



Original research article

# Breaking the silence: a qualitative study on older adults' perspectives and lived experiences of elder abuse

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## Abstract

**Background:** Elder abuse represents a significant social and public health challenge in Slovakia, yet little is known about older adults' experiences with this phenomenon.

**Objective:** This qualitative study examined the perspectives and lived experiences of older adults regarding elder abuse.

**Methods:** Asynchronous email interviews were conducted with 27 participants (15 female, 12 male) aged 65–81 years from urban and rural Slovakia. Data were collected between September–October 2023 and analyzed using systematic text condensation.

**Results:** Three main themes emerged: (1) unfamiliarity with sources of help (85% reported lacking knowledge about available services), (2) police as universal authority, help, and protection (89% identified law enforcement as primary protection), and (3) education to raise awareness. Participants described lived experiences with various forms of abuse, particularly financial exploitation and psychological abuse, while highlighting significant gaps in their knowledge of available support.

**Conclusion:** The findings reveal that older adults in Slovakia have limited awareness of protective services beyond law enforcement, face significant trust barriers in reporting abuse, and express strong desires for targeted educational initiatives.

**Keywords:** Elder abuse; Financial exploitation; Older adults' perspectives; Psychological abuse; Qualitative research; Slovakia

## Introduction

Elder abuse is an important social and public health problem worldwide (WHO, 2023) and, although still taboo in Slovakia, it is a relevant topic in the country's social, legal, and public policy (Draková, 2020). The issue is a society-wide challenge and a serious social problem which impacts both health and social spheres. With the global increase in life expectancy, and consequently the growth of the elderly population, the risk of violence and abuse increases proportionately. Elder abuse is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "any single or repeated act, or omission of direct management, that may result in harm or danger to an older person" (WHO, 2015, 2023). Building on this foundation, elder abuse and neglect (EAN) represents a comprehensive framework that encompasses both active harm (abuse) and failure to provide adequate care (neglect) to older adults. According to Yunus et al. (2019), EAN recognizes that harm to elderly individuals can occur through direct actions (physical violence, financial exploitation, emotional abuse) as well as through omissions in care (failure to provide food, medical care, or social contact). This dual conceptualization is essential for understanding the

full spectrum of maltreatment that older adults may experience. This study specifically examines the spectrum of elder abuse and neglect that causes harm or distress to persons aged 65 and older. Abuse encompasses active harmful acts; these include physical abuse (painful and injuring acts), emotional abuse (threatening, screaming, insulting), sexual abuse, and financial exploitation (fraud or unauthorized taking of resources). Neglect represents the failure to provide adequate care; this includes physical neglect (failure to provide basic needs such as food, shelter, medical care), emotional neglect (isolation, lack of social contact), and self-neglect (inability to care for oneself). These forms of EAN can occur across multiple settings, including community, family, and healthcare facilities, with individuals aged 65 and older representing a particularly vulnerable population due to age-related factors that may increase susceptibility to both abuse and neglect. Some experts view elder abuse as part of domestic violence, while others, drawing an analogy to child abuse and neglect (CAN) syndrome, speak of the so-called elder abuse and neglect syndrome (Repkova and Balogová, 2013). Regardless of classification, the phenomenon represents a significant violation of human rights with profound consequences for older adults' quality of life, dignity, and well-being.

