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“THIS MUCH YOU SHOULD KNOW: I WAS LESS AFRAID OF A SNAKE THAN OF MY HUSBAND”: OLDER WOMEN’S LIFE-STORIES ON POVERTY AND VIOLENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the findings of a study examining the lifelong experiences of older women affected by social deprivation, poverty, and domestic violence. Employing a life course perspective and biographical narrative interviews, the research reveals a constellation of interrelated factors that have shaped and reinforced these women’s marginalization. Key among these are the intergenerational transmission of deprivation, limited access to social and cultural capital, the presence of parental and/or spousal alcoholism, and the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms – both within the family and embedded in dominant institutional culture.

Keywords: older women, poverty, (domestic) violence, life course perspective, biographical narrative interview, Slovenia

“TI BASTI SAPERE QUESTO: AVEVO MENO PAURA DI UN SERPENTE CHE DI MIO MARITO”: STORIE DI VITA DI DONNE ANZIANE TRA POVERTÀ E VIOLENZA

SINTESI

Questo articolo presenta i risultati di uno studio che analizza le esperienze vissute nell’arco dell’intera vita da donne anziane colpite da deprivazione sociale, povertà e violenza domestica. Adottando la prospettiva del corso di vita e ricorrendo a interviste narrative biografiche, la ricerca evidenzia una costellazione di fattori interrelati che hanno contribuito a plasmare e rafforzare la marginalizzazione di queste donne. Tra i principali elementi emersi vi sono la trasmissione intergenerazionale della deprivazione, l’accesso limitato al capitale sociale e culturale, la presenza di alcolismo in ambito genitoriale e/o coniugale e l’influenza pervasiva delle norme patriarcali – sia all’interno della famiglia sia radicate nella cultura istituzionale dominante.

Parole chiave: donne anziane, povertà, violenza (domestica), prospettiva del corso di vita, intervista narrativa biografica, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

As the population in EU countries continues to age rapidly, old-age poverty is becoming an increasingly urgent issue for public policy and social services. Data indicates that poverty tends to increase with age, while the gender gap in poverty is also widening.[1] Over the life course, women consistently have lower incomes than men and are more likely to work in low-paid and insecure employment. This disparity is largely attributed to the gendered division of labour and traditional gender roles, which have had a long-term impact on the economic positions of both men and women.

A review of research and literature in Slovenia reveals that old-age poverty has received limited scholarly attention. Notable exceptions include the research project "Poverty and Material Deprivation of the Elderly" (Stropnik et al., 2010) and the accompanying monograph (Hlebec et al., 2010), which offer valuable insights into the lives of older people living in poverty and their strategies for coping with various forms of social exclusion. However, there has been even less focus on the intersections of poverty, age, and gender – particularly the poverty experienced by older women. This oversight is rooted in the historical marginalisation of women's issues (Leskošek, 2019). Furthermore, the intersection of poverty, age, gender, and (domestic) violence remains a significant blind spot in both research and policy discourse.

In response to these gaps, we seek to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by analysing older women's experiences of social deprivation, poverty, and (domestic) violence across their life course. While conceptualising this article, we considered the following research questions: how do older women living in poverty construct and narrate their life trajectories? What role has (domestic) violence played in shaping their lives? How do they retrospectively view their experiences of violence, and how did they manage to escape it? Who supported them in doing so? Finally, how have social policy frameworks addressing domestic violence evolved over time, and how have these women perceived and experienced these changes?

BACKGROUND

Our research is grounded in the life course perspective, a theoretical model that facilitates the examination of how earlier life experiences shape conditions in old age. This perspective conceptualizes life courses as a series of trajectories resulting from the complex interplay between individual agency and social structures or contexts (Elder et al., 2003; Carr, 2018; Danner, 2022). As elaborated by Dannefer and Settersten (2010), the life course perspective encompasses two complementary paradigms: the personological paradigm, which emphasizes individual agency and change, and the institutional paradigm, which highlights the social construction of life stages. This dual approach to studying the complexities of aging posits that "individual life courses are produced not only by individual choices and actions, but also by the social context (institutionalized life course), and by interactions with others within structural possibilities and constraints" (Van Regenmortel et al., 2019, 3).

One of the core concepts within life course theory is the cumulative inequality perspective (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006; Carr, 2018; Danner, 2022), which posits that disparities in health, wealth, and well-being tend to increase over the life span. The main argument is that advantages bring additional advantages and disadvantages bring additional disadvantages, so that relatively small inequalities in early life are exacerbated over time. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding disparities in later life, especially regarding physical health and economic well-being – dimensions that are further shaped by structural inequalities, including those based on ethnicity and gender, as discussed below.

Gender inequality functions both as a cause and a consequence of women's heightened vulnerability to poverty. Furthermore, existing theories and empirical research exploring the relationship between poverty and (domestic) violence reveal a complex web of interactions and interdependencies. Analysis of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (2014) survey shows that women reporting difficulty in managing on their current income (subjective poverty) are more likely to report experiencing intimate partner violence recently and across their lifetimes. Specifically, 30 per cent of women who reported financial hardship had experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15, compared to 18 per cent of women with greater financial resources. Financial strain is also linked to higher rates of psychological violence (Fundamental Rights Agency, 2014). Several scholars (Slabbert, 2016; Gillum, 2019) argue that poverty and material hardship not only contribute to the risk of domestic violence but are also exacerbated by it.

