

Help the Aged

Older women and domestic violence

A report for Help the Aged/hact
by Imogen Blood

Summary

To date, little consideration has been given to the specific needs of older women in England who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence; that is, physical, sexual, emotional or financial abuse carried out by a spouse or partner.

Service providers and policy makers often assume that domestic violence stops at 60 and there is a noticeable lack of literature, research and guidelines on the issue. There is also a lack of services specifically for older women. Confusion over the distinction between 'domestic violence' and 'elder abuse' means that the needs of this group are often overlooked altogether.

Nevertheless, many Women's Aid organisations are doing innovative work with this group. By highlighting this work, *Older women and domestic violence* seeks to challenge the assumption that domestic violence is not an issue for

older women, to stimulate debate among providers and funding bodies, and to encourage the development of more accessible services that meet the needs of older domestic abuse survivors.

The report presents the findings of research carried out by the Older Homelessness Development Project (OHDP), which was based at the Housing Projects Advisory Service in Manchester from 2000 to 2001 and funded by the Help the Aged/hact Older Homelessness Programme.

It looks at generic and specific examples of the services currently available for older women, at the barriers to greater take-up and at how these can be overcome.



The context

How many older women are affected?

The number of older women experiencing domestic violence is low compared with other age groups. However, this must be considered in the light of the fact that very little research has been done on the topic.

Older women are also less likely to report their experiences than other age groups. Before the 1970s, a range of cultural and social factors – combined with the fact that domestic violence was not considered a crime – led to many women ‘suffering in silence’. For many women now aged 50 or over, this is still the norm.

Awareness of the problem is also low. Professionals are less likely to identify the signs of domestic violence accurately in older women.

However, the research that has been carried out in the UK and elsewhere suggests that domestic violence does affect significant numbers of older women.

Do older women use the services available?

Take-up rates are generally low, although where specialist domestic violence projects have been established for older women, demand outstrips supply.

Do older women need tailored services?

Many of the issues facing older women who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence are common to all women. However, older women often do have specific needs which may be physical, social or cultural.

These include problems relating to disabilities, or mobility or transport difficulties.

The problems facing survivors living in rural settings can be particularly acute. Talking about their experiences or attending a meeting without people knowing is difficult, and anonymous resettlement in the same place is impossible. It is also hard to access support and information. Providers therefore need to find other ways to communicate with potential users, for example through churches or the Women’s Institute.

Current provision: models and issues

Refuges

Problems

The number of older women using refuges is significant but small. The research identified the following reasons why older women are not making more use of this provision:

- Awareness is generally low.
- Refuges themselves don’t know how much demand there is.
- Refuges may be noisy and chaotic or lack facilities for those with disabilities or reduced mobility.
- Leaving home often disrupts family and other relationships.
- Some older women care for older male children or teenagers, who can’t usually be accommodated by refuges.
- Refuges may not be able to provide the intensive emotional and practical support some older women will need.
- Refuges can’t afford to provide accommodation for women who don’t get full housing benefit and most survivors are unlikely to have a high

enough income to pay for a refuge place themselves.

- Refuges may not be equipped to deal with complex health or mobility problems.
- Older women are likely to be the main carer and therefore feel particularly guilty about leaving home.
- Older survivors who have been abused by their sons and daughters may need intensive counselling, which refuges cannot provide.
- Many older survivors have lived in the same area – or even house – for many years. It is difficult for them to access new social networks and facilities, and refuge workers may not be equipped to advise on housing needs.

Solutions

Some refuges have found innovative ways to make their services more attractive and accessible to older women. Some offer semi-self-contained suites, while one had entirely self-contained 'move on' flats on a separate site. Another had linked up with a single homeless women's accommodation project so that older women could live at the hostel but still get support from the refuge.

Refuges are also working to raise awareness and publicise themselves by advertising in GPs' surgeries, Citizens Advice Bureaux, community centres and post offices. Others have established links with Age Concern or social services, while some are encouraging women aged over 50 to work for them on a voluntary basis – a highly effective way of raising peer group awareness.

As well as offering tailored accommodation, refuges can offer tailored services such as drop-in sessions or outreach services. Outreach in particular can go a long way towards making services more accessible to older

women. However, refuges that do not offer home visits – whether due to resource issues or concerns about safety – are leaving a gap in service provision.

Helplines

Research into the Elder Abuse Response helpline shows that there is small but significant take-up of the service from older people experiencing partner violence or those concerned about them. This accounts for 11 per cent of all calls.

Since April 2002, the Manchester-based Women's Domestic Violence Helpline has been asking callers for their age group. This will provide valuable information on the extent of take-up by older women and inform future service development.

Specialist projects

Dumfriesshire and Stewartry

Dumfriesshire and Stewartry Women's Aid has appointed a full-time support worker to provide support, counselling and advice to older women. One of the organisation's refuges is designated for women over 50.

The project worker runs drop-in sessions, giving women an opportunity to make friends and try new activities, and provides services on an outreach basis, including home visits. Women are encouraged to pursue educational opportunities, and the project worker continues to support women after they have been resettled.

Leigh

From 1998 to 2000, Leigh-based voluntary sector organisation WAVE employed a full-time worker to develop and provide services for women over 60. Over time, users were encouraged to get involved and were given the training they

needed to run the project themselves. Eight of these user-volunteers went on to find full-time paid work, despite being over retirement age and having assumed they would never work again. In addition, older women ended up sharing skills – such as knitting and sewing – with younger women at WAVE’s resource centres.