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For the past twenty years, elder abuse research in Slovakia has focused predominantly on quantitative data collection. In 2020, the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights conducted a survey mapping the phenomenon of elder abuse and discrimination against older people through the experiences of 131 organizations working with or for the elderly (Máriássyová and Ujházyová, 2021). The survey revealed that 69% of respondents identified psychological violence (including humiliation, contemptuous treatment, or acts causing fear and stress), 47% reported economic violence (such as withholding income and obstructing in the use of property), 38% reported social violence (e.g., isolation from friends and other social contacts, or constant surveillance), 24% confirmed having experienced physical violence, and 21% experienced denial of care. The organizations did not confirm any experiences with sexual abuse (Máriássyová and Ujházyová, 2021). In 2015, research was conducted using anonymous questionnaires on a sample of 375 elderly people aged 55 to 80, living in either rural or urban regions of Slovakia. This survey showed that more than 80% had directly encountered some form of abuse in their immediate surroundings, or experienced mistreatment firsthand. In addition to occurring within a family setting, abuse in various forms also occurred in 21% of retirement and social service homes, and in 2.53% of medical facilities (Máriássyová and Ujházyová, 2021). A qualitative study was carried out in 2006 and repeated with different participants in 2010. This research focused on the incidence of maltreatment among ten older people aged 60+, living at home, who had been hospitalized for injury due to elder abuse. The abuse took the form of physical abuse, material and financial abuse, neglect by another person, and emotional abuse (Dobrovodsky, 2016).

A report published in 2020 by The Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, titled “The Development of Crime Against the Elderly”, documented various abuse cases, including robberies (12.34%), violations of domestic freedom (13.05%), intentional harm to health (26.29%), and threatening behavior (48.3%). Women were the victims in 54.77% of cases in 2020, compared to 50.17% in 2019. In the same year, following a long decline, a significant increase (12%) in the detection rates of violent crimes against the elderly was recorded. Within the framework of economic crime, fraud was committed 267 times and embezzlement 23 times (Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, 2023). While these quantitative studies and reports provide important data on the prevalence and types of elder abuse in Slovakia, there is a notable gap in understanding how older adults themselves perceive, experience, and respond to abuse situations. The personal perspectives of elderly individuals regarding available support services, their help-seeking behaviors, and their perceived barriers to accessing protection remain understudied. This qualitative understanding is crucial for designing effective and accessible interventions that address the specific needs and concerns of older adults.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how older adults in Slovakia perceive and experience elder abuse, with particular focus on their awareness of support services, trust in institutional protections, and educational needs. Specifically, this study seeks to:

- Examine older adults’ awareness and understanding of elder abuse and neglect (EAN) and available support services, with particular attention to how they conceptualize both active harm and care failures.

- Explore their perceptions of institutional responses to EAN, particularly regarding law enforcement and social services, including their understanding of how systems address both abuse and neglect.
- Identify educational needs to raise awareness about EAN prevention and protection, including recognition of both abuse and neglect indicators.

This study was guided by the research question: *What are the perspectives and lived experiences of older adults aged 65+ in Slovakia regarding elder abuse and neglect (EAN), available support services, and protective mechanisms?*

### **Theoretical approach to elder abuse and neglect in the Slovak context**

The present study adopts the EAN framework to examine the full spectrum of maltreatment experiences among older adults in Slovakia. This approach is particularly relevant in the Slovak context for several reasons. First, the traditional emphasis on family care in Slovak culture means that neglect may be as prevalent as active abuse but potentially less recognized or reported. The Slovak long-term care system is still predominantly family-based, with formal services underdeveloped and underfunded (OECD & European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2023). This cultural pattern of family-centered care extends to elder care, potentially creating contexts where care failures (neglect) may occur alongside or instead of active abuse, yet remain hidden within family networks.

Second, the transition from institutional to community-based care has created new vulnerabilities where both abuse and neglect can occur across different care settings (Schmahl, 2022). Slovakia’s deinstitutionalization strategy, initiated in 2011, remains the guiding framework for the transition from institutional to community-based care. Although progress has been uneven, recent reports confirm that the government continues to support this shift through EU-funded pilot projects and regional initiatives (Cangar et al., 2023). However, gaps in service provision and coordination persist, especially in rural areas, leading to new vulnerabilities for older adults.

The EAN framework encompasses three key dimensions relevant to this study:

- Recognition: How do older adults understand and identify both abuse and neglect?
- Response: How do institutional systems address both active harm and care failures?
- Prevention: How can educational interventions address both abuse perpetration and neglect prevention?

By adopting a qualitative approach that focuses on the lived experiences of older adults, this study provides crucial insights into how EAN is understood and experienced from the perspective of older adults themselves, thereby contributing to more effective, person-centered prevention and intervention strategies.

