



***Family Digest 7***  
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**The Abuse of Older People**

Older people, due to their age, frailty, declining facilities and increasing dependence, are a particularly vulnerable and often neglected social group.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, they are sometimes victims of abuse by family members and/or care-givers. According to the Aged Persons Amendment Act 100 of 1998, “‘abuse’ means the maltreatment of an aged person or any other infliction of physical, mental or financial power on an aged person which adversely affects the person”.<sup>2</sup> Some incidents have made headlines: in 2013 a brutal attack on a 92 year old woman from the North West occurred;<sup>3</sup> this year, a nurse in East London was arrested after she had been accused of assaulting an 84 year old woman and was filmed beating her<sup>4</sup>.

Numerous cases such as these have been reported. In 2013, the UN predicted that by 2050 “the global population above 60 will exceed the number of younger people”. It was estimated that by “2031 the population aged 65 years and over will nearly double”<sup>5</sup>.

According to John Jeffrey, Deputy Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, speaking at a workshop on the rights of the elderly, research has shown that the abuse of older men and women through neglect, violence and financial exploitation is a serious issue globally. He stated that “World Health Organization data suggests that 4-6% of older persons suffer from some form of abuse, a large percentage of which goes unreported.”<sup>6</sup> He argued that there has been a breakdown of traditional values that has caused older people to become vulnerable. Older women, in particular, often carry the burden of care for young and orphaned children, and therefore their well-being has a direct impact on the lives of children in South Africa. Deputy Minister Jeffrey emphasized that in the period 2012/2013 alone there were 2 497 reported cases of abuse of older persons nationally.<sup>7</sup> Incidents of abuse by members of the family and/or primary care givers are under-reported and frequently hidden. Furthermore, in a 2013 study on elder abuse it was found that local government’s capacity in terms of palliative care, social services and dedicated law enforcement is not adequate to deal with the challenges of elder abuse. Cases are often withdrawn and the perpetrators are seldom prosecuted successfully.

It is easy to overlook the contribution that elderly people have made during the course of their lives and to forget that, due to their life experience and accumulated wisdom, they are a cohort that still has much to contribute to South Africa’s growth. As a consequence of South Africa’s high rate of HIV/AIDS affecting much of the working population, older persons have stepped into the breach to take care of children and, in effect, of South Africa’s future. Protecting them, and ensuring that they

are free from abuse, is central in protecting their right to dignity and honouring the contribution they have made to all our lives.

Below please find links to further information regarding the abuse of older persons.

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<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/elder-abuse-and-neglect.htm>  
<http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/index.php?ipkArticleID=203>  
<http://www.sabc.co.za/news/a/7ca14400489ffbdab51cbfa96652ae2c/South-Africa%E2%80%99s-elderly-abused-daily-20150406> <http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2015/06/05/Abuse-against-elderly-on-the-rise-government-does-nothing>  
<https://www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/preventing-elder-abuse>  
<http://www.tafta.org.za/ageing.html>  
<http://www.enca.com/south-africa/probe-launched-alleged-abuse-western-cape-old-age-homeE>  
<http://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/communities-urged-report-people-who-abuse-elderly>  
<http://www.globalaging.org/elderrights/world/2012/Brutal%20Abuse%20of%20Elderly.html>

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<sup>1</sup> The CPLO has published two Briefing Papers focusing on the older person. They are BP 302 ‘Challenges Facing Older Persons’ October 2012 and BP 364 ‘The Older Person and the Family’ November 2014. These are available on our website at [www.cplo.org.za](http://www.cplo.org.za)

<sup>2</sup> (2013) Abuse of elderly set to rise in SA. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/abuse-of-elderly-set-to-rise-in-sa-1.1532972>

<sup>3</sup> (2013). Media Statement: SAHRC condemns older person’s abuse in South Africa. <http://www.sahrc.org.za/home/index.php?ipkArticleID=167>

<sup>4</sup> Koyana, Xolani. (2015). Nurse caught abusing elderly woman back in court. <http://ewn.co.za/2015/06/05/Nurse-accused-of-abusing-elderly-woman-back-in-court>

<sup>5</sup> (2013) Abuse of elderly set to rise in SA. Op Cit.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey, John. (2014). Address by the Minister of Justice and Constitutional Development at a workshop on the Rights of the Elderly. <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-john-jeffery-address-by-the-deputy-minister-of-justice-and-constitutional-development-at-a-workshop-on-the-rights-of-the-elderly-vezubuhle-community-hall-kwa-mhlanga-mpumalanga-02122014-2014-12-04>

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey, John. (2014). Op Cit.