However, any interpretations linking poverty and exposure to domestic violence and abuse (DVA) are

1 The 2022 indicators for the-risk-of-poverty and social exclusion in Slovenia confirm that older women (F) are generally worse off than older men (M): the at-risk-of-social-exclusion rate (F 22.9%, M 15.2%), the at-risk-of-poverty rate (F 22.2%, M 14.6%), the persistent at-risk-of-poverty rate (F 12.5%, M 7.4%), the risk-of-poverty in single-person households rate (F 41.3%, M 40.9%) and the severe material and social deprivation rate (F 2.1%, M 1.1%) (Trbanc et al., 2024, 56). Furthermore, the latest available data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (2024) show that the gender gap is particularly large (and increasing over time) in the over 75 age group: the at-risk-of-poverty rate in 2023 (F 26.5%, M 11.4 %) and in 2024 (F 29.7%, M 13.4%).

likely to be inadequate in the absence of a broader understanding of the social drivers of gender-based violence associated with patriarchal norms and practices in particular (historical) contexts. As observed by Fahmy & Williamson:

> […] *in classed and gendered societies, the cumulative and additive nature of social disadvantage is such that we might expect the interaction of socioeconomic inequalities with patriarchal norms to result in heightened vulnerability to DVA for women experiencing poverty. Within this perspective, the association between poverty and DVA is as an interaction effect where poverty heightens women's existing vulnerability to DVA arising from patriarchal social relations.* (Fahmy & Williamson, 2018, 9–10)

METHODOLOGY

The data presented in this article are part of a broader study conducted in 2024, within the research project "Everyday Life and Life Course of Older People Living in Poverty",[2] exploring the life stories of 33 individuals aged 65 and over – 14 men and 19 women – who live below the poverty threshold. To gain rich, interpretive insights into the lives of groups that are often underrepresented or overlooked in quantitative research, we employed qualitative methods, specifically the biographical narrative interview. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences across the life course. The social context of ageing and old age is constituted by individual and interactive practices in a complex and inconsistently organized and multi-layered environment with – for the individual – different levels of relevance: these include everyday situations as well as habitus-related life dispositions and structured socio-historical spaces through which the currents of social power and inequalities flow. While ageing is socially constructed, it is also deeply individual. Biographical narrative interviews are particularly valuable in studies of ageing and old age because they illuminate both the commonalities and diversities in older people's life trajectories. They help uncover how family patterns, cultures and subcultures are expressed in individuals' lives (Birren et al., 1996). At the same time, these interviews also reveal how individuals navigate, struggle with, resist and overcome (or not) the obstacles and challenges of the time and societies in which they have lived.

This method is especially useful when little is known about a topic, when we assume the existing knowledge and interpretations are insufficient, or when we want to emphasize the perspectives of the people being interviewed. We are aware that in life stories we will find a bridge between the personal voice and the social norms and cultural imperatives from the perspective of the person concerned. What we hear is always already an interpretation, never the naked, unmediated "truth." The biographical approach is particularly well-suited to studying "silenced social groups" who rarely, if ever, get a voice. This is one reason why biographical methods hold a central place in feminist and women's studies (Willemse, 2014; Mažeikiene, 2015). In our study, we used semi-structured biographical narrative interviews to guide participants in telling their life stories by identifying particular topics, life chapters, important life events or turning points, and challenges (Van Regenmortel et al., 2019). At the same time, we encouraged participants to go beyond the prompts of the interview guide – to reflect freely on connections between their past and present, and to share their thoughts on the imagined futures.

Sample and analysis

We employed a purposive sampling method to recruit narrators, collaborating with Centres for Social Work, the Red Cross, and leveraging the personal networks of the research team. Our sampling strategy ensured diverse representation across gender, ethnicity, marital status, and the urban-rural divide, spanning from Slovenia's southwestern regions through the capital city of Ljubljana to the northeastern areas. Participants were interviewed and recorded in individual sessions ranging from 38 to 238 minutes. The sessions took place in participants' homes, private interview rooms at Centres for Social Work, Red Cross facilities, and, in one instance, a Senior Activity Centre. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview.[3] The verbatim transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, with each life story summarized to identify predominant themes and subthemes (i.e., family of origin, childhood, relationships with parents and siblings, schooling, employment, housing, partnerships and children, income, interactions with institutions, retirement, health, social networks, current life, and future). During this immersive phase, it became evi-

2 The project *Everyday Life and Life Course of Old People Living in Poverty* (J5-4587). Project duration: 1. 10. 2022–30. 9. 2025. Project partners: Faculty of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Peace Institute and Institute for Contemporary History (principal investigator: prof. Vesna Leskošek). The project was financially supported by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

3 The research received ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Work, University of Ljubljana, December 4, 2023 (decision no. 033-3/2023-23). The empirical data supporting this study are securely stored by the project team and are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

dent that the issue of (domestic) violence emerged as a recurring theme, despite not being a focus of the original research design. Eight women spontaneously addressed this topic, and their narratives form the empirical foundation of this article.

Each of the eight narratives in the subsample was reread and annotated with margin notes referring to general themes, interconnections with other narratives, and additional insights. In their life stories, we identified several themes[4] that can be analysed individually although they are interconnected, intersecting and intertwining. From the perspective of the individual woman's life course, we can observe how these processes, events, incidents, and ruptures trigger new developments, conflicts and ruptures. After multiple readings and reflecting on the interrelations among themes, a final coding scheme was developed, categorizing the narratives into four strands: 1. poverty, intergenerational transmission of deprivation, survival strategies, help and support, 2. education, occupation, and employment, 3. (domestic) violence, alcoholism, institutions and 4. life events and turning points, and reflexivity.

The narrators[5]

FERIDA (72) married young and moved from Bosnia to Slovenia. She completed vocational school and worked in a factory for 24 years, supplementing her modest income with jobs as a cleaner and housekeeper. Ferida was married twice, and both relationships were marked by severe domestic violence. Now divorced, she enjoys a peaceful and fulfilling life. Her son, who spent his childhood and youth with his father due to various circumstances, means the world to her.

SELMA (71) moved to Slovenia after marrying at the age of 16. She completed primary school through evening classes and later took a six-month sewing course, eventually working as a production worker. Although she did not experience violence in her intimate relationships, she was surrounded by violence from an early age. She would not wish the life she had on anyone.

