

## Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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### Réseau canadien pour la prévention des mauvais traitements envers les aîné(e)s



## Abuse of Older Women

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### Are Older Women More Likely to Experience Abuse?

Many Canadian community agencies and organizations have found in the cases coming to their attention that older women are more likely to be the victims of abuse than older men, often at a rate of two to one.<sup>(1)</sup> They also find that men are more likely to be the abusers than women, again usually by a ratio of two to one.

On per capita basis, the rates of abuse and neglect appear to be equivalent for both older men and older women. It has been suggested that aging and ageism are great "equalizers", as they may leave both women and men open to abuse or neglect in later life, especially when the person has disabling conditions and must rely on others.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, people working with abused older women note greater risks for women because of their social situation:

"Domestic violence is learned behaviour, and passed on from generation to generation. Domestic violence is about power and control... [t]he social expectations of older women as women, wives, mothers, and grandmothers. In many case, older women have grown up with the expectation that if a problem develops in their relationship they have a responsibility to live with it and to make the best of it. This places the responsibility solely on their shoulders..."<sup>(3)</sup>

There are more older women than older men, especially after about age 75 or 80. That means that number-wise we would expect to see more abused older women than abused older men, because there are more older women.

Researchers are finding that abuse of older women is much more common than previously expected, and service providers in some settings such as health care are very likely to be working with abused older women. A 2004 report in the United States looked at 92,000 women aged 50 to 79 coming to health clinics. It found that 11% reported experiencing some form of abuse in the past year.<sup>(4)</sup> Women in their 50s were more likely to identify having being abused than the older women.

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## Gender and Crime

Who is more likely to be the victim of abuse crimes, older women or older men?

According to criminal offence reports for 2000 (Statistics Canada), there are more older women who are victims of abuse and more men are abusers. Eighty percent (80%) of the people accused of violently victimizing an older family member were men.

In cases of family violence towards seniors, an adult child or spouse of the senior accounted for almost three-quarters (71%) of victimizations. Older men were most likely to be victimized by their adult children (43% of the abusers). Older women were just as likely to be victimized by their spouses (36% of the abusers) as they were by their adult children (37% of the abusers).<sup>(5)</sup>

**It is important to remember that women can be abusive to older women, too.** People tend to assume that women interact in a caring and supportive manner and therefore women cannot be abusers. As a result, abuse is thought to only occur by men to women. But some daughters, daughter-in-laws, sisters and other female family members can be abusive too.

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## Does Being an Older Woman Make a Difference in Abuse?

Yes. There are important differences for older men and older women in terms of their social position, societal expectations, health and financial status. For example, it is possible that financial abuse may hurt older women more:

- women tend to have fewer financial resources to begin with,
- a greater proportion of older women are already living below the poverty line, and
- older women live longer than older men so that any loss of income or assets through financial abuse will hurt them more and for longer.

There can also be gender differences in the impact of physical abuse:

- a woman, on average, tends to be smaller than a man, and may have less ability to defend herself, and
- older women are more likely than older men to have disabling conditions.

Why do more older women have disabling conditions? In part this reflects gender differences and in part it is because the longer people live, the more disabling conditions they tend to have: women tend to live longer.

Older women are much more likely than older men to have one of more chronic diseases such as osteoporosis or arthritis. All these factors can lead to greater risk of injury for women who are in abusive situations. <sup>(6)</sup>

Older women are diverse. The types of abuse or neglect that the woman may experience can differ, as can its effects and her circumstances. For example, effects of abuse on her life may depend on whether

- she has many supports or few,
- she has a higher or lower income (e.g. for financial abuse),
- she is a visible minority, is a First Nations person, an immigrant, or a woman with disabilities,
- she is in her 60s or her 90s.

Studies on the incidence of abuse of women with disabilities suggest that the rate is much higher than in the general population and that between 40 and 80% of women with physical or mental disabilities experience some form of abuse in their lifetime. <sup>(7)</sup>

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## Is Violence Against Older Women a "Women's Issue"?

