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## Domestic violence against seniors perceived by the “prevention”

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## **Domestic violence against seniors perceived by the “prevention/ intervention staff”**

### **Introduction**

When publicizing these tragedies and, frequently, looking for guilty of the situation, the media point to the so-called “prevention/ intervention staff” who did not respond, did not take appropriate action, did not react and plan appropriate help and support that would have prevented the tragedy. Therefore, it has been decided that the paper will present how family violence against seniors is perceived by the said “prevention/ intervention staff.” Because of lack of appropriate (cross-sectional) studies of domestic violence against the elderly in Poland or reports dedicated to this problem, this paper will be based on the results of the team study led by professor K. Korzeniowski “Domestic violence against elderly and disabled people” (*Przemoc rodzinna wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych*), part of which was devoted to the abovementioned issue.

### **1. Body**

Nowadays, a visible interest in the subject of old age is noticeable in almost all disciplines from the field of social sciences, biology and humanities. However, since the concept of retirement is very broad and multidimensional, each area of study examines old age from its own perspective – focusing its attention on a selected aspect of old age. Medicine looks at human aging as one of the natural cycles of growth and a present-day challenge for geriatrics, associated with senile changes in the functioning of the human organism. Archaeologists (and historians) focus their interest on the search for skeletal remains, scripts of ancient scholars regarding the elderly, their role in the family and community.

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They also compare the role and attitude of ancient societies towards the elderly over the centuries. In social sciences, demographers look at aging through the prism of an aging population – by examining, among others, the phenomenon of the “three-stage demographic transition,” which in their opinion explains the phenomenon of aging societies. Sociologists look at old age through the prism of the social structure and multidimensional social differentiation. They are interested in the elderly as a “distinct social group.” Sociologists examine its structure, functioning, specifics as well as the attitude of society towards the elderly and the (“emerging”) culture of old age [Palska 2004, pp. 361–363]. Social work specifically draws attention to the problem of loneliness and isolation of elderly people and the necessity for care of the elderly both at home, their familiar environment, and on the institutional level. Social workers helping the elderly are also engaged in the promotion of active living among seniors and provide them assistance in unusual situations, e.g. financial problems of the elderly. Moreover, economists draw attention to the issue of the occupational and economic deprivation of elderly people and possibilities for earning extra money to complement their pensions, which could help them alter their consumption patterns in the retirement. Economists also emphasize the threat that the ever-expanding group of elderly people after paying for the medicines are left to live at the poverty level and face the risk of persistent poverty. Social policy looks at the phenomenon of old age from a broad perspective. Not only is it interested in the issue of social protection of the elderly, but also draws special attention to the relations between the seniors and the society along with active participation of elderly people in social life [Szatr-Jaworska 1994, p. 269]. Social policy is also interested in the population of elderly people as individuals belonging to the risk group – individuals at risk of marginalization and social exclusion. What is more, social policy to support seniors sets its goal on “meeting the needs of the elderly and formation of appropriate relations between the oldest generation and other generations” [translation mine] [Szatr-Jaworska 1994, p. 269].

This last view is of particular interest to me, a social politician, and from the perspective of social policy, understood as “form of public policy related to the instrumental use of power in order to ensure comprehensive welfare of all citizens” [translation mine] [Szarffenberg 2007, p. 34], I will try to present the issue of domestic violence against the elderly.

In light of the Polish Anti-Domestic Violence Act (Ustawa o przeciwdziałaniu przemocy w rodzinie) of 29 July 2005, domestic violence is defined as “any intentional action, series of actions, or lack thereof that violates rights (including personality rights) of family members, in particular those that expose them to danger of loss of life, health, violate their dignity, bodily integrity, freedom, including sexual, produce physical or psychological harm as well as cause suffering and moral damage to people affected by violence” [translation mine].

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Main forms of domestic violence are:

- physical abuse, one of the most visible forms of abuse, because is the hardest to conceal; can include hitting, pushing, strangling, kicking, pinching, throwing objects at a person, pouring substances on them, intentional burning, as well as abandoning a person (e.g. in a dangerous area), failing to provide necessary help, locking a person in, etc.
- psychological abuse, one of the most “insidious” forms of abuse, which most frequently starts unnoticed and innocent and, when developed, is one of the most painful and serious forms of abuse; can include humiliation, constant criticism, mockery, social isolation, threats, blackmail, harassment, etc.
- financial abuse, which may include taking away elder’s earned or received money (mainly pension), denying their right to work, failing to satisfy basic material needs
- sexual abuse, among which we distinguish forcing a person to participate in unacceptable for them forms of sexual intercourse, inappropriate touching, coerced nudity, forcing a person to look at pornography, demonstrating jealousy, criticism of one’s sexual behavior, etc.