NEVA (72) attended elementary school for four years and was very sickly as a child. She was never formally employed but earned a living through field work, picking herbs, helping in a bakery, and briefly caring for a disabled person. Today, she faces serious health issues and lives with her 92-year-old mother and her 40-year-old daughter, who is unemployed and currently applying for family caregiver status. All three women endured severe domestic violence and held hands as they shared their life stories.

SONJA (65) looks younger than her age. As the eldest child, she had to look after 8 siblings from an early age. The whole family lived in fear of an abusive father. After completing elementary school, she began working as a cleaner, later taking jobs as an unskilled production worker and cook. Today, both she and her husband receive a minimal pension. In retirement, Sonja dedicates time to volunteer work and enjoys pursuing her hobbies.

IVANA (65) was raped as a child by a stranger. At the age of 16, she moved in with her husband's family, who harassed and abused her, and later joined her husband, who was working in Slovenia. She was employed as an unskilled production worker and now suffers from severe health problems caused by years of intimate partner violence. She has been living alone for several months while her husband is in the hospital. No longer willing to suffer in silence, she is determined to confront him upon his return.

MARA (85) found work as a housekeeper in the capital of one of the Yugoslav republics after completing primary school. At the age of 20, she returned home and took a job as an unskilled production worker. Her husband abused her for many years. She finally left him upon retiring. Later she worked for years as a domestic worker and helped with the grape harvest. Today, she is content with her life, in good health, and still occasionally helps in the vineyards.

NADJA (70) completed primary school and has worked as a cleaner. Years of workplace bullying and severe violence from her alcoholic husband led to depression, and she was hospitalized twice. After 20 years of marriage, she divorced him. Now single, she is happy to live in peace – free from violence and alcohol. She is currently saving for a holiday in Greece or Spain.

MARIJA (70) grew up with an abusive father and began working at the age of 15. She completed her primary school education through evening classes and later took courses in typing and sewing. Her husband was an alcoholic and a violent man. After a traumatic divorce that left her homeless, her ex-husband was granted custody of their child, and she gradually lost contact with him. Throughout her life, she had only one friend to turn to for support.

KEY THEMES IN WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES

Poverty, intergenerational transmission of deprivation, survival strategies, help and support

All the women interviewed live below the poverty line. When asked about their monthly income, they responded openly, and also told us whether they had

4 In the initial analytic review, we identified 9 themes: social deprivation, poverty, intergenerational transmission of deprivation; education, occupation, employment; domestic violence; interactions with institutions, help, powerlessness; survival strategies, support; relationship with children; father's and/or partner's alcoholism; turning points in the life course; reflexivity.

5 Pseudonyms are used to protect the narrators' identities.

ever taken on a side job to make ends meet. Today, most of them live on modest pensions, none of which exceed €650. One woman, who was never formally employed due to chronic health issues, now depends on social assistance and a care allowance. All the narrators were born and raised in modest, even extremely poor families.

> *When my mother woke me up, I took the cows out to pasture, came home, washed quickly, ate something, and went to school. Halfway there, I met my sister and brother, and we swapped shoes, our boots. I took the better-looking pair for school, and the one heading home wore the worn-out ones.* (Ferida, 72)

The narrators who spent their childhood and youth in rural Bosnia lived under severe economic and social deprivation:

> *There were eight of us children. My brother died. I have three brothers and four sisters. Life was hard. When we finished primary school – four years of it, back then – we immediately went to work in the fields… digging for a daily wage.* (Ivana, 65)

All the narrators were involved in labour from an early age, often hard physical work, as Ivana recounts, or helped with household tasks and cared for younger siblings. Throughout their lives, none of the women managed to rise significantly above the modest conditions of their families of origin. While their standard of living is better today than that of their ancestors – since the general material, health, and hygiene conditions improved – they still belong, as we can assume their parents did, to the lowest income quintile. The same pattern appears to continue with their children. Their levels of education and employment do not differ significantly from those of their mothers. We can therefore speak of an intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.[6] No upward social mobility has been observed. Within a culture of poverty, reinforced by additional factors such as domestic violence and frequent alcoholism, social status appears frozen in time. The narrators live today in very modest conditions, yet they do not complain, much less resist. It is as if doing so would be meaningless.

> *My pension is… so low* [tiny smile, AN]. *I retired with a pension of 451 euros. Each year, they increased it by just two or three euros… and that was it.* (Selma, 71*)*

> *I somehow managed to make ends meet – and I still do. My pension is now 606 euros.* (Mara, 85)

With modest incomes it is difficult to save anything. Those who do manage to set something aside speak of monthly savings that rarely exceed 30 euros.

> *I'm one of those people with a meagre pension. But somehow… I always manage to save a little. When I got divorced for the second time, I was often hungry. I didn't have enough money for food. I stole* [she emphasizes the word indignantly, AN] *a few slices of bread from* [names a factory where she used to work, AN] *just so I'd have something to eat on Saturdays and Sundays…* [she cries, her voice trembling, AN] *And… and then I told myself: "I will never be hungry again!"* (Ferida, 72)

The survival strategies they use are similar: growing their own produce when health permits, buying cheaper food from the countryside, selling small handmade items, and above all, carefully choosing where they buy their basic necessities.

> *I keep an eye on discounts and special offers, washing powder, for example. I check everything: all the ads, all the flyers… for everything.* (Sonja, 65)

> *I always look for the best deals and shop where it's cheaper... or I knit something, like a pair of socks for someone. I have a friend, and I start knitting socks for her in the summer so I can give them to her at the end of November. She's doing me a favour* [by buying the socks, AN] *– that way I get something out of it – and then she gives the socks to her friends for Christmas.* (Ferida, 72)

Their incomes are not sufficient to take out loans when unexpected expenses arise. In such cases, they turn to friends, usually women, and, to a lesser extent, to relatives.

