



Dignity, everyday life, support for seniors with disabilities

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The process of ageing is an inevitable life phenomenon in both the individual and social aspects. With the growing life expectancy of humans, the way of living in the old age becomes a challenge in the context of respect for the dignity of the elderly. In this article, I present selected theoretical issues concerning the sense of dignity, everyday life and helplessness of elderly people with disabilities, which is unfortunately often associated with it. I also show the complexity of contemporary problems and expectations and the challenges faced by older people with disabilities.

KEY WORDS: Dignity, everyday life, helplessness, support, help, elderly people with disabilities, social welfare homes

Introduction

The phenomenon of rapid population ageing, which occurs in most highly developed countries, is the cause of profound political, economic and socio-cultural changes. The steadily growing elderly population is a heterogeneous community in many respects, ranging from their age, state of health and extent of physical and mental

fitness, social and economic situation, place of residence, to the extent of support required in everyday life. The experience of old age these days is first and foremost an experience of change and a reaction to change, as well as an attempt to cope with it.¹ The categories of dignity and everyday life of elderly people mentioned in the title of the article have a specific impact on their quality of life, their helplessness and the need for support. Particularly elderly people with disabilities can experience many situations that undermine their sense of value, dignity and being a part of society. Old age and disability are phenomena that are often accompanied by stereotypisation and discrimination. In today's social reality, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of human dignity, respect for the dignity of elderly people is a legitimate concern. The dignity of elderly people, expressed in their desire to have respect of the community in which they live, may be threatened by their deepening marginalisation. The dignified treatment of a human being means that in every life situation they are a subject, that they have freedom of choice, cannot be used, and their rights must be respected.²

The situation of rapid ageing of the population also leads to some specific consequences for social policy, threatening the collapse of the pension, health and care services systems. The increase in the burden of non-working age population on the working-age population lowers the value of support potential ratios, which determine the ability of the society to provide informal support to the oldest people. Needs of old people, their approach to everyday life, as well as their relations with their environment and immediate circles, exclusion, forms of activation, life, health and economic situation have recently become an extremely topical research problem

¹ Z. Strzelecki, J. Witkowski, *Przeszłość i perspektywy demograficzne Polski*, Warszawa, Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, Biuletyn, 2009, no. 54, pp. 33–60.

² B. Szczupał, *Równość wobec prawa jako jeden z warunków realizacji praw człowieka z niepełnosprawnością*, *Niepełnosprawność – półrocznik naukowy*, 2009, no. 1, pp. 149–155.

for researchers in a number of scientific disciplines. However, many studies ignore the aspect of ageing of people with disabilities, who often face difficult situations in everyday lives.³ In daily life, elderly people with disabilities need help and support in particular. Ageing is a multi-faceted process that encompasses both physical and mental change, with physical impairments, hearing loss, visual impairments and loneliness being just some of the problems faced by elderly people.⁴

In addition to the problems faced by the majority of senior citizens, the elderly with disabilities have to face many other particular limitations. Elderly people with disabilities constitute a very diverse group. These are both persons with congenital disability or disability acquired in earlier stages of life, as well as those who become disabled in late adulthood as a result of the emergence of various conditions leading to disability or reducing their abilities. The first group consists of people who have entered the phase of old age, already adapted to the disability, which was present in their lives from birth. This group might face problems connected with the consequences of the ageing process overlapping with the difficulties resulting from previous disabilities. On the other hand, among people with disabilities acquired at a later age, health problems overlap with the effects of ageing, such as for example losing a spouse, loss of employment, loss of social position, and are therefore experienced more severely.⁵ The growing number of elderly people, including people with disabilities, represents a major challenge for the society. It is necessary to draw attention to the problems of this group, as well as to study the phenomenon of ageing people with disabilities and the process of becoming a person with disabilities in old age.

³ A. Matysiak, *Is Poland really 'immune' to the spread of cohabitation?*, Demographic Research, 2009, Vol. 21, pp. 215-234.

⁴ J. Heitzman, *Psychiatria w geriatrici*. Wydawnictwo Termedia, Poznań 2018, pp. 12-35.

⁵ A. Gutowska, *(Nie)pełnosprawna starość – przyczyny, uwarunkowania, wsparcie*, Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2015, no. 8, pp. 9-33.

