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**ELDERLY PEOPLE AND DISCRIMINATION:
PREVENTION AND REACTION**

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***Elderly People and Discrimination:
Prevention and Reaction***

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Milana Ljubičić*

AGEING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EXTREMELY POOR ELDERLY: A CASE STUDY**

Like a large number of other European countries, the Republic of Serbia is facing the process of population ageing. According to demographic estimations, the elderly could soon make up a quarter of our country's population. Ageing goes hand in hand with the increased needs of the elderly for care and nursing, but also with prejudices. A decline in the quality of life is expected unless the old person has enough social, cultural, and especially material capital. If such capital is unavailable, the old are exposed to material and other forms of deprivations. How those old people in situations of extreme poverty perceive the ageing process, and whether they have capacities to alleviate the deprivations they face, were two research questions that we tried to get an answer to in our case study. We conducted an in-depth interview with an old person in a situation of absolute poverty. Analysis showed that our respondent meets existentially important issues, without social support. However, she possesses defines mechanisms/strategies for coping and solving some of the deprivations.

Keywords: *extreme poverty, old age, strategies*

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Introduction

The ageing of population is a global demographic trend that directly stands witness to a significant civilizational step forward - the extension of expected longevity. According to the projections, the number of the elderly will continue to increase, particularly of the extremely elderly ones (75 plus): in 2030, as many as 434 million people will be older than 65, while two out of three old persons will live in a developing region (*Income Poverty in Old Age: An Emerging Development Priority. social.un.org/ageing i*). Therefore, it is small wonder that the policy creators in this domain, and in particular the governments of the developed countries, recognize the ageing process as a special economic, social and community-based challenge (Kwan, Walsh, 2018) that directly affects the whole series of the rights of the elderly, e.g., the right to dignity (see: Ljubičić, 2020; Simović, Simović, 2020).

One of the most pronounced problems is definitely the poverty of the elderly. In the scientific field, this issue was brought up more than three decades ago by Stone (1989), who noticed that the number of poor Americans, both young and old ones, was on the rise, although poverty was generally believed to have been more or less eradicated¹ (Filipović, 2018: 13). At the time, this author already noticed two, conditionally speaking, difficulties that are of particular concern nowadays. The first one is that it is necessary to resolve the problem of resource allocation: who should be more important to help - the young or the elderly, because there were no sufficient resources for either category of population.² The other challenge refers to the feminization of the population, particularly in the case of the elderly.³ Finally, current data also indicate that poverty in the old age is primarily a female issue (Roig, Maruichi, 2022) in almost all countries,⁴ including our country⁵ (Babović, Cvejić Stefanović, 2018), as well as that women older than 75 are

¹ At the time, it was believed that poverty is the residue of general progress (Filipović, 2018: 13) - a marginal phenomenon, while the poor are personally non-adapted and responsible for the failure to participate in social progress.

² This dilemma was openly re-actualized at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, when the question arose as to who should be given priority for medical treatment in the situation of limited resources (see: Ljubičić, 2021; Polinesi, Ciommi, Gigliarano, 2023).

³ Stone (1989) states that 15% women and 7% men in the USA lived below the poverty line in the 1980s.

⁴ With the exception of Hungary, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Malta, where the poverty of the elderly is relatively low (<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/documents/PovertyIssuePaperAgeing.pdf>).

⁵ Women at an older age (in 16.9% cases) are more exposed to the risk of poverty than their male peers (13.3%) (Babović, Cvejić, Stefanović, 2018).

exposed to a particular risk of poverty (between 24% and 40%⁶)(<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/documents/PovertyIssuePaperAgeing.pdf>).

The strategies and practical policies that should reduce the risk of poverty in the case of persons in their third life age are of a more recent date. For example, in the document *Millennium Development Goals* (2015), the UN General Assembly sets the goal of reducing social exclusion and poverty, but does not emphasize the specific age characteristics of material and any other deprivation (Kwan, Walsh, 2018). That age is an additional risk for becoming or remaining poor is not clearly emphasized until the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing*.⁷ Namely, it is only in this document that the reduction of the poverty of the elderly is stated as one of the key goals of the governments (Roig, Maruichi, 2022).