Furthermore, this study fills an important gap in Slovak EAN research by exploring the personal experiences of older adults, rather than focusing on institutional or caregiver viewpoints. Understanding how older adults themselves perceive EAN, navigate support systems, and identify educational needs is crucial for creating effective, accessible, and culturally sensitive prevention and intervention strategies.

## Materials and methods

### Study design

A qualitative study using asynchronous email interviews was conducted, and then analyzed using systematic text condensation. Asynchronous interviews are a qualitative digital research method in which participants respond to questions communicated to them via information and communication technologies (ICTs) and online platforms such as email, audio, video, social media, apps, online forums, and chat rooms. They provide opportunities for participants to reflect on the interview questions and to respond during an agreed period (Lumsden and Snee, 2022).

This method was selected for several reasons. First, asynchronous email interviewing provides participants with a chance to think deeply about their responses and potentially gain new insights into the research topic between questions (Ratislavová and Ratislav, 2014). Second, this approach gives older adults greater control over the interview process, allowing them to respond at their own pace and in a comfortable environment. Third, the method reduces potential discomfort when discussing sensitive topics like abuse, as participants may feel more at ease sharing sensitive experiences in writing rather than face-to-face. Finally, this approach saves time and resources related to travel, transcription, and proofreading (Amri et al., 2021).

### Methodological limitations of asynchronous email interviews

While this methodology offers advantages for exploring sensitive topics, it also presents important limitations that must be considered when interpreting findings. The asynchronous nature of email interviews prevents real-time probing of responses, limiting our ability to seek immediate clarification or explore unexpected themes as they emerge. Unlike face-to-face interviews, this method does not allow for observation of non-verbal cues, emotional responses, or contextual factors that might inform interpretation of participants' experiences. Additionally, the written format may constrain participants' ability to express themselves, particularly for those who are more comfortable with verbal communication or might struggle with written articulation of complex emotional experiences.

### Sample selection

Participants were recruited via personal contact, telephone, and email by a multidisciplinary team of researchers educated in social work, psychology, public health, and health sciences. Three of the researchers (MT, JS, AS) were familiar with the culture and language of the participants. This cultural and linguistic familiarity encourages a feeling of trust and respect among participants which, in turn, increases the credibility, reliability and validity of data collection (Negrin et al., 2022).

The inclusion criteria and digital requirements specified that participants:

- Were aged 65 years or older.
- Were conversant with using email.
- Had freely volunteered to take part in the study.

The requirement for email proficiency was a necessary methodological constraint given our chosen data collection approach, but we acknowledge that this created important sampling limitations. This digital literacy requirement was accepted for several specific reasons:

1. *Methodological consistency:* To ensure data quality and comprehensive responses, the asynchronous email method required participants who could engage meaningfully with written digital communication.
2. *Participant safety and comfort:* Given the sensitive nature of EAN topics, email communication allowed participants to respond privately, at their own pace, and in familiar environments, potentially reducing psychological distress compared to face-to-face discussions of traumatic experiences.
3. *Exploratory study design:* As an exploratory qualitative study examining older adults' perspectives on EAN in Slovakia, we prioritized methodological depth over population representativeness. This follows established practices in qualitative research, where purposive sampling seeks information-rich cases rather than statistical generalizability.

Additional respondents were recruited using the snowball method; researchers used their social networks among older people to make initial contacts, and sampling continued until either the target sample size or saturation point was reached (Parker et al., 2020). The researchers sent the interview guide with open and closed questions via email to 30 registered participants. The interview guide was formatted with large font size and clear, age-appropriate questions to ensure readability and comprehension for elderly participants. After a three-week period, reminder emails were sent, resulting in 27 completed responses (90% response rate). This sample comprised 15 female and 12 male participants from both urban and rural areas of Slovakia.

Purposive sampling was carried out with variation in terms of gender and education to ensure diverse perspectives. Written informed consent to being part of the study was obtained from each person.