6 According to the data, released by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (Inglič et al., 2024), the adult's financial situation depends on the education and employment status of their parents during their youth. The education level of either the father or the mother significantly determines the current/future material situation of their children (as adults). The share of persons aged 25 to 59 who experienced severe material and social deprivation in 2023 was higher among those whose parents had lower education levels during their youth. Similar disparities are also evident in the share of persons below the at-risk-of-poverty rate and those at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion, with differences being even larger regarding the mother's education. Among people who assessed the financial situation of the household in which they lived in their youth as very bad or bad, 26 per cent are still (in 2023) struggling to make ends meet (difficult or very difficult financial situation).

> *Our combined pension is 1100 euros. If anything unexpected happens, anything at all, we're in trouble. Only* [names a friend, AN] *can lend us some money.* (Selma, 71)

> *There's just this one friend. She lives in* [names a place near Ljubljana, AN]. *She's been helping me since my youth, right up to today.* (Marija, 70)

> *Jožica, the stonemason's wife, would occasionally give us an egg or two and made pancakes for the children. She once said, "You should have told me, then I would have given you more." But I didn't dare to ask…* (Ivana, 65)

During times of hardship, some narrators turn to humanitarian organizations for help. They discuss these experiences calmly and thoughtfully, approaching them with wisdom and practicality rather than with shame or fear of stigma. Others, however, were more hesitant, worried about embarrassing their children. One narrator described how she waited for a kind of "permission":

> *I was living from hand to mouth, just barely managing to make ends meet. Then my son said, "Mom, maybe you could… you could also go to the Red Cross." And that's how I started coming here. I get some parcels – it's not much, but it helps.* (Mara, 85)

Another narrator shared the deep shame and desperation she felt when she sought material assistance from the Centre for Social Work decades ago:

> *"I have brought these papers, and I am asking for your help." She took one look at them, looked at me, and said, "Ma'am, do you really think you can just come here, and I'll say, 'How much do you need?' and just give you some money?" I took the papers back and said, "Look, you can shove them up your ass!" But… the tears just kept rolling down my cheeks. I didn't want to, but I humiliated myself so much!* (Ferida, 72)

Rather than relying on formal aid, most narrators depend(ed) on themselves and their close circles of friends and family. Those who did turn to humanitarian organizations for modest material assistance often found ways to give back, typically through volunteering. Helping others holds deep meaning for them.

Education, occupation, employment (and marriage)

The time adverb "early" in relation to educational attainment, employment and marriage is characteristic of all narratives. The women in our sample completed their education at an early age: all but one had only completed (or partially completed) primary school. Likewise, all but one – whose health prevented it – entered the labour market before reaching adulthood. Similarly, all but one married before the age of 20.

> *I said, "I'll marry the first person I meet. I don't care if it's someone I pick up off the street!" And that's exactly what happened. He was working in Ljubljana, and I came here. He told me, "You have one month: if you find us an apartment, you stay; if not, you go back* [to Bosnia, AN]*." So, I found an apartment and I stayed.* (Ferida, 72)

The narratives clearly indicate that the women's early marriages and partnerships were closely linked to conditions within their families of origin. For the migrant women in particular, marriage often represented an escape from unstimulating and typically oppressive home environments. In three cases, it also entailed leaving the household of the partner's parents, where they had been subjected to extreme subordination, and in one case, sexual harassment. All but two of the narrators reported experiencing violence in their relationships, including severe physical, economic, and psychological abuse. Their low levels of formal education were largely attributed to limited opportunities to continue schooling.

> *I finished primary school, and that was it. That's where everything ended. No one ever asked if I wanted to continue my education. No one asked anything. Nobody, nobody, nobody...* (Sonja, 65)

> *I wasn't good at school; I tell you that honestly… I only managed four years.* (Neva, 72)

> *…we had no money, even if I wanted to continue... I think it would be good for me to continue my education, but there was no money, because we were four children, only our father worked... and soon my brother also started working in the mine, he took any job he could get, and I took a job as a cleaner, I cleaned for 37 years.* (Nadja, 70)

References to their school years and vocational training were brief, suggesting that this phase of life was not perceived as particularly meaningful or impactful. While some expressed regret over their inability to pursue further education, such opportunities were generally out of reach due to financial constraints and a lack of parental support. In contrast, employment emerged as a significant and empowering aspect of their lives. While initially a necessity, work came to represent much more: it was a vital resource that enabled several women to leave abusive relationships after enduring years of suffering.

> *My life was hard. I started working because I wanted to buy clothes and sanitary pads for my daughter. I didn't want her to wear rags like I did. That's all I had – a few rags – because he wouldn't give me any money. I wouldn't wish that on any woman – not having her own money. The way I lived, I wouldn't wish that on anyone, no way. My husband beat me. And his mother always said: "Son, you only have one mother: believe your mother, don't believe that bitch!"* (Ivana, 65)

When the narrators entered the labour market – in the late 1960s and 1970s – employment opportunities were relatively accessible, particularly in industrial manufacturing and cleaning sectors. Job leads were typically obtained through acquaintances or family members. However, due to their young age, some narrators were not permitted to make independent decisions regarding the money they earned.

> *Of every salary I received, I gave half to my father. I don't know why…* (Sonja, 65)

> *I started working when I was fifteen and a half. I had to give half of my salary to my mother, and the other half went straight into a savings account. No, I wasn't allowed to keep any money for myself, not until I turned eighteen. We needed it to survive. In practice, I was providing for myself and my younger brother.* (Marija, 70)

To secure better-paying employment, some of the narrators sought to further their education by attending night school or enrolling in various courses, such as typing, sewing, or bookkeeping. However, the employment situation changed significantly for them following Slovenia's independence and the establishment of a new political and economic order, during which many of the factories where they had previously worked went bankrupt.