It was recognized that the insufficiently developed social protection system and economic insecurity (*Income Poverty in Old Age: An Emerging Development Priority*) can put the elderly into the situation of poverty, while risk alleviation strategies mainly point out the necessity of working on pension policies. Namely, in the EU member-states there is a declarative consent regarding two goals: 1. that pension income should be sufficiently high for senior citizens to avoid being exposed to the risk of poverty, and 2. that they should be at such a level as to ensure the living standard similar to the one prior to old-age pension (Zaidi, 2010). However, not much has been done in that respect: public allocations for social protection vary from one country to another, and it is stated that, in global terms, only 42% of the future pensioners can expect a social pension (*Income Poverty in Old Age: An Emerging Development Priority*), although it has been revealed that this income, although generally low, acts protectively when it comes to the poverty of the elderly and everything pertaining to it⁸ (Kwan, Walsh, 2018). It is particularly concerning that there is no adequate policy for those working in the grey zone and running the risk of being left with no income at all in their old age (Zaidi, 2010).

Furthermore, there are no cross-nationally comparable data about how profound and widespread the poverty of the elderly is, not even in the EU member-states. The research in this domain is mostly related to the local context and, in addition, the researchers use different definitions, operationalization and indicators of poverty (Kwan, Walsh, 2018). Finally, despite the fact that the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for*

⁶ The former percentage shows the average risk of poverty in the EU member-states in the case of the elderly 75 plus, while the latter refers to the countries in which poverty incidence is high above average.

⁷ The Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing adopted in 2002 constitutes, according to Babović et al. (2018: 10), the most significant international document elaborating on the ageing policies at the global level.

⁸ For example, poor mental and somatic health.

reliable data calls for the collection of reliable data, there are few countries with the mutually comparable data bases about the elderly (*Income Poverty in Old Age: An Emerging Development Priority*).

However, regardless of the above-listed methodological difficulties, there are assessments of poverty incidence. This incidence is believed to range from 2% in the Netherlands (in 2013) and 3% in Czech Republic (data for 2012), 34% in Australia (2014), 50% in Korea (2009) up to 80% in Zambia (in 2009) (Zaidi, 2010). The difficult social position of the elderly is graphically shown by the data from Indonesia. Namely, in this country, as many as 85% people over 65 do not have any income whatsoever (Muis, Agustang, Adam, 2020).

A high percentage (18%) of the EU citizens in the third life age is also exposed to the risk of poverty: 16 million elderly or on average one in five citizens of the EU member-states (Zaidi, 2010: 3). In that respect, the elderly in Romania (26%), Spain (29%), Lithuania (29%), the UK⁹ (30%), Bulgaria (34%), Estonia (39%) and Cyprus (49%) are in the most unenviable situation.

In our country, the elderly, particularly female, also face poverty (*Research on the Position of Older Women in Serbia*), which is to a certain extent alleviated by the pension-based income (Babović et al., 2018). In fact, it is thanks to the guaranteed income that the persons over 65 (19.1%) run the lowest risk of poverty in the general population.

The above-mentioned leaves little room for optimism when it comes to the well-being of the elderly in global terms. On the one hand, the data show that poverty of the people in their third life age is rather widespread, while, on the other hand, only a small number of studies is dedicated to the evaluation of strategies and policies of poverty reduction among the elderly according to which potential changes in this domain could be monitored (Kwan, Wang, 2018). Furthermore, we must agree with Kwan and Wang (2018) that the studies about the elderly mostly focus on the difficulties encountered by them. Those are illnesses, deprivation, deficit, abnormalities and disorders. We know very little about the personal strengths possessed by the elderly.

Does old age necessarily take away resilience?

⁹ These data refer to the period before Brexit.

