



**BUILDING A SOCIETY FOR ALL AGES**



**Welcome to the June 2026 Issue of the UN NGO Committee on Ageing/NY Newsletter**

**ELDER ABUSE -An annual reminder**

Mistreatment of older people has long been a problem but has been increasingly recognized across the globe in recent decades. Since 2011, the United Nations has recognized June 15th as World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Observances are held at the UN and in many of its member states. And so, we are once again looking at these unfortunate violations of the rights of older persons

Elder Abuse takes many forms. Our chair, Bill Smith, in his A Word from the Chair message, lists the main forms of elder abuse reported by governments and NGOs around the world. Our newsletter articles add some background on two specific types. Read Coercive Control: A Type of Elder Abuse by Gloria Gutman and Kira Gawenus. See also Adriane Berg's Words that are Trending which explores Land Grabs – accusations - often by family members - charging older persons with witchcraft in order to take over their land.

If, Dear Reader, you have examples to share of what is being done in your country to address these forms of abuse, please email us at: [webmaster@ngocoa-ny.org](mailto:webmaster@ngocoa-ny.org) We would be happy to share some of these insights in future columns.

Warm regards,

Martha Bial, PhD, Editor and Chair of the NGOCOA-NY Communications Committee, Representative to the UN, International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics



## A word from the Chair

Yearly since 2011, the United Nations has designated June 15 as World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Elder Abuse is a global concern. There are basically eight types of Elder Abuse which continues to plague our globe: Self-Neglect, Physical Abuse, Neglect by others, Sexual Abuse, Financial Abuse, Mental Abuse (Verbal, emotional or threatening), Abandonment and Isolation. My article in this newsletter continues to call for a remedy for this major problem.

Older Persons Globally have given much throughout their lives, to their families, friends, neighbors and community and in the twilight of their years they should not be victims of abuse. Each year the Committee on Aging takes an in depth look at one of these types. We are fortunate to be guided by INPEA, The International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, whose primary dedication is toward a remedy for this global assault. INPEA was founded in 1997 by the late Rosalie S. Wolf, Ph.D. and continues today with much support from Ms. Susan B Somers, JD a close friend of the NGO CoA.

This year the Program Committee on 11 June 2026 addressed Financial Exploitation of Older Adults: Understanding Abuse, Prevention and Protection, with a stellar panel of experts.

The High Level Political Forum 2026 will be held at the United Nations in New York from Tuesday 7 July to Wednesday 15 July 2026. The theme of the HLPF will be “Transformative, equitable, innovative and coordinated actions for the 2020 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals for a sustainable future for all.” Please support this work if possible.

We can all do more to address there eight types of abuse. Let’s do it!

I hope you all enjoy the Summer. Be well.

William T . Smith, PhD,

Chair, NGO CoA in New York

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## A Deeper Dive:

### Coercive Control of Older Adults: A Type of Elder Abuse

By Gloria Gutman, Prof Emerita SFU Gerontology, Vice President International Society for Gerontechnology, and Kira Gawenus, MA Gerontology



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Coercive control is widely discussed in the intimate partner violence literature, but has been underexamined by those concerned about elder abuse. As populations age and more people live with chronic illness, disability, or social isolation, it is important to understand this form of abuse and develop effective prevention, detection, and intervention strategies.

## What Coercive Control Looks Like for Older Adults

**Coercive control** is a pattern of acts and behaviours used by an abuser to limit another person's freedom and control their life. When the victim is an older adult, the tactics often exploit age-related vulnerabilities—declining health, reduced mobility, cognitive changes, or dependence on others for daily needs.

Common tactics include:

- **Isolation** — restricting access to friends, family, transportation, or communication devices under the guise of “protecting” the older adult.
- **Financial manipulation** — controlling bank accounts, pressuring for changes to wills or property titles, or withholding money needed for basic care.
- **Medical control** — limiting access to medications, appointments, or assistive devices to create dependency.
- **Threats and intimidation** — using fear of abandonment, institutionalization, or loss of independence to force compliance.
- **Information control** — withholding mail, hiding diagnoses, or misrepresenting what professionals have said.
- **Gaslighting** — undermining the older adult's confidence in their memory or judgment, especially when cognitive decline is present.

These behaviors rarely appear in isolation. They accumulate, creating an environment where the older adult feels trapped, dependent, and unable to assert their rights.