### Sampling bias and digital exclusion

The research team recognizes that this sampling approach creates a significant limitation by systematically excluding older adults without digital access or literacy skills. This exclusion is particularly problematic because digitally excluded older adults may face higher vulnerability to EAN due to social isolation, lower socioeconomic status, or limited access to information about support services. Consequently, our sample likely overrepresents urban, higher-educated, and more socially connected older adults while missing experiences of more vulnerable populations, including rural elderly, lower-income individuals, and socially isolated older adults. This sampling bias limits the transferability of our findings and may have resulted in underrepresentation of the most vulnerable elderly populations – who could provide crucial insights into EAN experiences and service access barriers.

### Data collection

Data was collected during September and October 2023. Participant responses were collected through a newly created neutral email address to which only one of the researchers had access, thus maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Each interview document was assigned a study code and kept in a separate location from the participant identification information. Only one of the researchers (MT) had access to both these documents. This researcher assigned security codes to computer records and then encrypted identifiable data. After receiving the email responses, the data was encrypted, anonymized, and shared in a secure virtual space with other researchers to enable evaluation.

The written interview guide began with questions about the participant's demographic profile, followed by questions about their knowledge and experiences with elder abuse, support services, and protective mechanisms. To clarify ambiguities and encourage depth of response, several probing questions were included:

- *Describe a case where, in your opinion, violence occurred against an elderly person.*
- *Which institutions are dedicated to protecting the rights of the elderly?*
- *Who would you call first if you were a victim of violence?*
- *What do you need to feel safe?*

### **Data collection limitations and saturation assessment**

The reliance on written responses limited the ability to probe deeper into relevant or unexpected answers, and the predetermined question format may have constrained the emergence of themes not directly addressed in the interview guide. Data saturation was assessed through systematic analysis aligned with the systematic text condensation approach (Malterud, 2012). The research team conducted preliminary thematic analysis after receiving each set of five, six, or seven interviews, followed by regular meetings to assess whether the new interviews contributed novel insights. Saturation was considered approached when no new themes emerged from consecutive interview batches and existing themes showed consistent patterns across participants. The researchers acknowledge that saturation assessment may be less robust than in traditional face-to-face research due to both the inability to probe responses in real-time and the considerable variability in email response detail. Given these constraints, the study considers the data to represent thematic adequacy within the accessible population, rather than definitive saturation.

### **Data analysis**

As explained by Malterud (2012), systematic text condensation was conducted as a descriptive and exploratory method for thematic cross-case analysis of different types of qualitative data, such as interview studies, observational studies, and analysis of written texts. This method represents a pragmatic approach inspired by phenomenological ideas, and various theoretical frameworks can be applied.

The analytical procedure consisted of the following steps:

1. *Total impression – from chaos to themes:* The researchers read all transcripts to obtain an overall impression and identify preliminary themes.
2. *Identifying and sorting meaning units – from themes to codes:* Systematic review of the transcripts to identify “meaning units” (text fragments containing information about the research question). These units were then coded and organized into code groups.
3. *Condensation – from code to meaning:* The content of each code group was abstracted into “condensates” (artificial quotations maintaining the original terminology used by participants).
4. *Synthesizing – from condensation to descriptions and concepts:* The condensates were synthesized into an analytical text that formed the basis for the results section, with authentic illustrative quotations selected.

To enhance rigor, the data was translated by three researchers (MT, JS, and AS) and analyzed throughout 2024 by all the researchers. To ensure research reliability, triangulation was used to collaborate with another researcher (VNF), who

read 50% of the interview transcripts and arrived at similar interpretations, enabling the development of the themes for this study.

### **Characteristics of the study sample**

Sixty-five percent of the participants were from a Slovak urban area and 35% were from rural areas. The age range of the female participants was 65 to 81 years (Mean = 69 years) and the male participants 65 to 80 years (Mean = 72.5 years). All participants lived alone or with their spouses and had formal education. Among the female participants, educational levels included elementary ( $n = 3$ ), secondary ( $n = 10$ ), and university/college with an academic degree ( $n = 2$ ); male participants' educational level included secondary ( $n = 8$ ) and university/college with an academic degree ( $n = 4$ ).