1. Personal strategies and strengths of people in the third life age

The authors rarely deal with the personal strengths and resilience¹⁰ of the elderly in relation to the difficulties inevitably encountered by them.¹¹ It is the primary reason why a whole series of tactics used by the elderly in order to live their everyday life (and survive) remains unrecognized. Some of them are culturally based and belong to the corpus of traditional solutions to the problems such as the poverty of the elderly. For example, Korean studies show that family ties reduce the risk of material deprivation because cultural norms dictate the obligation of relatives to look after the elderly.

Furthermore, Rodrigues Lemes et al. (2019) assert that, based on the analysis of 27 studies on resilience of the elderly facing illness or natural disasters¹², resilience to challenges varies also depending on public policies in the domain of ageing. According to these authors, this thesis is corroborated by the example of high resilience of elderly Australians to personal and natural disasters. Namely, they live in the state with the most stable pension system in the world, which ensures avoiding the risk of poverty and providing a dignified life in the old age.¹³

Apart from the solutions offered for typical challenges accompanying old age at the local level, in the form of tradition and collective expectations, or system efforts, some refer to the optimistic conclusion that the elderly are not necessarily helpless, even when facing significant life challenges (illness, natural disasters, death of close family members), but they possess personal strengths also acquired through life experience. Although some of them, for example, avoidance tactic, which is essentially reduced to the pretence that the problem does not exist or, for example, the manifestation of hostility or helplessness, isolation, keeping quiet about the problem, are not adequate, there are also coping models that help an elderly person to overcome life difficulties (Hildon et al., according to: Portella Fontes, Liberalesso Neri, 2019). Those who manage to integrate difficulties in their everyday life, learn how to live with a problem, direct their attention to different contents, apart from those personally upsetting ones, or seek help from others, will be quite likely to remain resilient. In addition, resilience to challenges also strengthens the

¹⁰ Needless to say, the concept of resilience is not unique and it is defined in different ways in practical policies and scientific studies (Rodrigues Lemes et al., 2019).

¹¹ Mainly in those studies related to active ageing (Knežić, 2011; Dragišić Labaš, 2016).

¹² The analysis included the studies from 11 countries that measured resilience with the aid of the Connor-Davidson scale.

¹³ However, it should also be noted that the experience of trauma and its frequency can also reduce resilience. For example, the lowest resilience rate according to the Connor Davidson scale is found in Japan, among the elderly who survived natural disasters, i.e., earthquakes, which are exceptionally frequent in this country (Rodrigues Lemes et al., 2019).

old person's willingness to actively search for more information about a specific problem bothering him/her, to connect more closely with other people, to pray and/or have faith that God or some higher entity will help him/her, and to be ready to learn from that experience.

A recent research study (Stanojević, Ljubičić, Filipović, Marković, in the process of preparation for printing) applies the positive deviance method to establish that a number of the elderly have the capacity to adapt successfully to health, economic and family challenges by building new and maintaining old social networks. Moreover, it transpires that the feeling of personal wellbeing and resilience to life challenges is reciprocal to their expression of solidarity with and providing concrete help to those who are of poorer material status and health.

In her study that includes seven poor elderly women (between 50 and 69¹⁴) from a village in Bangladesh, Sultana (2011) also finds that, despite these women's expectations did not come true,¹⁵ they possess certain strategies for surviving loneliness, hunger, the feeling of being disrespected and life failure. Some of the modes of surviving everyday life are found negative by this author, e.g., an old person's conflict with the family members, while others are found positive. These would include the avoidance of conflict, the failure to express one's opinions or wishes, the tolerance of the lack of power within the family and posing no requests to others (Sultana, 2011). Furthermore, a small number of studies dealing with this topic have established that being religious has a special place in facing life difficulties, particularly poverty¹⁶ and illness. It helps to redefine the circumstances and difficulties and to interpret them as God's benevolences (Pargament 1997, according to: Black, 1999).