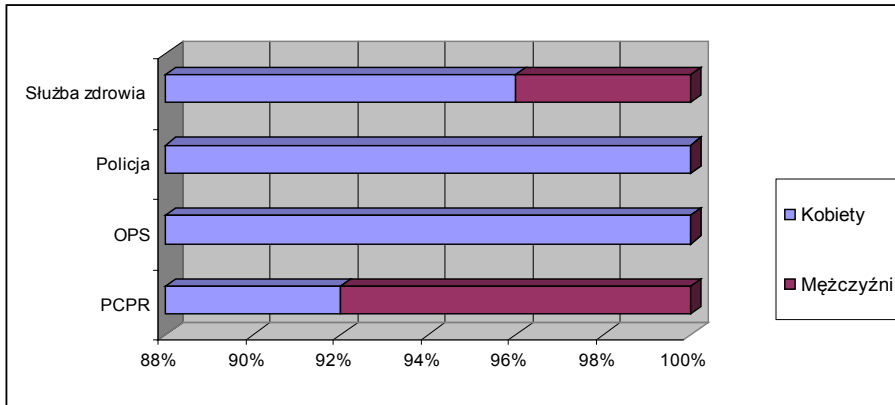
Therefore, these forms of abuse were included in one of few (major) reports, half of which was devoted to the issue of domestic violence against the elderly, prepared by the team led by professor K. Korzeniowski “Domestic violence against elderly and disabled people.” Its second part contains information from the study of professionals (employees of Social Welfare Centers, District Family Support Centers, Health Care, Police) on the scale of domestic violence against the elderly<sup>1</sup> and the basic characteristics of the abuse victims.

According to the (said) report, the majority of victims of domestic physical abuse are older women with primary education but, importantly, place of residence (only employees of District Family Support Centers disagreed) has no effect on physical abuse against seniors (elderly people living in the countryside, in a small town or big city – they all fall victim to abuse just as often). The opinions concerning the detection of physical abuse are, on the other hand, visibly divided – while 64% of police officers positively evaluate the level of detection of physical abuse, as many as 84% of employees of Social Welfare Centers claim that the detection of physical abuse is rare.

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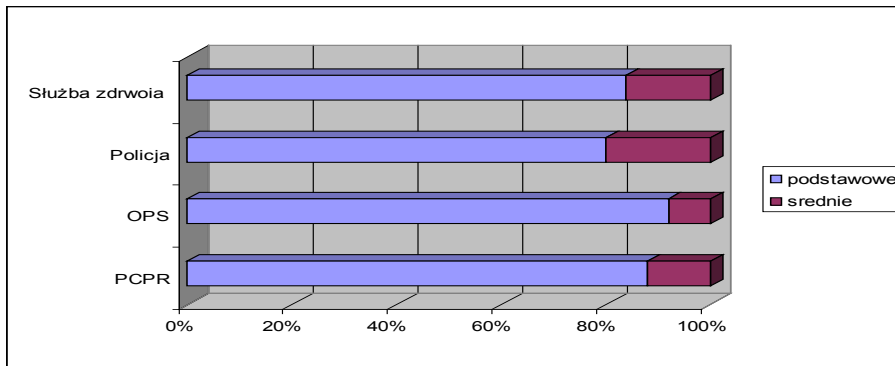
<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study the elderly were defined as men and women who have reached the retirement age

**Chart 1 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the sex of the victim of domestic physical abuse against the elderly**