> *My husband's sister worked there and told me they were looking for seamstresses. I said, "But how can I do that? I don't have any qualifications!" So I took a six-month sewing course while I was working at* [factory name, AN]. *Then I switched jobs and went to* [another factory, AN]. *I think I worked as a seamstress there for about eighteen years.* (Selma, 71)

> *I started working there… after one month – no salary. The second month passes – no salary. Third month – no salary.* (Ferida, 72)

Most women also engaged in side jobs, often seasonal in nature, such as fruit and vegetable picking, gathering medicinal herbs, selling handicrafts, or working as domestic helpers.

> *I worked in* [factory name, AN] *for thirty years. I also helped with the grape harvest in the vineyards. I helped around a lot with housework, I was a maid in* [names a city, AN]. (Mara, 85)

These informal jobs were often unpaid; instead of getting some money, they were compensated with small goods or favours, described as receiving "a bit of this and that."

> *I worked my ass off! I cleaned, I cut chestnuts for the Albanians who roasted and sold them, I knitted clothes for my neighbours' kids, I sewed… But if someone had reported me for sewing at home, they would've cut off my benefits! So I said: fine, I won't ask for money – instead of paying me, bring me some food, or washing powder, or coffee…* (Marija, 70)

> *And she went to take care of this woman, to nurse her. She did everything – cared for her, watched over her – but she didn't get paid! He just gave her a little bit of this and that.* (Maja, Neva's daughter, 40)

Childcare arrangements were typically informal as well. When the women worked, their children usually did not attend kindergarten but were cared for by a partner, relative, neighbour, or friend. The women often coordinated their work schedules to care for one another's children, stating that "we took turns."

(Domestic) violence, alcoholism, institutions

Since the topic of (domestic) violence was not included in the interview protocol, we did not explicitly ask about it, but at least eight women who had experienced it decided to talk about it, hesitantly at first, then with a wide-open narrative flow. In at least three cases, the act of speaking appeared to be both traumatic and therapeutic. For one narrator, it was the first time she had ever spoken about being raped as a child.[7] For all but one of these women, the experience of intimate partner violence had ended by the time of the interview, either because their partners had died or because they had divorced them. The only woman still living with an abusive partner was unlikely to face further physical violence, as he was terminally ill and hospitalized at the time of the interview. She is waiting for him to return, when:

> *I'll tell him everything, everything – just to get it off my chest. He's said "Fuck you" to me more times than I have hairs on my head. I haven't slept with him in over twenty years, I just can't. I even told the priest in confession that I can't stand him.* (Ivana, 65)

We identified a specific form of violence – one that has yet to be adequately named – which arises in two distinct contexts. The first involves parents withholding essential knowledge from their children, knowledge that is crucial for navigating life. For instance, a teenage girl became pregnant at the same time as her mother. Because pregnancy and childbirth were never discussed at home, she had no understanding of what to expect:

> *I got pregnant and when I found out... I mean, I didn't know... I didn't know anything about it! I didn't even know when... that you get your period, I knew nothing* [she emphasizes the last word strongly, AN]*! Because we didn't talk about things like that... The night before I went into the delivery room, I asked my mom: "Mom, are they going to tie me up in there?" I thought that's what's gonna happen: you get there, and they tie you up. I told myself, "If they don't tie me up, then everything will be okay."* (Sonja, 65)

The second context concerns systemic violence perpetrated by institutions, particularly when individuals are denied access to vital information about their rights and entitlements as citizens. One such case involved a young family who illegally moved into a 12-square-meter room in an abandoned building, later slated for demolition by the owning company.

> *Where was I supposed to go with a baby? She was sleeping under the window when they came and started tearing the place down. I told them, "Go on then, keep going – you'll crush the baby under the rubble!" But they didn't stop. I pulled her close and held her against my chest. The police came and tried to throw us out. I said, "Do what you want, I've got nowhere else to go. Put me wherever you want, even in jail if you must!"* (Selma, 71)

When asked if they had sought help from any institution, Selma responded that they had not, fearing legal repercussions due to their unauthorized occupancy. After the police forcibly evicted them, they found temporary refuge with relatives who also lived in poverty. This form of violence is closely tied to (epistemic) ignorance,[8] itself deeply interwoven with deprivation and poverty.

Intimate partner violence is certainly a central theme in the narratives about violence. Six of the eight women had survived severe and prolonged abuse.

> *I was pregnant. When you take a man off the street as your husband, of course you know you won't get along with him... that all hell is gonna break loose... And we argued and he started beating me... and then he shot me! ... Somewhere here* [points to her lower abdomen, AN] ... *and I was already pregnant at the time though I didn't even know I was pregnant! It was 2 millimetres short of going through the middle of my pelvis ... And they* [in the ER, AN] *told me I was pregnant... And…because I'm an honest person... I'm like: "Hey, you made a mistake, now you're going to be a decent man". He says: "I'm not gonna hit you again! I beg you…" He cries like a child: "Please, just say that you did it yourself, that you shot yourself!" And they laughed at me: "Why here, why didn't you shoot yourself in the head?"* (Ferida, 72)

Ferida's story is a typical example of being trapped in a cycle of violence. After divorcing her first husband, who took away her child – a fatal combination of rigid patriarchal ideology, according to which the child belongs to the father, and poverty – during her long-term stay at the hospital, she later entered another violent relationship:

> *When I divorced that man, I remarried two years later. And we immediately started saving money to buy a flat. And we bought a two-bedroom flat. And we lived together for 18 years... He hit me too, like... like... I didn't know how to behave, I didn't*

7 At the age of eight, Ivana was raped by a stranger when she was sent to a well during harvest time to fetch water for the reapers. That evening, after she had crawled home bleeding, her father beat her. She never spoke about it, her mother died early, but when her father was dying, she decided to tell him and then changed her mind so that he could rest in peace.