Therefore, researching the resilience of women in South Sudan, who found their shelter in the refugee centres in Uganda, Isaac Waanzi Hillary and Bruno Braak (2022), establish that these women have devised ways of surviving, reconciling and accepting the unenviable existential circumstances. Speaking of conflict, losses (of family members), dreams that did not come true, displacement and why they say that they live in the world inverted upside down, all these indicate that resilience does not imply returning to old ways, as it is usually believed, and money and material possessions are not its backbone.¹⁷ Resilience is much more than that. It implies devising everyday practices (personal effort,

¹⁴ The author included 50-year-old women in the elderly, justifying it by the fact that the life of village women is rather difficult and that the changes typical of old age emerged as early as the fifties.

¹⁵ All of them imagined that their old age would be different and that their children would respect them more.

¹⁶ In fact, some research studies show that the poor have stronger religious beliefs in comparison to those who are better off in material terms (Joshi, Hardy, Hawkins, 2009).

¹⁷ The thesis promoted by the FAO and the UNDP.

independence, work) whose sole goal, at least in the event of the respondents in the study of Isaac Waanzi Hillary and Bruno Braak (2022), is keeping common sense. It becomes possible thanks to their belief that everything is in the hands of God and their ancestors and that it is necessary to hold on and exert oneself.

How important religiosity is in devising ways to accept difficult life circumstances (poverty, illness, marginalization based on the colour of skin, gender and age is also shown by Helen Black (1999). Four old Afro-Americans, her respondents, see their connection with God as a personal, reciprocal and empowering connection. It is a partnership in which everyone has their own roles. They tell God about all the small and big things in their lives and see Him as someone closest to them. He knows everything about them, loves them in a concrete and personal way and know the intimate details from their lives. They trust that God will take care of them: He is always there when they need help. The permanent presence of God is the key mechanism of the struggle against poverty; it keeps despair away and confirms the attitude that their everyday routine and life, albeit not so easy, are actually organized by God's will. It gives hope and faith in future, so they define difficulties as accomplishments and as God's intention and expression of personal love for them (Black, 1999).

2. Methodological part of the paper

Within our context, very little is known about how old people, particularly those facing difficult life challenges - extreme poverty - survive their everyday life and what mechanisms they use for that purpose. Serbian authors, except for the above-mentioned study by Stanojević, Ljubičić, Filipović and Marković (in the process of preparation for printing), and the research focusing on active ageing (see: Knežić, 2011; Dragišić Labaš, 2016), do not deal with the topic of the resilience of the elderly. Such absence of researchers' interest is unusual, since our country faces an increasing number of the elderly in the total population, which brings along a whole series of challenges typical of that life age (illness, poverty, loneliness). Since this topic is socially relevant, we believe it is necessary to open it not only out of scientific curiosity, and particularly not for the sake of exclusivity, but also because of practical needs - to delve into the problems brought by reality, especially of those people who are by definition on the society's margins. Those are poor people, in particular women.

The research task we set before us was to understand how an old person living in extreme poverty perceived challenges in his/her life and what mechanisms he/she applied in order to deal with them. At the same time, those were two research questions we have been guided by in our study, while the goals, apart from the descriptive ones - to

describe the difficulties in old age and survival strategies, were also explanatory - to understand how to organize everyday life characterized by extreme material deprivation and everything it brings with it.

In order to describe and understand personal strategies, we used two research methods: the in-depth interview and observation with participation. We conducted an interview with Bosa¹⁸, a 74-year-old woman who has been a street beggar for 38 years.¹⁹ We spoke to her while sitting in her workplace: on the shopwindow sill - her decades-long workplace, in one of the busiest streets in Belgrade. In this way, we also got an opportunity to observe the relationships Bosa established with the passers-by and the ones she had with her friends and acquaintances. Bosa wanted to finish the interview on several occasions - first at the beginning of the interview, and every time when we asked for her particulars, e.g., how old she was and whether she lived in town or in the country. That is why our strategy was to let our respondent talk about those aspects of her everyday life that will turn out to be important for her personally as well. We directed the interview to a minimal extent, not wanting to jeopardize the possibility to hear her story or to contaminate the course of Bosa's narrative ranging from the past to the "here and now". Although, formally speaking, we distanced ourselves from the researchers' role, stopping ourselves from directing the interview towards previously prepared topics, as observers and careful listeners we had the opportunity to hear this woman's authentic voice. We wrote down parts of the interview with Bosa's approval and after the interview, we added our personal observations and comments.