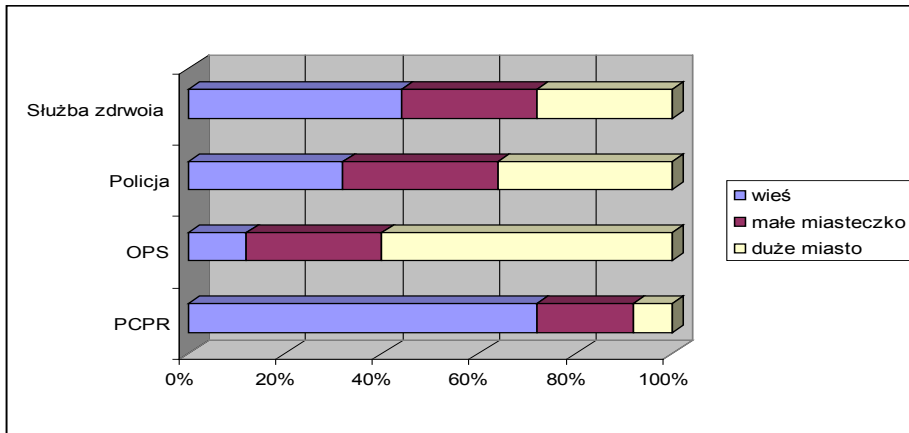
Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 9

**Chart 2 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the education of the victim of domestic physical abuse against the elderly**



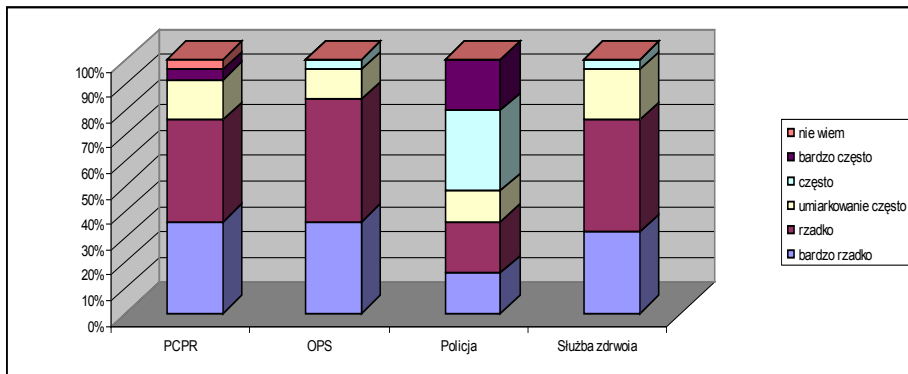
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**Chart 3 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the place of residence of the victim of domestic physical abuse against the elderly**



Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 9

**Chart 4 Percentage distribution of answers to question about the level of detection of domestic physical abuse against the elderly?**

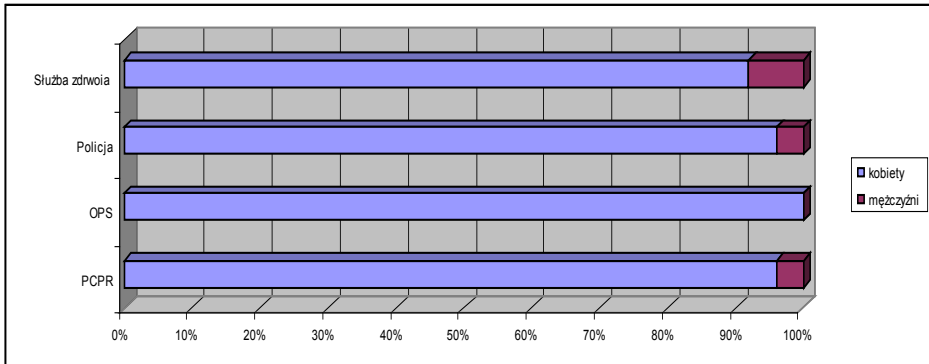


Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 19

When commenting on psychological abuse, the opinions of the prevention/intervention staff were very similar – according to them, the majority of victims of this form of abuse are women with primary education. However, respondents again have divergent opinions on the importance of the place of residence of victims of psychological abuse against the elderly. The opinions on the level of detection of physiological abuse are divided, as in the case of physical abuse – while 60% of