The WAVE project shows that group work can be appropriate for older women and that training and employment are still relevant to them. User-led services can also bring the following benefits:

- Services and activities that are developed by users will be tailored to their needs.
- Prospective clients worry less about being patronised by younger workers.
- Users are more committed to the service.
- Volunteering boosts confidence and teaches users new skills.

No Secrets: the gap between domestic violence and elder abuse

No Secrets was published by the Department of Health in November 2000 and provides guidance on developing and implementing multi-agency policies and procedures to protect vulnerable adults – that is, adults who are eligible for community care – from abuse.

This relatively narrow definition of ‘vulnerable’ could be preventing some older domestic abuse survivors from accessing services that could improve their situations. There is scope for using existing community care services – like residential homes or home care – as

part of a wider protection package but these options are not currently available to those not classified as ‘vulnerable’.

At the moment, social services take the lead in providing services to older domestic abuse survivors who also qualify for community care services. Often, teams have little experience of dealing with domestic violence and could benefit from sharing expertise. Strong partnership working between the adult protection and the domestic violence fields is therefore vital. Staff on both sides need training so they can give accurate and objective information to women on all the services available to them.

No Secrets goes some way towards recognising the overlaps between domestic violence and elder abuse. However, by neither stipulating co-ordination from the outset nor allocating the resources needed to fund more partnership working, the guidance does little to tackle the potential obstacles to closer working between domestic violence and adult protection fields. *No Secrets* also fails to give clear guidance on domestic violence training for staff working with ‘vulnerable adults’ or adult protection training for workers in the domestic violence field.

Despite these shortcomings, *No Secrets* does create some opportunities for raising awareness of the needs of older survivors of domestic violence, promoting closer working between the domestic violence and adult protection fields and improving service provision. However, at the moment close partnership working between adult protection committees and domestic violence forums is only occurring in a small number of cases.

Bridging the gap

Authorities and organisations on both sides could expand services and provide assistance to more older women by:

- expanding service provision. Furnished flats in sheltered schemes could be used to provide temporary accommodation and Victim Support or Women's Aid could be encouraged to run counselling, advice or support groups at day centres;
- creating consistent policies. Leeds Adult Protection Committee includes representatives from community care and those who protect the victims of abuse. The committee's role is to ensure consistency between domestic violence and adult protection policies and guidelines; and
- providing training. Cheshire Domestic Abuse Partnership runs a rolling programme of inter-agency domestic violence training for staff of member agencies, which include social, health and probation services, the police and Women's Aid.

Recommendations

Service provision

- Providing houses with on-site support can help older women regain their independence.
- Dispersed refuge move-on flats or clustered, self-contained flats can accommodate older women with older dependent children.
- Refuges designated for single women may be suitable for older women who want or need a quieter environment.
- Churches and the Women's Institute can provide effective channels for reaching older women in rural areas.

- Outreach services – ideally including home visits – offer the flexibility many older women need.
- Specialist older people's outreach workers can offer tailored financial and legal advice and emotional support, and provide support for longer periods.
- They can also help deal with older women's resettlement needs.
- Drop-in community activities and groups are popular with older women. Having an initial focus, like a craft activity or a speaker, encourages attendance.
- Getting users involved in running the group increases commitment and develops skills and self-confidence.
- Many older women are interested in education, training, volunteering and employment.
- Some older women settle well in mixed-age refuges. Women of all ages can benefit from each others' skills and knowledge.
- Accommodation and community-based projects must be accessible to women with disabilities and reduced mobility.
- Take-up of services must be monitored and service users consulted regularly.
- Refuge workers need specific information and training if they are to work effectively with older women.

Policy

Government guidance should:

- emphasise the need for adult protection committees and domestic violence forums and agencies to work together;
- assess the relevance of domestic violence legislation to some cases of adult abuse;

- stipulate inter-agency training on the overlap between domestic violence and adult abuse;
- require local authorities to establish consistent policies and guidelines on vulnerable adults and domestic violence;
- emphasise the importance of co-ordinated monitoring, auditing, consultation and strategic planning; and
- provide funding for training and partnership work.

The Government should also:

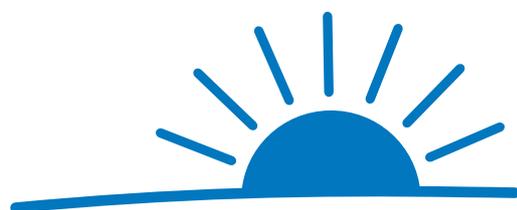
- encourage local authority Supporting People teams to work with adult protection committees and domestic violence forums to audit and commission services for older women;
- provide more funding both for services and research; and
- make provision for older survivors of domestic violence whose pensions or savings make them ineligible for housing benefit and/or community care grants.

Finally, the report calls for a national public awareness campaign on domestic violence and other forms of abuse against older people.

Further research

Future research should focus on addressing the following questions:

- How many older women present to local authority housing departments on the grounds of domestic violence and what response do they get?
- How many older survivors of domestic violence are in local authority and independent hostel accommodation? What are the issues facing them and what are their needs?
- Are black and ethnic minority women who are over 50 using specialist domestic violence services? How can service providers respond to them more effectively?
- Existing research, such as the *British Crime Survey*, must develop methods that enable it to reach older women.



Help the Aged

Working for a future where older people are highly valued, have lives that are richer, and voices that are heard.