8 Nancy Tuana addressed the concept of epistemic ignorance in her article published in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* (Tuana, 2006) and later co-authored a more extensive treatment with Shannon Sullivan in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Together, they developed a taxonomy of ignorance, illustrating how women's social position is shaped not only by their knowledge but also by their ignorance. They argue that ignorance is directly dependent on social power and is often meticulously constructed and maintained, either directly or indirectly. Let us add: its main medium are society's repressive apparatuses and bureaucratic practices.

know how to live! I didn't know what to say... if I said "good" he'd hit me, if I said "bad" he'd hit me. (Ferida, 72)

The severe physical violence had a profound and lasting impact on the women's health. In Ferida's case, it ultimately left her unable to have children. Ivana, similarly, is reminded of the violence with every sip and every bite she takes:

It was summer, he beat me, he choked me, he threw me to the ground and broke my skull. To this day I always drink water when I eat, it's the only way I can swallow food. Because he hurt me here. [points to her throat, AN]

For both Ferida and Marija, the cycle of abuse extended across relationships and generations. Ferida experienced violence again in her second marriage, while Marija, who grew up in a violent household, went on to live in an even more abusive environment as an adult.

And then he came after me, he threw me to the ground, hit my head to the floor, threw me down and forcibly got that – you know what – the little one jumped on him, "You're killing mommy!" and he locked the little one in a room and he took a knife, the big one, butcher's knife, saying he knows the kid is not his son, he knows that's why I didn't want another child, that he's gonna gut me, cut me from the belly up… well, then I passed out. (Marija, 70)

During the interview, Neva held hands with both her mother and her daughter as she recounted their shared history. They kept saying that they only survived because they had each other.

This much you should know: I was less afraid of a snake than of my husband [her voice breaks to a barely audible whisper, AN]. (Neva, 72)

Then he came and started kicking her. I remember it clearly, the image is so vivid in my mind: he came and... he poured boiling water on her back... she couldn't lie on her back for two months! He hit her on the head with an iron kettle, they were very big and heavy back then and smashed her skull. And he wouldn't let her see a doctor! A neighbour bought everything she needed to bandage her. She shaved her head and put the bandages on. ... I was just a child, but I remember everything! He wouldn't even let her change the bandages! It was the alcohol that did it! And one night he came home drunk, it was payday, and he started beating her! I lunged at him and... he grabbed me by the throat and started choking me. He choked me until I passed out. Barely... she barely managed to get me out of his hands. […] *I passed his house on the way to school – we had already moved into my grandma's house – and I was so scared of him I wet my pants.* (Maja, Neva's daughter, 40)

In all but one of the cases involving extreme, life-threatening violence, the perpetrator was an alcoholic. The women never downplayed their partner's excessive drinking, for instance, by saying "everyone drinks." Instead, they recognized alcoholism as a serious addiction and made efforts to address it.

I always went to the treatments with him. We used to come home after midnight and Grandma would look after her while I was away. I did everything I could to get him help. He needed therapy so he would stop... drinking [her voice breaks, AN]. *For five years I tried to get him to stop... but... he just wouldn't quit!* (Neva, 72)

Mara explained that her husband's alcoholism was ultimately what gave her the strength to end their abusive marriage.

He was a glassmaker, and glassmakers are always drunk... Always! And then, after the kids left home, I thought things would get better since it was just the two of us. But it got even worse. Without the kids around, he had even more control over me, that's how it was… He was horrible back then! I used to wish I'd outlive him by just a few days, just to know what it's like to be free and live a good life… (Mara, 85)

The reasons why the narrators did not leave or divorce their violent partners earlier varied. We deliberately chose not to pose this question directly, as it often carries implicit judgment or blame. Nonetheless, the women raised the issue themselves. They explained that they could not leave because of financial constraints such as mortgages, because their partner legally owned the home, because of threats to take the children away, or simply because they were too afraid.

What held me back the most were the five loans I had. But somehow, I found the courage to hire a lawyer. I asked him, "If I move out of the apartment, what's going to happen?" He said, "Expect a lawsuit, but the outcome is uncertain." So I held on. (Ferida, 72)

I always thought I should've gotten rid of him, I should've left, but… talk is cheap! When you're in that state of mind, you just can't. I was a wreck, I almost lost my mind… It's no wonder. I often say to myself, "Thank God I survived." That's all I say, "Thank God!" (Nadja, 70)

When the women shared their experiences of violence, we asked who had helped them and where they had sought support.

When my child was a baby and he [husband, AN] *beat me to a pulp... I went to the police and social services. Do you know what they told me?!? "You must obey your husband!" Today it's different, today you can't hit anyone, you can't even scowl at anyone!* (Ferida, 72)

Despite facing life-threatening violence, Neva and Maja described negative experiences with the police.

He threw an axe at my grandma! You call the police – "There's nothing we can do!" Sure, we called! But those were different times! Back then... if he doesn't kill you, it's nothing! If he doesn't kill you – "There's nothing we can do!" They showed up, but they didn't even arrest him! All they said was, "Calm down, pull yourself together… go back inside and sober up!" But how can you expect him to just calmly go back inside and sober up?!? (Maja, Neva's daughter, 40)

Nadja, on the other hand, said that what helped her most was being admitted to a psychiatric hospital. It offered a safe environment where she could distance herself from the abuse, and she found compassion and support among the medical staff and fellow patients.

In there, I got company, I tell you, there was a whole bunch of them, they listened to me, really listened, they helped me so much... But I tell you, in [name of psychiatric hospital, AN] *it was really wonderful, it was like... I wouldn't even say it resembled a hospital, it didn't look like one at all, and I had a great time there.* (Nadja, 70)

Even after the narrators found the courage to leave their abusive partners or pursue divorce, the suffering continued for at least two of them. Their experiences might have been different had they not been living in conditions of deprivation.

Well, after the divorce, this happened: our child was placed with my ex "until the mother's housing issue is resolved." The apartment we had belonged to the factory he worked for. After the divorce, I still lived with him for a while, but he beat me so badly I ended up with a broken nose and a fractured skull. (Marija, 70)

Ferida, whose only child was – and still as – her entire world, was hospitalized for an extended period.