Dignity and everyday life of elderly people with disabilities

In today's social reality, despite the widespread recognition of the importance of human dignity, reflecting on the respect for the dignity of older people is a legitimate concern. It is important that the person copes with their old age and the associated sense of self-dignity. They have to first deal with a number of matters on their own and come to terms with their state. According to the World Health Organisation, a certain cause and effect sequence of events may be occurring in many elderly people: illness – damage – incapacitation – disability.⁶ In the sphere of declarations, the dignity of older people is recognised as an important value and a crucial objective of actions aimed at preventing discrimination. Dignity always remains the main point of reference, it is incomparable with other determinants of the law and cannot be replaced with any other values. In the majority of legislation applicable to elderly people, they do not appear as a separate category of beneficiaries, and they do not possess any specific rights on the basis of their age. Poland lacks clear rules for the protection of the rights of the elderly (which have been present for many years in the documents of the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union.)⁷

The internal determinants of human dignity should be looked for in their personality, particularly in their biopsychosocial predispositions, moral sensitivity, self-esteem, lifestyle and quality of life. With the life expectancy of humans growing longer, the way of living old age becomes a challenge in the context of respect for the dignity of the elderly.⁸ The basis for dignified treatment is experi-

⁶ A. Gutowska, „(Nie)pełnosprawna starość – przyczyny, uwarunkowania, wsparcie, Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2015, no. 8, pp. 9-33.

⁷ B. Szczupał, K. Chatzipentidis, *W poszukiwaniu drogi do emancypacji – godność osoby starszej i ageizm w świetle koncepcji praw człowieka oraz w perspektywie rozwoju współczesnego społeczeństwa*, Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2016, pp. 99-118.

⁸ I.M. Świłała, *Godność osoby starszej w nowej rzeczywistości społecznej*, Roczniki Teologiczne, 2017, Vol. 10, pp. 5-21.

encing the respect of the immediate circles. Treating a person with dignity means that they are a subject in every life situation, that they have freedom of choice and self-determination, cannot be used, and that their rights are respected. Dignity of a human being is expressed by ensuring their autonomy, freedom and equality, including in the sphere of economic and social rights.⁹ Unfortunately, there are also a number of negative phenomena which impact the situation of elderly people, which cause their exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, and thus pose a threat to the fundamental value of self-dignity.

There are many examples of discrimination faced by elderly people, such as negative stereotypes regarding old age, worship of youth, widespread lack of reliable knowledge about old age, unemployment increasing competition in the labour market, specific needs of elderly people, procedures for sharing public funds, low education, loneliness, as well as poor organisation of work in institutions serving the elderly.¹⁰ The crisis of respect for the dignity of the elderly will progress more and more rapidly with the development of civilisation.

Elderly people with disabilities face many problems that affect their functioning in their everyday lives.¹¹ These include family problems (empty nest syndrome), retirement, changes affecting their health and bodies, excessive free time, economic and technical difficulties, dependence on third parties, daily routine, worsening health, loneliness, as well as staying in a social welfare home.¹² These factors are among the greatest threats to the self-dignity of older people.

⁹ T. Romer, *Godność człowieka w prawie pracy i pomocy społecznej*, [in:] *Godność człowieka a prawa ekonomiczne i socjalne. Księga Jubileuszowa wydana w piętnastą rocznicę ustanowienia Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich*, Wydawnictwo Biura Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich, Warsaw 2003, pp. 59–83.

¹⁰ P. Szukalski, *Uprzedzenia i dyskryminacja ze względu na wiek (ageizm) – przyczyny, przejawy, konsekwencje*, *Polityka Społeczna*, 2004, no. 2, pp. 11–15.

¹¹ R. Kijak, Z. Szarota, *Starość. Między diagnozą a działaniem*, Wydawnictwo Centrum Rozwoju Zasobów Ludzkich, Warsaw 2013.

¹² K. Ziomek-Michalak, *Znaczenie rodziny w starzeniu się i w starości człowieka*, *Roczniki Teologiczne*, 2015, Vol. 5, pp. 175–194.