## Why Older Adults Are Especially Vulnerable

Several structural and social factors make older adults susceptible to coercive control:

- **Dependence on caregivers** — needing help with transportation, finances, or personal care can shift power dramatically.
- **Ageism** — society often dismisses older adults' concerns, making it easier for abusers to operate without scrutiny.
- **Cognitive impairment** — dementia or mild cognitive decline can be exploited to discredit the victim.
- **Social isolation** — shrinking social networks reduce opportunities for outside detection.
- **Intergenerational dynamics** — adult children or relatives may feel entitled to control finances or decision-making.

These vulnerabilities do not cause abuse, but they create fertile ground for coercive control to take root.

## Who Are the Perpetrators?

Unlike intimate partner violence, coercive control of older adults may involve a wide range of perpetrators:

- **Adult children** who feel entitled to assets or resent caregiving responsibilities
- **Spouse or partner**, including long-term relationships where abuse escalates with age

- **Other relatives** who assume informal power or try to
- **Paid caregivers** who exploit their access
- **Trusted professionals** such as financial advisors or neighbors

The common thread is access, trust, and an imbalance of power.

### **How Coercive Control Harms Older Adults**

The consequences may include:

- **Psychological harm** — anxiety, depression, learned helplessness, and loss of identity
- **Physical harm** — neglect of medical needs, malnutrition, medication mismanagement
- **Financial devastation** — loss of savings, property, or income
- **Erosion of autonomy** — inability to make decisions about daily life, health, or relationships
- **Increased mortality risk** — research consistently links elder abuse to higher rates of hospitalization and death

Coercive control is not merely “family conflict” or “caregiver stress.” It is a systematic violation of human rights.

### **Why Coercive Control in Older Adults Is Often Missed**

Professionals may overlook coercive control because:

- It rarely involves visible injuries
- Older adults may fear retaliation or institutionalization
- Abusers often present as “helpful” or “devoted” caregivers
- Cognitive impairment can make disclosure fragmented or inconsistent
- Systems (healthcare, legal, social services) often focus on single incidents, not patterns

### **What Effective Intervention Looks Like**

Addressing coercive control requires a multi-layered approach:

- **Trauma-informed screening** in healthcare, home-care, and social services
- **Legal protections** such as restraining orders, guardianship oversight, and financial safeguards
- **Caregiver support** to reduce stress without excusing abuse
- **Community engagement** to reduce isolation
- **Education for professionals** on recognizing non-physical abuse

Interventions must prioritize the older adult’s autonomy and preferences, not simply remove them from their environment.

### **A Call to Recognize Coercive Control as Elder Abuse**

Coercive control is not a private family matter. It is a form of elder abuse that undermines autonomy, safety, and dignity. As societies age, failing to recognize and address this pattern of harm will leave countless older adults vulnerable.

## **Coercive Control of Older Adults as a Criminal Offence: The International Legislative Landscape**

England and Wales were the first jurisdictions to criminalize coercive control in situations beyond intimate partner relationships. Through passage of section 76 of the Serious Crime Act in 2015 the offence covers controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or, a family relationship. The Domestic Abuse Act of 2021 removed the requirement that the parties live together, so that post-separation abuse is included. The Victims and Prisoners Act of 2024 is especially noteworthy because it can in principle apply to an adult child or other relative who coercively controls an older adult.

Scotland and Ireland were next to criminalized coercive control through section 9 of the Domestic Violence Act of 2018. Scotland's Domestic Abuse Act of 2018 is widely regarded as the strongest internationally because it integrates physical and non-physical abuse into a single offense. However, the reach is only to current and former intimate partners.

In Australia, New South Wales (NSW) criminalized coercive control of intimate partners in 2024,

and the government has committed to reviewing the legislation this year to consider whether it should be expanded to other types of relationships. Queensland, in 2025 criminalized coercive control in domestic relationships, broadly defined as intimate personal relationships, family relationships, and informal care relationships. Like England & Wales, family relationships were included from the outset.

Canada's Elder Justice Coalition, an ad hoc group of 17 organizations from across the country has called for legislation to protect victims of elder abuse. Offences include controlling social interactions, finances or property, taking of medications and access to health services, and controlling access to their spiritual/cultural community. Bill C-16, introduced in 2026 includes a coercive control offence currently framed around intimate partners. Elder abuse advocates have argued that this excludes the most common form of coercive control experienced by older adults, which is that exerted by adult children or other relatives not a partner. There is a commitment to reexamine the legislation in five years and the need to broaden its reach which advocates consider too long to wait for action that is needed now.

In Canada and elsewhere the legal innovation of the past decade has been to make the pattern of coercive control itself the offense, rather than waiting for discrete assaults that criminal law could already reach. But recognition in law is not the same as protection in practice. International ageing-rights organizations as well as local on-the-ground individuals, agencies and organizations need to recognize coercive control as a unique form of elder abuse not just one manifestation of psychological abuse and work towards its prevention and mitigation.

