcoming not related older persons, becoming welcoming families or family homes. This is the case of the family homes of APG23 where many older people even affected by serious disabilities find a substitute family. These family contexts proposed by Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23), following the inspiration of its founder, Don Oreste Benzi, are antidotes to superficial and efficiency-oriented modernity, not only regarding old age but also in other situations where marginalisation is rampant.

It must also be considered that sometimes older persons are in a situation of not having a family at all. Some examples are single persons in their late years or those who have become single due to the death of a spouse. Some associations have thus started forms of cohousing, where single older people can live together. Within these facilities, responsible personnel take care of the person's elementary care, and health needs, deal with bureaucratic matters, and organise forms of entertainment and leisure time. In this way, older persons are not "prisoners" indoors of their general condition but also experience time outdoors. And this certainly improves their quality of life.

In Italy in some places, medical clinics are established, where specialised personnel offer their time for the benefit of older people. As it is easy to guess, healthcare plays a crucial role in their lives, and they often cannot move easily or do not have the appropriate competencies in order to take care alone of their own health. In these settings, older persons feel listened to and welcomed in their needs, and establish a bond with their doctors that reflects the attention they need.

An essential role in accompanying older persons is played by caregivers, whether they are family members or people who professionally lend their services. Their role is essential to guarantee a good quality of life for those they care for, on the level of affection, competence, and conscious care. This is not an easy task: it is an endeavour that requires effort, and collaboration among several people (relatives and caregivers for example), among several professionals, and among several competencies. For this reason, sometimes "mutual aid groups" are created. Such an experience was already born a few years ago in the United States and is becoming more and more widespread. These mutual aid groups support those who are engaged in helping older people at both levels: physical and psychological, by offering also psycho-attitudinal aid to caretakers so that they don't feel alone in their tasks.

Institutions are responsible for establishing an indispensable path in contemporary society, a path that recognizes, de facto and legally, the role of older people, to be cared for in their families, which in turn

should be supported in the care they offer at home. In fact, the goal should be for care to migrate from institutes/nursing homes/ residential care homes to home care in families. This evolutionary process must not take place solely on the organisational level or, even worse, for economic reasons, but because of recognition of the primacy of a care that gives older people dignity as human beings. Care for older persons is an essential part of the Integral Ecology proposed by His Holiness Pope Francis in the Encyclicals "Laudato Sì" and "Fratelli tutti."

Pope Francis in the Encyclical Letter "Fratelli Tutti" on Fraternity and Social Friendship reminds us:

“ A decline in the birthrate, which leads to the aging of the population, together with the relegation of the elderly to a sad and lonely existence, is a subtle way of stating that it is all about us, that our individual concerns are the only thing that matters. In this way, “what is thrown away are not only food and dispensable objects, but often human beings themselves”. We have seen what happened with the elderly in certain places in our world as a result of the coronavirus. They did not have to die that way. Yet something similar had long been occurring during heat waves and in other situations: older people found themselves cruelly abandoned. We fail to realize that, by isolating the elderly and leaving them in the care of others without the closeness and concern of family members, we disfigure and impoverish the family itself. We also end up depriving young people of a necessary connection to their roots and a wisdom that the young cannot achieve on their own”.¹

We all aspire to live as long as possible: this means that we all aspire to become older. Then, let us take care of ourselves projected into the future by caring for the older persons of today, our older brothers and sisters.

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¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (19)