Helplessness of the elderly

Helplessness can affect people of all ages. It has its own individual dimension – it is subjectively assessed by an elderly person. At the same time, we can also distinguish helplessness in an objective dimension, which encompasses for example the existence of specific difficulties for older people in coping with particular aspects of life situations. A characteristic feature of contemporary everyday life is the fast-paced changeability and unpredictability. This is associated with great deal of difficulty in adapting to frequent changes and difficulties in finding one's place in reality. This leads to increasing dependence on others. The appearance of the first symptoms of helplessness should be a signal to the family, neighbours and social services in the broad sense of the term to undertake specific remedial actions.¹³

So far, measures geared towards elderly people with disabilities have had varying degrees of effectiveness. In many environments (such as rural) social work with the elderly is not carried out at all. Activities in this area carried out by local government institutions, governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations rarely form a cohesive system. Each entity operates according to its own standards and decides what actions are the most important for meeting the basic needs of elderly people on its own.

According to Tokaj, the multidimensional helplessness of the elderly should be accompanied by multifaceted support.¹⁴ A frequent cause of difficulties in old age are the so-called geriatric syndromes, such as dementia, depression, locomotion and balance disorders, hearing impairments, visual impairments, etc. A characteristic feature of geriatric diseases is their chronic, multi-causal nature and

¹³ M. Bogusz, S. Ostrowska, *Wybrane problemy polityki społecznej i zdrowotnej wobec osób starszych na poziomie lokalnym – sztuka partycypacji*, Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, 2016, no. 450, *Polityka ekonomiczna*, pp. 82–90

¹⁴ A. Tokaj, *Codziennosc, bezradnosc, pomoc. Trzy kategorie opisu sytuacji zyciowej czlowieka starszego*, *Auxilium Sociale*, 2005 no. 3–4, pp. 80–95.

difficulties in treatment. They most often restrict the activity of elderly people and their mobility, resulting in a gradual loss of independence.¹⁵ In addition, the lack of autonomy caused by these disorders can cause chronic stress and the emergence of other diseases and disorders. Disability in an elderly age can cause an additional burden causing a dissonance between the degree of everyday capacity and expectations of the elderly person, as well as general weakness of the body, resulting in a state of increased risk of the development of adverse health phenomena, such as bone brittleness, weakened immunity, general weakness. All these factors can lead to social isolation and feeling of loneliness, and as a consequence, a reduction in the quality of life. It is extremely important to strive for multi-pronged changes in the area of health, education and customs in order to change the negative image of old age and ensure every day, real support for this group.

Support for the elderly

The ageing of the population forces the rest of the population to face the challenge of fulfilling the needs specific to the group of elderly people. These are needs related to lifestyle, health and care, psychosocial sphere, social activity, economic activity, financial situation and education. Therefore, the tasks of many modern institutions include organising assistance for elderly people with disabilities in order to improve their life situation, health and physical fitness, care and assistance in basic life activities, long-term care and hospice, psychological support, sense of security, recreation and developing interests, as well as supporting and utilising the potential of the elderly.

Forms of assistance are an important element of the situation of elderly people with disabilities in contemporary times. In situations

¹⁵ A. Gutowska, *(Nie)pełnosprawna starość – przyczyny, uwarunkowania, wsparcie*, Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2015, no. 8, pp. 9-33.

where people are unable to act autonomously, it is essential that their dignity is protected by the state, implementing the provisions of the relevant legislation through appropriate social policies.¹⁶ Unfortunately, today's social situation may be a source of barriers in accessing important goods and values, jeopardising elderly people's ability to meet their needs, exposing them to multiple types of discrimination (concerning for example place of residence, age, gender and disability.)¹⁷ These barriers can often lead to the need for help and support for older people.

In Poland, family care is the dominant form of support, and in the cases of the lack of family, its inability to take care of the elderly person, or weakening of family ties, formal organisations or care institutions are obliged to provide assistance.¹⁸ The areas of support and social assistance addressed to the elderly include health care, social assistance, social insurance and social conditions. This support may be provided in the community assistance provided in the place of residence of the elderly people or institutional assistance, implemented through social welfare homes, which are institutions of permanent or temporary stay that can be used by these persons.¹⁹ Both forms of support – institutional and non-institutional – should be complementary and cannot be limited to fragmentary impacts in selected areas, ministries and systems.

A. Tokaj holds the opinion that the basic direction of all support activities for the elderly should be aimed at maintaining the activity

¹⁶ B. Mikołajczyk, *Międzynarodowa ochrona praw osób starszych*, Wydawnictwo Wolters Kluwer Polska Sp. z.o.o., Warsaw 2012.