Absolutely. As the report "Silent and Invisible"<sup>(3)</sup> notes:

"A woman who has been physically abused during her marriage does not become a victim of elder abuse at the age of sixty-five." "Within the family setting, some older women suffer violence and abuse at the hands of their adult children and even grandchildren."

Research indicates that domestic violence in later life may

- be a continuation of long term partner abuse,
- begin with retirement or the onset of a health condition, or
- occur in an intimate relationship started in later life.

Older women's relationships may be opposite-sex relationships or same-sex relationships.

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## What Types of Abuse Do Older Women Experience?

"Silent and Invisible" notes that women may experience a variety of abuses from their husbands, or, in some cases, their children:

"They may be dealing with psychological abuse in the form of harassment, verbal aggression, intimidation, insults, threats, and various ways of enforcing isolation. In some cases their activities are monitored and outside contacts are controlled. They may be experiencing financial abuse, including withholding money for food and other basic essentials.

Financial abuse often occurs at the hand of sons or daughters, rather than husbands. Financial abuse and physical abuse can also come from a daughter's boyfriend. Some women experience sexual assault throughout married life, or sexual

abuse begun in later life. An older woman with mobility problems or other significant health problems may experience neglect from her husband or children.

Physical abuse may occur in combination with emotional abuse, and often the mix involves sexual as well as physical and emotional abuse. Some women have been subjected to emotional, physical and, in at some cases, sexual abuse in childhood, and then entered into adult relationships where they suffered the same kinds of abuse. Some had several adult relationships characterized by these forms of abuse."<sup>(3)</sup>

Abuse may be something new in the older woman's life or it may have been going on throughout the marriage until the husband's or partner's move to a long term care facility or death. For some older women, abuse may start in childhood from a parent or other relative, and then continue through marriage. Sometimes the woman remarries into another abusive relationship. Other older women have good marriages, and only begin to experience abuse after becoming widowed or divorced and when they are in a new relationship in later life.<sup>(3)</sup>

Some older woman experience abuse at the hands of a spouse or partner who is developing a dementia and who has become aggressive and violent. There are few services for women in this situation. Also a woman may be developing dementia and be abused by her "well" spouse or partner. An older woman in an isolated rural community may rarely see a service provider of any sort.<sup>(3)</sup>

Abuse by a spouse or partner is likely to be psychological or physical abuse, whereas abuse by one's children is more likely to be financial exploitation or neglect.<sup>(6)</sup>

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## **Why do Older Women Stay in Abusive Relationships? Understanding Older Women's Lives and Responses Better**

Older women in abusive relationships stay for many of the same reasons that people in non-abusive relationships stay together, out of feelings of love, duty, financial need, responsibility to their children and their community. But many older women in abusive relationships also stay out of fear. For a good description

of why women stay in battering relationships. See "Peer Support Services for Abused Women" ([www.pssaw.org/wwsibr.htm](http://www.pssaw.org/wwsibr.htm)).

Many older women were raised with social and religious expectations that their marriage was a covenant, and therefore it cannot and should not be dissolved. In Canada there was no federal Divorce Law until 1968. Until then divorce was a privilege of the rich. Even then, divorce was treated as "unusual" or "deviant" or a personal failing.

After that point in time, the Divorce Law permitted people to divorce if they could show there was cruelty or adultery. However, property such as the family farm or business was usually registered in the husband's name, and was considered the husband's property and not a family asset. That meant that until provincial law reform in the mid to late 1970s in most parts of Canada a divorcing woman, or women living in a long term common law relationship could be left destitute. <sup>(8)</sup>

It was not until 1986, that "real" divorce reform occurred in Canada, when it began to allow for a divorce if the husband and wife have been separated for at least one year. It also provided for spousal support. However, even today, abused older women are often told by their abusive spouse "If you leave me, you will get nothing", and they believe it.