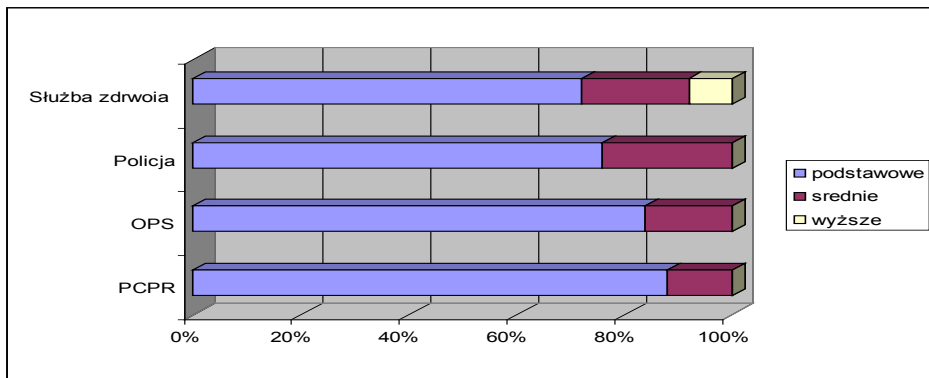
police officers positively evaluate the detection rate of these crimes, only 8% of employees of District Family Support Centers share this opinion.

**Chart 5 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the sex of the victim of domestic psychological abuse against the elderly**



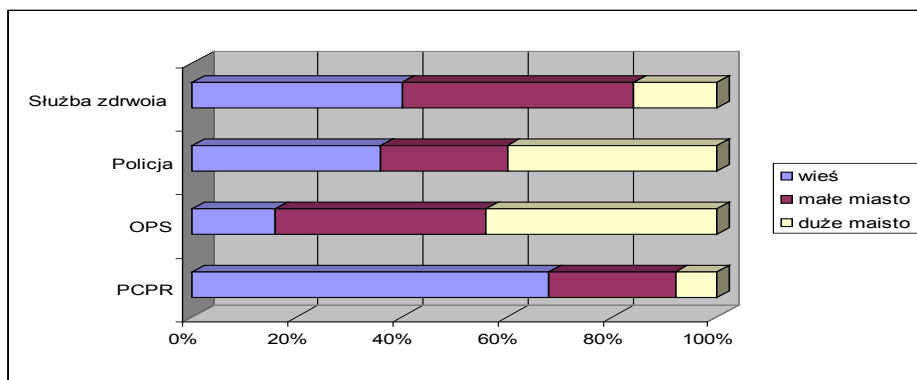
Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 10

**Chart 6 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the education of the victim of domestic psychological abuse against the elderly**



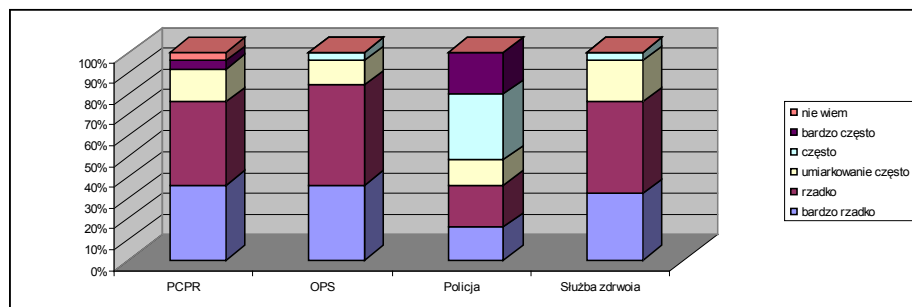
Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 10

**Chart 7 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the place of residence of the victim of domestic psychological abuse against the elderly**



Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 10

**Chart 8 Percentage distribution of answers to question about the level of detection of domestic psychological abuse against the elderly?**

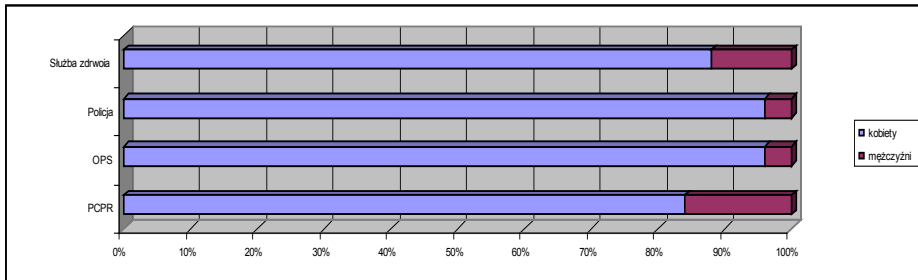


Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 19

When commenting on financial abuse, respondents claimed that, once again, the majority of victims of this form of abuse are women with primary education, whereas the place of residence does not play a significant role in this case. The level of detection of financial abuse (according to respondents) is lower as compared with the level of detection of physical and psychological abuse. In opinion of 56% of police officers, the phenomenon is detected very rarely and rarely, an opinion expressed also by other focus groups.