### **Ethical considerations**

The study protocol and related documents were approved under reference number FF-EK 1-2023 (approved April 25, 2023) by the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius University of Trnava, under the project “University of Enhancing the Smart Active Ageing”, funded by Norway through the Norway Funds. Authors of the study from Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica and Kristiania University of Applied Sciences, Oslo, were members of the aforementioned project.

The participants were briefed on the study objectives by meeting with two researchers (JS and AS), where the confidentiality of the study data was discussed and ensured, along with confirming the voluntary nature of participation and participants' freedom to refuse the interviews at any time without experiencing any negative consequences. It was explained that by sending back the completed interview guide through email, the participants expressed written consent.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, special attention was paid to participant well-being. Researchers provided contact information for support services and maintained availability for follow-up should participants experience distress after sharing their experiences. The study design prioritized participant comfort by allowing them to respond to questions at their own pace and in their own environment.

## **Results**

The participants described their experiences with and perspectives on elder abuse and neglect in Slovakia. Three main themes with concomitant subthemes were derived from the patterns across the asynchronous interviews: (1) Unfamiliarity with sources of help; (2) The police as a universal authority, help, and protection, and (3) Education to raise awareness.

### **Unfamiliarity with sources of help**

A striking finding was that the vast majority of participants reported lacking knowledge about available support services for elder abuse. This unfamiliarity extended to both specific services and the process of accessing help. As one 66-year-old female participant noted:

*“I can't defend myself; I don't know what to do and who to ask for help. Those who act abusively take advantage of our vulnerability. I don't know if there is any organization that can help me. I know that bad things happen to my neighbors who are the same age as me ... I still hear yelling and swearing from them, sometimes even fights. I also heard something like elderly people have the status of a protected person, but I don't know exactly what that means and how it can help me.”*

Participants frequently reported experiences with financial exploitation, particularly through door-to-door sales fraud and telephone scams. These experiences were characterized by sophisticated deception tactics targeting older adults' vulnerabilities. One rural participant described being deceived into signing a three-year chimney cleaning contract despite not having a chimney, highlighting how fraudsters exploit trust and create confusion about service agreements.

Phone scams emerged as a particularly distressing form of abuse, with participants reporting calls claiming there was a family emergency which required immediate financial assistance. These incidents caused significant emotional trauma, as evidenced by one participant's account:

*"Someone said my son was in a car accident and I needed to provide money for his rescue right now! I was very afraid!"*

Such scams exploit parental instincts and create urgent psychological pressure that can override rational decision-making.

Beyond financial exploitation, participants described witnessing various forms of abuse within families and neighborhoods, including psychological abuse, neglect, and physical violence. Family-based abuse scenarios often involved adult children mistreating elderly parents, sometimes related to the adult children's alcohol misuse. Participants also expressed concerns about mistreatment in healthcare settings, describing instances where medical personnel treated older patients with disrespect and verbal abuse. Gender differences emerged in help-seeking preferences and disclosure patterns. Female participants identified diverse potential sources of support, including friends, healthcare providers, children, religious figures, community workers, and law enforcement, while notably excluding extended family members. Male participants demonstrated greater reluctance to disclose abuse experiences and expressed trust primarily in immediate family members and police authorities.

### **The police as a universal authority, help, and protection**

The second major theme highlights the central role of law enforcement in elder protection. Nearly all participants identified the police as their primary or only known source of protection against abuse. When asked about institutions dedicated to protecting the elderly, most participants could only name the police, suggesting limited awareness of other protective services.