¹⁷ B. Szatur-Jaworska, *Uczestnictwo osób starszych w sferze publicznej*, Biuletyn RPO, 2008, no. 65, p. 115–121.

¹⁸ M. Rajczykowska, *Środowisko terapeutyczne nowe podejście do projektowania domu senior*, Społeczeństwo i Edukacja. Międzynarodowe Studia Humanistyczne, 2015, no. 2, pp. 173–180.

¹⁹ W. Borczyk, D. Jachimowicz, W. Nalepa, *Partycypacja osób starszych w życiu publicznym – wybrane zagadnienia*, Nowy Sącz, Ogólnopolska Federacja Stowarzyszeń Uniwersytetów Trzeciego Wieku, Nowy Sącz 2015.

and independence of this group in order to satisfy everyday life needs and to integrate them with their immediate environment. Social policy addressed towards older people should take into account three basic principles: subsidiarity, comprehensiveness of assessment of needs and localisation.²⁰ These principles indicate that the quality of life of elderly people is the result of a balanced distribution of responsibility both among the state, the local environment and the family. The municipality is the main authority responsible for the implementation of local policies geared towards the elderly. Its basic responsibility in this respect results from the special position which it occupies in the structures of public administration and a privileged position among local government units. The activities of the poviats and voivodeships should complement and support initiatives taken at municipal level (from a local and regional perspective).

It is also worth noting that elderly people with disabilities are increasingly treated as subjects, while their needs are increasingly taken into account. Elderly people also strongly feel the need for respect, supporting their sense of dignity and usefulness. These needs can be met with the help of various institutions such as day-care centres, universities of the third age, senior citizens' clubs, self-help organisations, cultural organisations, voluntary work organisations, senior citizens' councils, as well as social time banks.²¹ Above all, the activity of the elderly meets the need to be useful and necessary, gives a sense of fulfilment, independence, makes it possible to pass on the wisdom of life and accumulated experience.²² As a consequence, elderly people feel a sense of stability, balance, safety, security, they can also take advantage of treatment, rehabilita-

²⁰ A. Tokaj, *Codzienność, bezradność, pomoc. Trzy kategorie opisu sytuacji życiowej człowieka starszego*, *Auxilium Sociale*, 2005 no. 3–4, pp. 80–95.

²¹ S. Scherger, J. Nazroo, P. Higgs, *Leisure activities and retirement: do structures of inequality change in old age?*, *Ageing and Society*, 2011, vol. 31, pp. 146–172.

²² M. Posłuszna, *Aktywność rodzinna i społeczna osób starszych*, *Nowiny Lekarskie*, 2012, 81, 1, pp. 75–79.

tion and therapy. On the other hand, the lack of such activity may lead to a loss of acceptance on the part of the immediate social circles, resulting in loneliness and lack of self-respect.

Summary

The growing number of elderly people, including people with disabilities, is a major social, economic and political challenge. Contemporary reality creates many barriers and causes existential crises that worsen the quality of life of elderly people and diminish the respect for their dignity. The ageing process cannot be stopped, but it can be changed in such a way so that it becomes a good period in life. It is therefore essential to pay attention to the daily problems of this group, and to study the ageing of people with various disabilities and the emergence of disabilities in old age.²³ The increasing life expectancy is not always connected with satisfactory physical and psychological fitness and independence. It is also important to pay attention to the sense of dignity of the elderly, which helps to direct their lives in spite of changing circumstances, motivates, brings a sense of existence, sets moral directions, crystallises identity, strengthens staying true to one's ideals and values. The benchmark for dignified treatment is experiencing respect from one's immediate circles. It is essential to treat older people with disabilities as subjects, giving them the right to dignity, respect, self-determination, counteracting social marginalisation and ensuring social education aimed at overcoming stereotypes towards the elderly. It is important to promote attitudes that make respect for the dignity, freedom and equality of older people a reality. During this period of life, support and help are essential, but understanding, attentiveness, listening skills and respect are even more important. Thanks to

²³ A. Gutowska, *(Nie)pełnosprawna starość – przyczyny, uwarunkowania, wsparcie*, Interdyscyplinarne Konteksty Pedagogiki Specjalnej, 2015, no. 8, pp. 9-33.

such attitudes, elderly people with disabilities are more willing to participate in social life, work in various organisations to the best of their abilities, develop and be active.

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