I went home for the weekend from the hospital and took the child to my mother in Bosnia – to save the child. I thought that when I returned from the hospital, I'd find a place for us to live. But it didn't work out that way. I went back to the hospital, and he went to Bosnia and brought the child back. Then he took over our apartment… we were separated. He brought another woman from Bosnia. I couldn't prove anything against him… and the child stayed with him. (Ferida, 72)

Life events, turning points and reflexivity

At the conclusion of the interviews, we asked the women to reflect on the most significant events in their lives, how they perceive their lives in retrospect, and what they envision for the future. Employment emerged as particularly important – indeed, often crucial. They emphasized that work not only provided the means to support themselves financially, but also offered, for some, a space of relative respite from their otherwise difficult circumstances.

When my husband beat me and I went to work the next day, I heard people talking about how badly I was beaten, how badly I was treated and so on... and I thought: "Tomorrow is another day!" (Ferida, 72)

Even Selma, who had not experienced intimate partner violence, acknowledged the critical role employment played – not merely as a means of survival, but as a source of personal stability and purpose.

And I said, "I'm getting a job, and that's that!" My husband said he could take care of us, provide for all of us on his own. But I told him, "No, I want to work. I need to." (Selma, 71)

Some women endured horrific abuse for years, only leaving their partners when the violence became life-threatening or when their children were also targeted ("After that incident, after he tried to kill me, we ran away, we fled to my grandparents."; "So I left, you know, to save the child."). In other cases, women stayed in abusive relationships for decades, only leaving after their now-adult children intervened.

Then the children said, "Mom, why don't you leave him? Why don't you just go?" So I asked my brother if I could move in with him. Thirteen months after I left my husband, he was dead. (Mara, 85)

Life has been undeniably difficult for all eight women in the study; they have endured hardships they say they would not wish upon anyone.

My life's been miserable. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. Really, it's been one long struggle. I don't know how I made it through... It was for the children. But unfortunately, life's been hard on them too. (Selma, 71)

And yet, most expressed a sense of contentment with their current lives – some even described themselves as very content – despite living frugally. What accounts for this sense of contentment in later life, after so much suffering? We identified two central sources: their children and grandchildren, and a sense of peace, freedom, and autonomy.

These days, I really, really enjoy being single. First, I do everything here [at the Senior Activity Centre, AN]*, and then when I get home – I'm the queen of my castle! I've never enjoyed life like I do now. I live how I want, cook what I want, go where I want... rest when I feel like it... and I'm truly having the time of my life!* (Ferida, 72)

I prefer being single. I come and go as I please, I answer to no one. I feel peace, I feel calm. Sometimes I look up to the universe and say, "Thank you for this peace." (Nadja, 70)

Ivana, who continues to live with her abusive husband, finds strength in her children and her deep religious faith.

Life was hard, it still is, but I am grateful to God that I have children, that they are healthy, that they have work and a roof over their heads... It was so hard, I endured so much, but then I took the pills, I wanted to kill myself, they pumped my stomach, I was in hospital for two days. I had a hard life, but God still gave me health and I just pray for a peaceful death. We will all go to the great beyond, just let it be peaceful. (Ivana, 65)

When they look to the future, their thoughts are most often directed toward their children and grandchildren – though primarily in terms of concern for their well-being, rather than expectations of receiving support in old age. Given their limited financial means, institutional care, such as placement in a nursing home, is not considered a viable option.

A nursing home? No way! How could we ever afford that? Our pensions together barely cover one person! It's sad, isn't it? (Sonja, 65)

When asked whether there had been any joyful or fulfilling moments in their lives, and whether they were satisfied with their current life, one of them responded:

There had been – the children and grandchildren. Or now, when I'm retired, when my husband is away, he's down in Bosnia, and my friend comes by. We make coffee, lie on the bed, talk about the old days... we usually doze off. When we wake up, we eat something nice – something sweet, if there's anything to hand. (Selma, 71)

DISCUSSION

In reflecting on the themes that emerged from the narratives, we observed both parallels with and notable deviations from findings in international research on older, economically disadvantaged women who have experienced domestic violence. While some of our findings align with those of previous studies, important differences also emerged. For instance, unlike findings reported in studies from other countries, our participants did not exhibit self-blame in their reflections on the violence they endured. Prior research has shown that older women often internalize responsibility and look to themselves to explain what was going wrong in their households and their relationships, or express guilt over their perceived failure to protect their children from violence (Wendt & Zannettino, 2015; Hing et al., 2021). This tendency was absent in our sample.

Consistent with expectations and existing research, our data revealed strong intergenerational patterns and the cyclical nature of violence. All the narrators were raised in households where women were expected to be subservient and compliant with their husband's will, and where the physical punishment of women and children was normalized. As Sonja (2024) recalled, "My father was extremely strict, we were terrified of him." Several narratives highlighted that this dynamic persisted even in the absence of male authority figures. In such cases, mothers or mothers-in-law assumed dominant roles, exercising their authority to oppress and intimidate their children and daughters-in-law. Ivana (2024) recounted, "My mother-in-law took a wooden stake and started to beat me, screaming, 'You whore!'"

All participants were born and raised in severely disadvantaged or impoverished households, where daily life centred on survival and hard physical labour. Education and occupational advancement were largely inaccessible and deprioritized. Most of the women worked in industrial manufacturing and supplemented their income through informal labour, such as cleaning or domestic work. All identified as belonging to the lower working class. However, a notable divergence from international findings (cf. Podnieks, 2008; Saunders, 2020) emerged in the area of economic independence. In our sample, all but one woman had been employed, had access to a personal – albeit modest – income, and currently receive a pension, though often a minimal one. This financial autonomy allowed many of them to eventually leave abusive relationships or pursue divorce, even if later in life. A Canadian study of older women, victims of violence found that 70 per cent of them were completely economically dependent on their partners, which kept them in violent relationships in later life (Podnieks, 2008). In Slovenian context, the full employment of women – an essential tenet of the socialist doctrine of emancipation – proved to be of critical importance for the women in our sample, often even redeeming. In the narratives collected for our study, it was not the lack of income but rather the lack of alternative housing options that emerged as the decisive factor. The primary reason for delaying separation was the difficulty of securing rental accommodation following divorce. Two women reported that, due to unresolved housing issues, custody of their children was awarded to their abusive partners. One of these women described the experience as the most traumatic event of her life.