Throughout the lives of many older women, the possibility of leaving simply was not an option, for social, legal, and economic reasons. Many people are not aware that many of the resources that are available for young abused women did not exist when older women were young. People are often unaware that the first transition homes ("women's shelters") were not established in Canada until 1972. Today, these resources are often stretched thin, and although things are changing in some communities, some shelters may not be suitable to an older woman. Abused older women often consider these resources as only for abused young women, not themselves. <sup>(2)</sup>

It is very important to understand the emotional struggles of abused older women and the effect of other factors. For example, an older woman's financial security is fundamentally tied to her marital status, whether or not she is being abused. While many older couples may be comfortably off or able to get by, over 45% of unattached older women (in other words those who are single, widowed or divorced) live below the poverty line, because they seldom have the resources to financially rebuild their lives. Separation or divorce is emotionally difficult, and it can be financially treacherous for an older woman.

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## Did You Know?

**1968** was the first time in Canada that a spouse could be granted a divorce because of cruelty.

**1983** was the first time in Canada, a husband could be charged with sexually assaulting his wife.

In **1983**, police forces across the country were instructed to lay charges of assault against offenders in cases of "domestic dispute" when there was evidence an assault had taken place. Previously, it had been the victim's responsibility to lay charges.

## References

- (1) Pittaway, E. & Gallagher, E. (1995). *A Guide to Enhancing Services for Abused Older Canadians*. Victoria, BC: British Columbia Office for Seniors.
- (2) B.C. Coalition to Eliminate Abuse of Seniors (May, 2003). *Profile of Later Life Abuse in British Columbia*. Prepared for and the Ministry of Children, Aboriginal and Women's Affairs, Victoria: B.C. Also, Spencer, C. (1998) Sources and Consequences of Abuse for Older Women GRC News, Vol. 17 (2) 6-8.
- (3) Hightower, M.J. (Greta) Smith, M.J. and Hightower, H. Silent and Invisible: A Report on the Abuse and Violence in the Lives of Older Women in British Columbia and Yukon. Executive Summary. B.C. Yukon Society of Transition Houses.
- (4) Mouton, C.P., Rodabough, R. J., Rovi, S.L. D., Hunt, J.L., Talamantes, M.A., Brzyski, R.G. and Burge, S.K. (April, 2004). Prevalence and 3-year incidence of abuse among postmenopausal women. *American Journal of Public Health*, 94, 605-612.
- (5) Dauvergne, M. (March, 2003). Family violence against seniors. *Canadian Social Trends*, No. 68. pp: 10 -14, at 13.
- (6) Lithwick, M., Beaulieu, M., Gravel, S. & Straka, S.M. (1999). Mistreatment of older adults: perpetrator victim relationships and interventions. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*. 11 (4), 95-112.
- (7) Violence and People with Disabilities. (1994) Prepared by L'Institut Roehrer Institute for the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Online at: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/fvdisabliterature\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/familyviolence/html/fvdisabliterature_e.html)

(8) See *Murdoch v. Murdoch*, [1975] 1 S.C.R. 423; *Peter v. Beblow* [1993] 1 S.C.R. 1280; *Pettkus v. Becker* [1980] S.C.R. 834; *Rawluk v. Rawluk*, [1990] 1 S.C.R. 70.

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## Resources and Links

Parent Abuse: A Well-Kept Secret

[www.bcifv.org/resources/newsletter/2003/winter/parent.html](http://www.bcifv.org/resources/newsletter/2003/winter/parent.html)

### **Education Wife Assault**

[www.womanabuseprevention.com](http://www.womanabuseprevention.com)

### **Why Women Stay in Battering Relationships**

[www.pssaw.org/wwwsibr.htm](http://www.pssaw.org/wwwsibr.htm)

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## Readings

If you are looking for an article that helps explain about the lives and circumstances of older women who have experienced abuse in their lives, see:

B. Wolkenstein and L. Sterman (1998) "Unmet Needs of Older Women in a Clinic Population: The Discovery of Possible Long-Term Sequelae of Domestic Violence". *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. Vol. 29, No. 4, 341-348.

"Carole Seaver talks about the Milwaukee Women's Center and its older battered women's program." *Nexus*, Volume 1, Issue 3, October 1995. Online: [www.preventelderabuse.org/nexus/seaver.html](http://www.preventelderabuse.org/nexus/seaver.html)