2.1. Findings of the analysis

Bosa shared with us several things from her biography. In that respect, she was rather succinct: she was afraid that her particulars might be posted on social media or on *YouTube*. She revealed her personal data during our interview, at times quite accidentally, while talking about other topics. Her narrative meandered between returning to the past and then back to the present, and is quite rich in various details giving further colour to the picture of Bosa.

In her narrative, we recognize a whole series of challenges faced by her throughout life and those that currently constitute her everyday life. In the past, she had experienced being abandoned (by her partner and relatives), her son's illness, difficult material

¹⁸ The respondent's name was changed for the purpose of anonymity.

¹⁹ In contacting her, we were helped by a mutual acquaintance who also recommended us to Bosa. She otherwise refuses to talk to journalists, while she puts researchers into the same category with journalists.

deprivation and violence. The topic of being abandoned/rejected by others frequently recurs in Bosa's experience. First, she was left by her partner just before their son's birth and afterwards her family requested that she should "leave her son because he was ill". Since she did not do it, her siblings threw her out of the family home. She had no help and support from "anyone", in her own words, and she ended up in the street "with a sick child".

Another important topic is her job - begging. Being unemployed, she had nothing to live from, so after her son's birth she decided to start begging in the street. Almost four decades have gone by since then. Working in the street, Bosa has been exposed to various forms of violence: from law enforcement officers, passers-by and other beggars. She says that the communal police "takes her to the station every now and then". She feels that she is an object of injustice: "They keep arresting me while they leave the Gypsies alone", she says. Then she adds that she is treated in a most inhuman manner: "They keep me in the (police) station all day long... without giving me any water or letting me use the toilet". In addition, she has the impression that passers-by very often record her.²⁰ She is sure that they place those videos "on the Internet and write who knows what. They can cause me problems just as the thing that happened earlier". Bosa does not want to talk about what happened earlier.²¹ Furthermore, she was also a victim of physical violence when she was attacked by "our woman and by a Gypsy". Two of them asked her to give them all the money she had earned and when Bosa refused to do it, they pushed her, so she fell down and broke her hip. With the broken hip, she lay in the street "for an hour, until a girl called the ambulance". All others passed by paying no attention.

Currently this woman faces more or less the same difficulties. Those are her illness, her son's illness and material destitution. Furthermore, she is still exposed to violence from law enforcement officers, passers-by and beggars. Bosa suffers from diabetes, she cannot see well and, due to the hip fracture, she moves with difficulty. She does not seem to take sufficient care of her health. She says that "she hasn't eaten the whole day" and that it is much more important to feed the sparrows in the nest above her workplace. To prove it, she takes a piece of bread from her large bag, crumples it and leaves the crumbs on the windowsill for her pets - the sparrows. Bosa is much more concerned about her son's health than her own. She says that it is important for her to collect money for "his diapers and expensive medications". Nevertheless, this woman is an optimist; she

²⁰ During our interview, she suspected that a passer-by was doing it. Visibly upset, she took her walking stick and waved it in a threatening way. He did not notice it.

²¹ It seems that her fear is related to what happened when funds were raised for her son's treatment. At the time, a man who organized the fundraising took all the money, but Bosa was accused of it. It is likely that the media reported about this event, but we have not been able to find any information about it.

thinks that an operation could help to improve the health of “the little one” and she is putting her best efforts to provide the money for his treatment.

Because of her material destitution, she goes to work in the street every day - when it is cold and rainy and when it is hot. “I must do it because of my son”, she says, adding that she has no possessions: she did not even buy the clothes she wears. “I’m wearing male trousers. I got them, and my grandma bought me the jacket three years ago”. She is particularly offended by the behaviour of the passers-by. They do not pay attention to her or just look away. “A dog is worthier than a child. They will give money for a dog, but not for a child here”, she says in a resigned way, pointing her walking stick to the box with the written text about why she collects money.