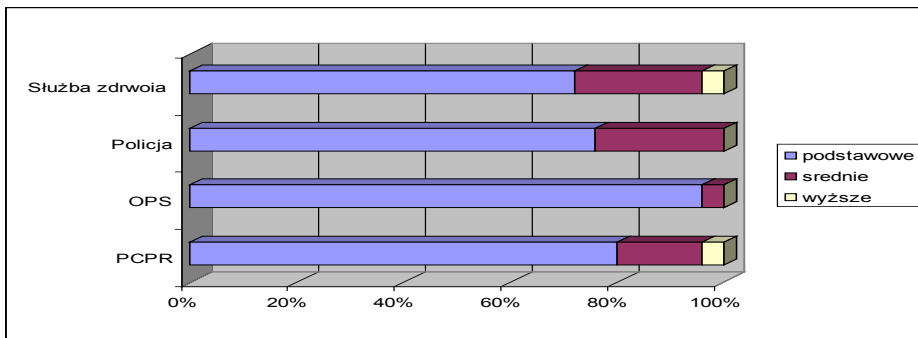


**Chart 9 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the sex of the victim of domestic financial abuse against the elderly**



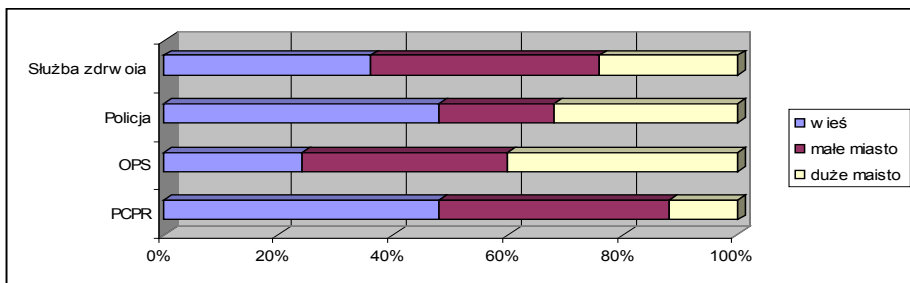
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**Chart 10 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the education of the victim of domestic financial abuse against the elderly**



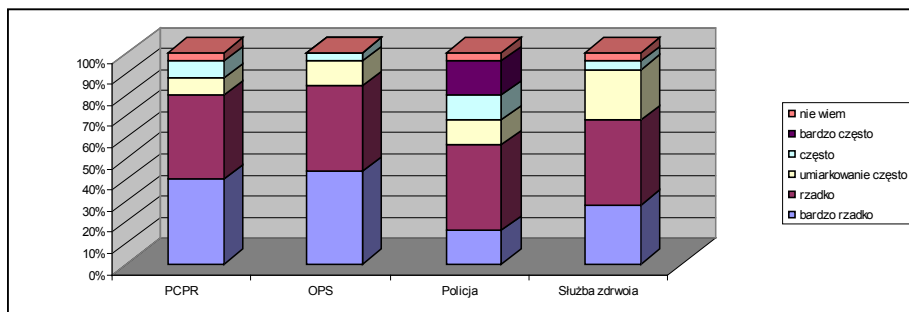
Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 11

**Chart 11 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the place of residence of the victim of domestic financial abuse against the elderly**



Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 12

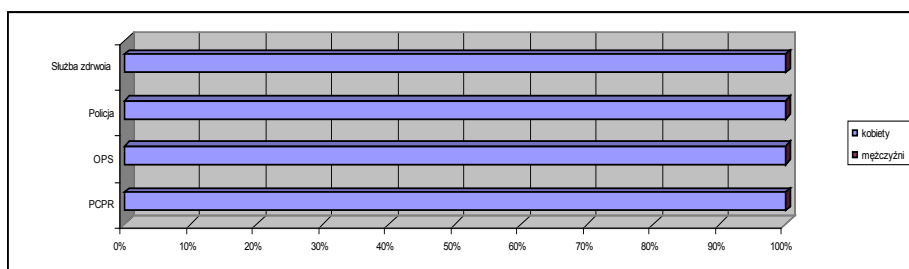
**Chart 12 Percentage distribution of answers to question about the level of detection of domestic financial abuse against the elderly?**



Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 20

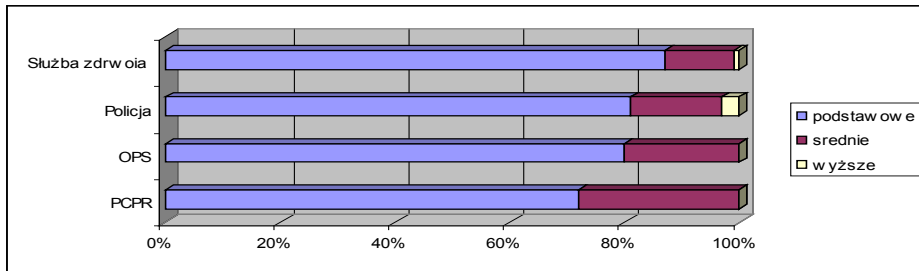
When commenting on domestic sexual abuse, respondents claimed that 100% of victims are women, the majority of whom have primary education. Similarly to psychological, physical and financial abuse, also in case of sexual abuse the place of residence does not play a significant role. Sexual abuse against seniors is (according to respondents) the least frequently detected form of abuse, even in the opinion of the most optimistic study group, i.e. police representatives, 72% of whom claimed that sexual abuse is detected very rarely (or rarely).

**Chart 13 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the sex of the victim of domestic sexual abuse against the elderly**



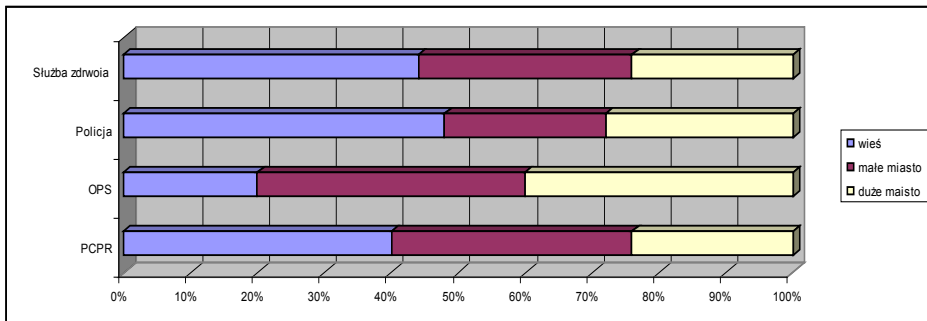
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**Chart 14 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the education of the victim of domestic sexual abuse against the elderly**



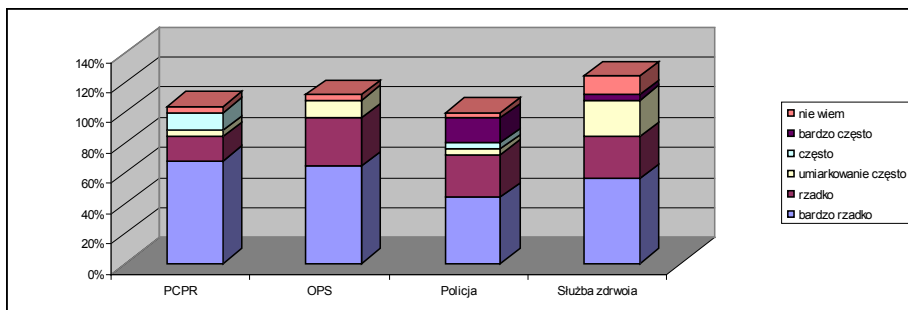
Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 12

**Chart 15 Percentage distribution of answers to the question about the place of residence of the victim of domestic sexual abuse against the elderly**



Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 13

**Chart 16 Percentage distribution of answers to question about the level of detection of domestic sexual abuse against the elderly?**



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Przemoc w rodzinie wobec osób starszych i niepełnosprawnych, cz. II – Raport z badań profesjonalistów, (red.) K. Korzeniowski, PAN, Warszawa 2009, s. 20

According to the opinion of the surveyed professionals, the main barrier (difficulty) in offering help to the elderly falling victim to domestic violence was the fear of the victim (and, unfortunately, this barrier is the main barrier, regardless of the age of the domestic violence victim), difficult contact with their family (which was deliberately obstructed) as well as difficult contact with the person examined and complex legislation. Additionally, a significant part of the respondents, mainly social workers, indicated lack of professional preparation to work with elderly abuse victims as one of the barriers. Therefore, in order to increase both the level of detection, as well as the professional help extended to elderly people who are victims of domestic violence, it is necessary to break the social “taboo,” which could be inter alia achieved through awareness-raising campaigns, publicizing the problem of domestic violence against seniors and the consequences that should face a person guilty of such abuse. Moreover, there exists a pressing need for the professionalization of prevention/ intervention staff in the area of prevention and rapid diagnosis of instances of domestic violence against seniors, among others, through impromptu trainings, as well as the development and implementation of a proper offer of postgraduate studies from this field.