A 70-year-old participant from a rural area explained:

*"I would contact the social department and tell them what I saw or heard ... but I didn't know if they would do anything about it. The police have responsibilities and must help ... that's what it says on police cars: protect and help!"*

Cases of elder abuse prevention presented by the Slovak police in the media (mainly television, radio, and the internet) had reached many participants. More than half reported having participated in police-led preventive activities, while fewer than half stated they regularly apply police advice in their daily lives. An 80-year-old participant described his caution when he uses public transport:

*"Every time I travel by train, I only take four €5 notes with me and put them in different places. I never have more than five euros in my wallet. The police warned us how often a person can become a victim of theft on a train. There are also posters at train stations warning about this and how to protect yourself."*

Only one 74-year-old female participant commented that she would:

*"... do nothing because it is not my problem if abuse occurs locally..."*

Later she added:

*"... if it were really bad, I would call the police..."*

Two other female participants (aged 65 and 70) wrote that they:

*"... would anonymously report the fact of abuse using the telephone line aimed at protecting the elderly."*

This response revealed that some participants were aware of specialized helplines, though they represented a small minority of the sample.

The strong emphasis on police as the primary protection source may indicate both trust in law enforcement and a lack of knowledge about other available resources. Participants generally expressed confidence that the police would respond to reports of elder abuse, yet most had only vague ideas about what such a response would entail or what other services might be involved in addressing abuse situations.

### **Education to raise awareness**

The third theme centered on the participants' expressed need for education and knowledge about elder abuse prevention and protection. Most participants articulated a desire for better understanding of available support organizations and protective mechanisms, with particular emphasis on digital safety and financial protection. Digital security emerged as a primary concern, with participants reporting suspicious text messages and fraudulent delivery notifications targeting mobile phone users. The financial vulnerability of older adults was highlighted through media reports that participants had encountered, including cases where small initial payments led to complete account draining by fraudsters. Such reports reinforced participants' recognition of their own vulnerability and need for protective knowledge.

Several participants agreed on the need for greater respect for seniors' rights at the political level. One 78-year-old participant from a rural area expressed frustration with political campaigning:

*"... politicians themselves were exploiting the elderly for election campaigning, and I don't like it ... it is abuse against me as an older person."*

Almost all participants expressed the need to have more knowledge about dealing with abuse in their neighborhood so that they would not become direct victims. This need has been identified as essential for an increased sense of self-protection and security, and the participants acknowledged their responsibility for protecting their own life and health. However, they also expressed the need for state intervention through experts, not just the police, to protect their health and life.

Many of the participants reported not having heard of the protected person status, which is defined by law in the Slovak Republic, or not understanding what it means. This lack of awareness about legal protections specifically designed for vulnerable populations, including the elderly, represents a significant gap in knowledge that could affect help-seeking behavior.

The need for better financial security to enable them to finance care in their own homes, and thus avoid institutional care, was also expressed. A 73-year-old man from an urban area mentioned having heard (in the media):

*"... nursing home workers using stun guns on restless or confused old people to stun them."*

The participant thought that he would have to increase his financial resources to prevent such an experience, highlighting how fears about institutional abuse might influence financial planning and decision-making among elderly individuals.

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## Discussion

This study provides valuable insights into older adults' perspectives on elder abuse in Slovakia, revealing significant gaps in their awareness of support services, strong trust in police as the primary protection mechanism, and substantial educational needs for raising awareness about prevention and protection measures. These findings align with international research indicating that limited awareness of services is a common barrier to help-seeking among elderly populations (Dow et al., 2020).

The finding that most participants reported a lack of knowledge about support services beyond law enforcement is concerning, but it is consistent with findings from other European countries where awareness of specialized elder abuse services remains low (Harbison et al., 2012). This knowledge gap may be particularly pronounced in Slovakia, where dedicated services for elder abuse victims are still emerging and public awareness campaigns have been limited. The findings suggest that current efforts to inform older adults about available resources are insufficient, potentially leaving many of them vulnerable to ongoing abuse situations. Furthermore, our findings regarding the predominant forms of abuse experienced or witnessed by participants – financial exploitation and psychological abuse – align with previous quantitative studies in Slovakia (Máriássyová and Ujházyová, 2021) and with broader European research (Yon et al., 2019). Financial exploitation appears to be particularly prevalent, manifesting through sophisticated scams, fraudulent service offers, and door-to-door sales tactics specifically targeting older adults. The emotional impact of these experiences was evident in participants' narratives, highlighting how financial abuse often causes significant psychological distress beyond the material losses.