However, although facing such challenges, Bosa manifests an enviable degree of resilience. Bosa’s resilience is founded on her religiosity, on the one hand, and on the active defence mechanisms from the assault of others, on the other hand.

In fact, Bosa’s eloquence was particularly manifested only when we mentioned the topic of God. She talked openly and eagerly about her relationship with Him. As a matter of fact, it turned out that this relation was profoundly personal: God is omnipresent in her life. She says: “Everything belongs to God! I have nothing of my own. If God hadn’t wanted me to be born, I wouldn’t be here now. Am I right?” She is certain that God helps her in everything: “You think that He won’t help you”, she poses a rhetoric question and immediately answers it: “He will!”. She then adds: “God is in everything. There’s no place where he doesn’t exist and He can do things that no one can”. Bosa illustrates her deep conviction by a number of examples. She says that “there are always good people because God sends them to help you”. She is certain that God sent her to her grandpa and grandma, the people she lives with, who accepted her and her son “like next of kin”, after they had been expelled from their own home. “God also sent them one boy who paid their electricity bills when electricity was cut off in their home”. Thanks to Lord, “a sister from the church bought the medications for the little one and drove her home”, while “the Turkish guy working here in the street gave 700 Euros for her son’s operation”. That is all “given by our good God”.

Bosa goes on to say that she never gets angry with God, despite her extremely difficult life: “I wouldn’t want God to give this life to those snakes under the stone, although they are speechless creatures”. God gives her what she needs: “As much as He wrote down to give me. As much as He intends to give me, and that’s it”. She is grateful for all life challenges given to her by God: “I am looking forward to suffering because He is making a road for me to heaven and not to hell”. This is how she justifies it: “Every illness that strikes you is God’s will because Gods wants to make your faith even

stronger". Referring to her son's illness, she thanks God: "Thank you, good Lord for the gift (my son). If it is your will, then let it be".

She lives her life with the permanent presence of God: "Not a millimetre, not a moment without Him". He is the one who comforts. "When everything is black before you, Lord will make it become light." She constantly prays to God in a wise prayer: "I can speak to you, but He is with me. First God and then everything else, always and in every place". When asked how to address God, this woman gives the following advice: "Just like that! Who else will you call if not Him?! It is the smartest thing to call Holy Mother. She is the Mother that propitiated the son (Jesus Christ), and no one else can do that". It can be noticed that people have drifted away from God. "We are as stupid as it gets. Many problems arise because the human mind does not understand what God means. The devil rules, and laughs straight into Lord's face because of holding people the way he likes".

Apart from Lord, Bosa's resilience to life challenges is also founded on the defence mechanism whose name we have borrowed from the theory of Sykes and Matza about neutralization techniques (Ignjatović, 2009). It is the judgment of those who judge, and this strategy is applied by Bosa primarily towards other people who, in her opinion, attack her. For example, when dealing with the formal social control bodies, Bosa finds successful strategies to defend herself. When she is kept in the station the whole day without being allowed to use the toilet, she even resorts to threatening that she would urinate in front of them. "I will take off my trousers and they can decide what to do". She is no milder to judges either: she reminds them that she is not the only one working in the street, but some people are protected. In her narrative, both judges and police officers, as well as other beggars she despises, are depicted as not being her equals when it comes to adroitness and intelligence. She is also intolerant towards passers-by, primarily because of their lack of interest: "People walk like cattle. They do not know themselves, let alone the one that is hungry. They have everything and I have nothing. It is unlikely that they don't have ten dinars to spare. They think that a beggar is worthless, but I'm smarter than them", she adds. This woman is also resentful of the clergy. It is not rare that priests try to send her away from her workplace in front of the church. "I see everything, and that's why they don't like me", she says and adds: "When they saw the photos of me, who I am and what I am, they began hating me". The only positive person is priest D., who "has never entered the church without greeting us (beggars). *God help you!* He's a very good man. I pray for him".