With one exception, all the women in our study married very young – before the age of 20 – several years earlier than the average marriage age for their cohort.[9] Early marriage aligned with prevailing patriarchal norms ("If you weren't married by 20, nobody wanted you," Ivana recalled), but it also served as a means of escaping violent families of origin and an environment in which they saw no viable future. However, this escape often led to similarly, or even more, violent domestic situations. Early entry into both the labour market and marriage compounded their economic vulnerability ("I gave my salary to my father"), reinforcing patterns of submissiveness and subservience within a deeply patriarchal context ("I kept quiet and did what I was told"; "My husband's father tried to rape me in the barn"). These early transitions into adult roles also left the women with limited life experience and exposed them to institutional paternalism.

It would be erroneous to generalize the narrators' experiences of violence or other recurring elements in their life courses. Nevertheless, we believe these accounts are indicative of broader patterns. All the women associated the violence they had endured with not only physical abuse but also with severe forms of coercive control, humiliation, and psychological manipulation. They described experiences such as being forbidden to leave the house or make eye contact with others, enduring sexualized insults, accusations of infidelity, and pressures to terminate pregnancies. For most, the cycle of violence began in their families of origin and continued into their own marital relationships. In five cases, prolonged exposure to abusive relationships resulted in significant physical and mental health issues. Chronic stress and psychological exhaustion stemmed from living in a constant state of fear, shouldering the burden of all domestic responsibilities, and often taking on additional informal work to compensate for the loss of family income caused by their partners' alcohol dependency. In five cases, the abusive partner was an alcoholic, and in four of these, the partner eventually died because of excessive drinking. The lasting impact of intimate partner violence also shaped the women's attitudes toward future relationships. None of the women who had divorced or lost their partners wanted to form a new partnership in later life, emphasizing the value they placed on the peace and autonomy they had gained.

Some women had reported their partner's violence to the police or social services but were disillusioned by the institutional responses, summed up by recurring phrases: "There's nothing we can do!" or "You must obey your husband!" Reflecting on these experiences, the women frequently referred to the historical and institutional context in which the violence occurred: "Those were different times," and "Things are different now, no one can hit you." Their own perceptions of violence also evolved over time: "Today it's easy to talk, but back then I could not speak out about it or leave."

A further theme that emerged strongly from the narratives was that of female solidarity and informal support networks. Friends, neighbours, and relatives often played crucial roles during the women's most vulnerable moments. In three cases, this support became lifelong. The supportive role of other women was explicitly acknowledged in all but one narrative, in which the narrator described receiving compassion and care from fellow patients in a psychiatric ward, without specifying their gender.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the thematic analysis reveal a complex interplay of interrelated and mutually reinforcing factors across the life courses of older women living in poverty who had experienced (domestic) violence: material deprivation, limited social and cultural capital, the alcohol dependency of partners and/or fathers, and a deeply entrenched patriarchal mentality that extended beyond the private sphere and permeated the institutional systems they encountered. Yet, a significant turning point emerged in each of their lives: the moment when they were no longer subjected to domestic violence. This transition held profound significance for the women. Despite enduring many hardships, they expressed a sense of satisfaction with their current lives. Violence has left a more profound imprint on their lives than poverty itself.

Today, the narrators lead modest, quiet, and relatively contented lives. Some enjoy good health, while others do not. They enjoy sharing a cup of coffee with a friend after lunch and indulging in a sweet treat – "if there's anything to hand."

We thank them all for sharing their life-stories – they still resonate within us.

9 In 1971, the median age of first marriage for women in Slovenia was 24 years (Šircelj, 2020, 466).

»*TAKU DA ZNASTE: KAČE SEM SE BALA MANJ OD SVOJEGA MOŽA*«: ŽIVLJENJSKE ZGODBE STAREJŠIH ŽENSK O REVŠČINI IN NASILJU

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POVZETEK

V članku so predstavljeni izsledki raziskave o življenjskih potekih starejših žensk z izkušnjami socialne deprivacije, revščine in nasilja v družini. Z uporabo pristopa perspektive življenjskega poteka in izvedbo biografsko-narativnih intervjujev smo v življenju starejših žensk, ki živijo z nizkimi dohodki in so bile žrtve nasilja v družini, odkrili številne dejavnike, ki so se združevali in medsebojno krepili: medgeneracijski prenos prikrajšanosti, nizek socialni in kulturni kapital, alkoholizem staršev in/ali zakoncev ter patriarhalna miselnost, ki je bila tudi del prevladujoče institucionalne kulture. Večina jih je izkusila krog nasilja: zloraba se je običajno začela v izvorni družini in se nadaljevala v lastni družini, vendar nobena od njih ni bila žrtev nasilja v poznejših letih. Predhodne izkušnje z intimnopartnerskim nasiljem so trajno vplivale na njihov odnos do partnerskih zvez: nobena od žensk, ki so se ločile ali katerih partner je umrl, si v poznejših letih ni želela skleniti nove partnerske zveze, saj visoko cenijo mir in samostojnost, ki so ju pridobile. Iz pripovedi je bilo razvidno, da je nasilje življenja starejših žensk zaznamovalo bolj kot revščina in pomanjkanje.

Ključne besede: starejše ženske, revščina, nasilje v družinah, perspektiva življenjskega poteka, biografski narativni intervju, Slovenija

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