The near-universal identification of the police as the primary or only protection source reveals both strengths and weaknesses in the current response system. While confidence in law enforcement is positive, overreliance on police suggests a potential gap in multi-sectoral responses to elder abuse. International best practices emphasize coordinated approaches involving social services, healthcare providers, and specialized elder protection services working alongside law enforcement (Atkinson and Roberto, 2024). The absence of these other resources in participants' awareness indicates a need for better integration and visibility of comprehensive support services. Gender differences in help-seeking preferences represent another important finding. Female participants identified a wider range of potential confidants (friends, doctors, children, religious figures) compared to male participants – who would mainly trust only close family members or police. This pattern aligns with broader research on gender and help-seeking behaviors, where men often exhibit greater reluctance to disclose vulnerabilities or seek assistance (Teo et al., 2022). These differences suggest the need for gender-sensitive approaches in outreach and service provision.

The strong desire for education expressed by participants highlights an important opportunity for intervention. Their educational needs centered on multiple areas: understanding legal protections, recognizing abuse, navigating support systems, and developing digital literacy to prevent online exploitation. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that education is a critical component of elder abuse prevention (Mikton et al., 2022). The specific mention of digital safety concerns also reflects the evolving landscape of elder abuse, where technology-facilitated exploitation is becoming increas-

ingly common. Participants' concerns about institutional abuse and their preference for home-based care reflect international findings about fear of institutional settings among elderly populations (Ouchi et al., 2017). This anxiety about institutional care, combined with limited financial resources to secure alternative arrangements, creates additional vulnerabilities that policy approaches must address.

The relationship between unfamiliarity with help sources and the strong emphasis on educational needs suggests a circular pattern: older adults lack awareness of protective services while simultaneously expressing a desire to learn more about them. This pattern indicates that the gap is not due to lack of interest, but rather to insufficient outreach and education. Accessible information campaigns specifically designed for older adults could help break this cycle.

## Strengths and limitations

Despite the methodological limitations discussed in the methodology section, the study offers several important strengths. The use of qualitative methodology allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, providing rich context often missing from quantitative surveys. The asynchronous interview approach created a safe space for discussing sensitive topics, potentially encouraging greater disclosure about abuse experiences. The inclusion of both urban and rural participants, as well as both genders, provided some diversity of perspectives within the accessible population. Additionally, the cultural and linguistic familiarity of the research team enhanced the credibility of data collection and analysis. The main limitation remains the sample size ( $n = 27$ ) which, while sufficient for qualitative exploration, does not allow for generalization to the broader elderly population in Slovakia. However, this limitation is inherent to qualitative research design, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical representativeness.

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## Conclusion

This qualitative study provides important insights into older adults' experiences and perspectives regarding elder abuse in Slovakia. The findings highlight three critical areas: significant knowledge gaps about available support services, heavy reliance on police as the primary or only protection mechanism, and strong desire for educational initiatives about abuse prevention and protection.

The participants' narratives reveal their vulnerability to various forms of abuse, particularly financial exploitation and psychological abuse, while demonstrating limited awareness of resources beyond law enforcement that could provide assistance. Gender differences in help-seeking preferences suggest the need for tailored approaches to support different population groups.

The findings have several implications for practice. First, there is an urgent need to improve information dissemination about existing support services through channels accessible to older adults. Second, specialized education programs addressing digital literacy, financial safety, and rights awareness should be developed specifically for elderly populations. Third, efforts to strengthen trust in services beyond law enforcement could help create more comprehensive protection networks for vulnerable elderly individuals.

Future research should expand on these findings by including more diverse elderly populations, particularly those with limited digital literacy or from more isolated communities.

Comparative studies across different regions of Slovakia could help identify geographical variations in service awareness and accessibility. Additionally, research exploring the perspectives of service providers would complement this study's focus on older adults' experiences, potentially identifying additional barriers and facilitators to effective support provision.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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