Apart from the above-mentioned strategy, in order to overcome everyday troubles, Bosa finds helpful the fact that she also helps others in similar troubles. She gives the example of two sisters (one of them previously greeted Bosa and asked her if she

needed something) who sell souvenirs. She says that one of them became ill during the coronavirus pandemic, while the other complained of not having any money for medications. Then Bosa took out her daily earnings and gave them to her. “She doesn’t need to pay me back”. Another moving story is about the sparrows above her workplace. They have known her for a long time; they have been friends for so many years, and Bosa feeds them every day, sharing breadcrumbs with them. In addition, if she is sick or must stay with her son, she also takes care of her much older landlord and landlady, whom she calls “grandpa and grandma”. She looks after them, and she stayed with grandpa “when he was bedridden”.

Finally, Bosa recalls who she was earlier. Those identity threads are quite vivid and make this woman special: she was her father’s best-loved child, she danced folk dances and travelled all over Russia; she imitated her brother; she visited monasteries and helped nun, and also often spoke to Patriarch Pavle who, according to her, respected her highly: “With him, beggars were never hungry. He always shared his salary with us”; she says. Moreover, Bosa has two special talents; she can sing (every now and then throughout the interview) despite everything, and she spends time in the street thinking about life and its meaning. From these philosophical self-negotiations, in the full meaning of this phrase, she creates her poems. She shared one of them with us.

*“The street is empty.
There is no one around
except for Prince Mihailo,
dozing on his horse.
Both when it rains,
or in springtime
Prince Mihailo will never
dismount from his steed”.*

Instead of a conclusion

Population ageing is a global demographic trend, which brings up a whole series of challenges that call for both system answers and for a more comprehensive scientific approach in the research of this topic, which would not be directed exclusively to difficulties, but also to the personal strengths of the elderly. If we limit ourselves to the scientific-research approach, we believe that qualitative participatory research would be of special importance.

It was exactly this approach that we applied in our case study. We dealt with two questions: what challenges are brought by life in old age, in the situation of extreme poverty, and what strategies an elderly person has for overcoming such difficulties. We have also observed that our respondent's difficult and almost lifelong circumstances - poverty, being abandoned, illness, violence, do not necessarily affect her resilience but, absurdly, serve as encouragement for searching for solutions/struggle against troubles. Bosa, the woman who has been begging in the street for the past four decades, has a whole set of tactics with the aid of which she responds to exceptionally complex life circumstances. The most important among them is her religiosity. By creating an intimate and deeply personal relationship with God and a strong belief in His providence guiding her through challenges, helping and taking care of her, and with a reward awaiting her in the end - a place in the heaven, this woman manages to give a meaning to her suffering. Moreover, she has also developed tactics for opposing what she experiences as violence that comes from other people (law enforcement officers and the formal social control, other beggars, passers-by and even priests). Her resilience to difficulties is undoubtedly strengthened by her fostering of solidarity with those who have less than her - in that way, she gets the opportunity to show her humaneness, i.e., goodness, as well as referring to those identity threats that do not show her only as a beggar who has never been anything else. Furthermore, this woman spends time in the street watching passers-by and contemplating about existential issues about which she has plenty to say. Giving a meaning to suffering and thinking of the reasons why challenges arise are the key elements of her resilience.

Although the findings we obtained in this study, and the limitations of which we have already indicated, cannot be general, we believe that they should encourage other researchers to deal with this topic more thoroughly. We believe that it is the only way of collecting a reliable corpus of knowledge that could be turned into practical activities with preventive goals (reduce poverty, alleviate the suffering due to illness, loneliness...) as well as aimed at empowering the elderly through sharing personal experiences. Moreover, we believe that it is necessary to build the bridges of intergenerational solidarity and reduction of prejudice. Our hypothesis, the future in which old age and ageing will be ever more present, will otherwise not be bright whatsoever.

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