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**Words That are Trending:**  
**Land Grabs: A Continuing**  
**Problem for Older**

# Villagers Living in Developing Nations



By Adriane Berg, United Nations representative, International Federation on Ageing; Board Member of The Global NGO Executive Committee (GNEC), Member of NGO Committee on Ageing NY

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In our last newsletter, I wrote about one of the most disturbing forms of elder abuse I have encountered in my years of advocacy: the persecution of women and some men as so-called witches in Kenya. The accusations are a pretext, and the real motive is land. Since that piece ran, a webinar has been organized to address this issue directly, and I am pleased to share that registration is available free of charge. Details will be included at the end of this article.

But it would be a disservice to our readers — and to the elders suffering around the world — if we focused only on Kenya. Witchcraft accusations are merely one weapon in a vast and ugly arsenal. Land grabs targeting older adults are a global crisis, and they are escalating as once-barren rural land becomes extraordinarily valuable. The intersection of aging populations, growing industry, and expanding tourism has transformed remote villages into economic frontiers. And wherever land values rise, predators follow.

## **A Global Pattern of Dispossession**

The stories are everywhere, if you know where to look. In sub-Saharan Africa — Nigeria, Uganda, Tanzania, and beyond — older adults are driven from ancestral plots through intimidation, false legal documents, and outright violence. In Pakistan and India, elderly widows are among the most vulnerable, stripped of land by male relatives who exploit inheritance customs that were never designed to protect women living alone. In Southeast Asia, indigenous elders face displacement as governments and corporations partner to develop land for resorts and industrial agriculture. In parts of Latin America, older campesinos are pressured off plots their families have farmed for generations.

When we trace where the land eventually ends up, a troubling pattern emerges. It rarely stays in the hands of the son or nephew who first grabbed it. Through a chain of transactions — informal deals, forged transfers, corrupt registrations — the land migrates upward. It ends up in the portfolios of agricultural conglomerates, mining companies, and international hotel chains. The original theft is buried under layers of paperwork, and the global corporation at the end of the chain may genuinely not know — or may prefer not to know — what happened at the beginning.

## **The Family Wound**

What makes this crisis particularly heartbreaking is that the abusers are most often not strangers. They are sons, daughters-in-law, nephews, and grandchildren. Families struggling under their own economic pressures look at an aging parent sitting on land that could fetch a handsome price and make a

terrible calculation. Sometimes dementia makes the elder an easy target; a signature on a transfer document obtained through manipulation or outright forgery. Sometimes threats are enough. Sometimes the elder disappears from the village, and no one asks questions.

We cannot be naive about the poverty that drives some of this. But poverty does not excuse it, and understanding it does not mean accepting it.

### **What Can Be Done**

The good news — and there is good news — is that tools already exist to address this. The challenge is adapting and scaling them.

In the United States and Canada, the concept of a sale-leaseback allows an older homeowner to sell their property while retaining the legal right to live there. The elder receives income or a lump sum; the new owner gains an asset. Thoughtfully adapted versions of this model could give older rural landowners in developing nations a way to monetize their land without losing their homes and livelihoods. Legal frameworks that separate the right to live on land from the right to profit from it could be transformative.

Education is equally critical. Many older villagers do not know the market value of what they own, have never seen a land title, and have no idea they have enforceable rights. Programs that help elders understand their land's worth and their legal protections can shift the power dynamic. At the same time, outreach to family members about dementia — how it affects decision-making and how to support a parent ethically rather than exploit them — can interrupt abuse before it begins.

Anonymous hotlines for reporting suspected land grabs could be as effective in rural Kenya or rural India as they have been in elder financial abuse programs in the West. Public service announcements in local languages, broadcast on community radio, can reach people that no internet campaign ever will.

The accountability model used in the fight against child labor offers a powerful template. Companies that source cocoa or cotton from exploitative suppliers face reputational damage and consumer boycotts. The same logic can apply to land. Hotels and developers who acquire land that was taken from an elder through abuse should face scrutiny. A robust title-search requirement — one that asks not just *who* owned the land before, but *also what happened to that person* — *could make the entire land acquisition supply chain* more transparent. If a buyer learns that the previous owner was displaced or killed, they should be required to act on that knowledge.

And finally, we need more research. Where has this problem been meaningfully reduced? What policies worked? What community structures proved resilient? The answers exist somewhere. We need to find them, document them, and share them loudly.

The land beneath an elder's feet is not just property. It is their security, their identity, their place in the world. Protecting it is not a niche cause. It is basic human dignity.

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