### **3. Conclusion**

The scale of domestic violence against seniors in Poland is poorly recognized. Even though the number of elderly people in the Polish society is systematically growing, the problem is not the subject of extensive (detailed) analyses or awareness-raising campaigns (preventing domestic violence against the elderly), and (occasionally) constitutes only a part of a study. It may be due to the fact that the diagnosis of the phenomenon of domestic violence against seniors is, generally, a sensitive subject and is often marginalized, only brought up (mainly by the media) when a tragedy occurs. Unfortunately, (as shown by the study I referred to earlier) in recent years such tragedies are more and more frequent, which is connected to the fact that the characteristic feature of Polish seniors (including abuse victims) is their high level of isolation – the vast majority of the elderly functions almost exclusively in the home environment and their interpersonal contact is limited to their immediate family, which also includes the abuser. As the study suggests, a “statistical victim” of domestic violence (against seniors) is a poorly educated woman. Firstly, it is a consequence of the weakness of the victim: her inability to defend herself, susceptibility to psychological abuse, such as harassment, humiliation. Secondly, it is as associated with the victim’s ignorance of her rights and possibilities (ways) of investigating the violation of said rights, as well as the willingness to defend the abuser, since it is a person close to the victim. The issue of domestic violence (and abuse in general) against the elderly became also the topic

of last year's European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012. An awareness-raising campaign for a friendly society for elderly and young people was launched but, unfortunately, this vital and significant aspect (actually one of the main ones) was ignored, although it is the area conducive to positive aging and, in my opinion, one of the greatest opportunities to address this issue was wasted. However, one may hope that, together with the observable increase in the interest of the policy makers in the issue of old age, will come an increased interest in the issue of abuse against this group (including domestic violence).

**Abstract:** In this paper the author focuses on the issue of domestic violence against seniors in Poland. The opinions of prevention/ intervention staff (i.e. employees of Social Welfare Centers, District Family Support Centers, Police, Health Care) on this subject are presented. The analysis includes, above all, the characteristics of a victim of domestic violence, the most common forms of abuse, places of residence of the elderly who fall victim to domestic violence and the level of detection of family violence against seniors. It is also explained how present-day studies manifest their interest in the matter of old age and which aspects of the aging process are covered by particular areas of study (inter alia sociology, social policy, social work). At the end, the author draws conclusions as to why little research has been done on this topic (remains a taboo) and why we should start to explore this issue at present and take actions aiming at reducing (and eventually eliminating) the phenomenon of family violence against seniors.

**Key-words:** aging process, domestic violence, forms of abuse, old age

**Streszczenie:** Autor w swoim referacie koncentruje się na kwestii przemocy rodzinnej stosowanej wobec seniorów w Polsce. Przedstawia opinie pracowników pierwszego kontaktu (tj. pracowników OPS, PCPR, Policji, Służby Zdrowia) na ten temat. Uwzględnia przede wszystkim cechy ofiary przemocy rodzinnej, najczęstsze rodzaje przemocy domowej, miejsca zamieszkania osób starszych będących ofiarą przemocy domowej oraz wykrywalność przemocy rodzinnej wobec seniorów. Ponadto wyjaśnia w czym przejawia się współczesne zainteresowanie nauki kwestią starości oraz którymi obszarami procesu starzenia się zajmują się poszczególne nauki (w tym m.in. socjologia, polityka społeczna, praca socjalna).

Na zakończenie formułuje wnioski dlaczego problem ten jest mało zbadany (pozostaje tematem tabu) oraz dlaczego właśnie dziś warto zająć się badaniem tej kwestii i podjęciem działań zmierzających do zmniejszenia (a w dalszej perspektywie do zlikwidowania) zjawiska przemocy rodzinnej wobec seniorów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** proces starzenia się, przemoc rodzinna, rodzaje przemocy, starość

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*Ustawa z dnia 29 lipca 2005 roku o przeciwdziałaniu przemocy w rodzinie.*