

## **Public health approach to preventing gender-based violence**

### **Equality and Social Justice Committee**

#### **Consultation response**

**April 2023**

Age Cymru is the leading charity working to improve the lives of all older people in Wales. We believe older people should be able to lead healthy and fulfilled lives, have adequate income, access to high quality services and the opportunity to shape their own future. We seek to provide a strong voice for all older people in Wales and to raise awareness of the issues of importance to them.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry. In writing this response we include the various forms of abuse as constituting violence in its wider forms. It is vital that the approach to preventing gender based violence fully considers how age and gender affect the likelihood of people becoming victim/survivors and how the intersectionality of other protected characteristics impacts individuals further. It is vital that public service responses are tailored accordingly in order for older victim/survivors to feel safe, and that perpetrators of gender based violence and abuse have opportunities to change their behaviour earlier.

We welcome changes in 2020 in data collection that have increased the visibility of older people in the national crime survey for England and Wales data on domestic abuse. Previously respondents were only asked questions until the age of 74. This change has meant that research from our partner Age UK shows that 1 in 30 people aged 60 to 74 and approximately 1 in 50 people aged 75+ were subjected to domestic abuse in the previous year.<sup>1</sup>

Research from Safe Lives on older victim-survivors of domestic abuse shows that older people are as likely as younger ones to be subject to physical abuse, are more likely to be abused by their current partner and also being more likely being subject to physical abuse for longer than their younger counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

Academic research suggests crime data may underestimate the volume of violent crimes against older people as unconscious bias can mean that a criminal justice

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<sup>1</sup> Age UK article December 2022 New data on domestic abuse in older people accessed 21/4/23 <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/discover/2022/december/new-data-on-domestic-abuse-in-older-people/>

<sup>2</sup> Improving Support and Services for Older Men Experiencing Domestic Abuse – Older People's Commissioner for Wales, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2022, [Improving Support and Services for Older Men Experiencing Domestic Abuse - Older People's Commissioner for Wales](#) accessed 21/4/23.

response has not been considered for older people.<sup>3</sup> The cost of living crisis may leave older people more isolated and less able to leave an abusive relationship. And particularly for the older generations of older people, feelings of shame or the normalisation of abuse over many years can be additional barriers to help seeking. As such, the volume of abuse of older people may still be an underestimate and as such, requires a focussed response suitable to the needs of older people.

Particularly as we come away from the pandemic, it is highly likely that there are more unpaid carers at breaking point who may be inadvertently neglecting their loved ones at a time when public services are not there to support them sufficiently.

Whilst this consultation focusses on gender based violence, it is important to consider the needs of male victim-survivors of abuse. The gendered nature of abuse most often thought of in younger people's relationships and different forms that abuse take may are not always the same for older people. Factors more prevalent in later life such as co-morbidities and caring responsibilities can lead to an increase in neglect, and this in turn increases the proportion of men at risk of abuse.

### **What works in preventing gender-based violence before it occurs and intervening earlier to stop violence from escalating?**

We believe that primary prevention and earlier intervention for older people requires a targeted approach that is informed by the range of factors faced by older people that can make them more likely to be victim-survivors of gender based violence. Older people with disabilities, or those from LGBTQ+ and ethnic minority backgrounds, may face further barriers to leaving an abusive relationship – this may be due to a lack of appropriate services, community barriers, discrimination, or a reliance on carers.

In Wales and particularly since the introduction of the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, Welsh Government have coordinated national awareness campaigns in efforts to improve awareness of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) which can help with prevention and earlier intervention. Increased efforts in awareness raising will undoubtedly improve awareness but for older victim/survivors to come forward and disclose their experiences, they need to be more visible in campaigns. Messages on what counts as violence and abuse need to come from agencies and individuals that older people trust and turn to for advice and information.

Many older people in Wales do not have access to the internet and some will have limited digital literacy<sup>4</sup>. Our ongoing program of engagement with older people has highlighted that that some would not consider finding information online – some as they lack the digital skills to find information, others as they have poor signal, and

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<sup>3</sup> 'Access to Justice for victim/survivors of elder abuse: A qualitative study' A Clarke and S Wydall Criminal Justice Matters, 99:1 2016 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/social-policy-and-society/article/abs/access-to-justice-for-victimssurvivors-of-elder-abuse-a-qualitative-study/7CF7AC414B88AE4AF4AB89318C724FA5>

<sup>4</sup> [National Survey for Wales, 2018-19: Internet use and digital skills \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/national-survey-for-wales-2018-19-internet-use-and-digital-skills)

others are they are unsure which are trusted sources of information. As such any campaigns work needs to consider where older people get information from. Efforts should be made to reach more older people through campaigns that are not digital by default.

The VAWSASV Act introduced a training framework aimed at ensuring professionals who are likely to come into contact with victim-survivors should be equipped with knowledge on how to spot signs of abuse and have the confidence and appropriate opportunities to ask suspected victim-survivors of abuse questions around safety and wellbeing. We are unclear whether the introduction of the framework has meant that specialist training such as the training previously available from Safe Lives on older people and domestic abuse is being used or if it has been replaced by something else through the Act's actions in Wales. It is important that training includes a focus on the risk factors and appropriate responses for older people.

### **Improving public responses to assist in preventing gender based violence**

Central to an effective public health approach to preventing and reducing gender based violence is the implementation of interventions that successfully address risk and protective factors. Unless there is increased recognition that older people can also be victims of domestic abuse and violence, opportunities to identify and respond to older people experiencing domestic abuse will be missed.

Welsh research identifies that there are additional barriers for older victims to seek help for abuse and these include age discrimination.<sup>5</sup> The research concluded that the availability of social networks and networks connected to the home strongly influenced help-seeking in older people.

Whilst crime data is now changing, routinely published data collected for high risk cases that go to the Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) or survivors of domestic abuse does not break down into sufficient detail the proportion of victim/survivors of all protected characteristics, even though the information is routinely collected as part of the MARAC data collection processes. As such it is unclear whether enough is being done to protect older people. It is important that all protected characteristics data is monitored for similar reasons and actions taken to address gaps in identification and reporting.

It is important to remember that the gender focus can detract from specific areas of abuse that are likely to impact older men as they age. The MARAC data does include the proportion of male victims – and this changes from 4% of high risk cases for those aged under 60 to 21% for those aged over 60. In addition, nearly half of

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Wydall and Rebecca Zerk, October 2017, Domestic Abuse and Older People: factors influencing help-seeking , Journal of Adult Protection <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JAP-03-2017-0010/full/html?skipTracking=true> accessed 21/4/23

older victim-survivors are living with a disability.<sup>6</sup> The Safe Lives report highlights that few older high risk victim-survivors have support from specialist domestic abuse services, which can be geared towards younger victims needs as a result of unconscious bias. In order for safety to be improved, it is vital that support is available from agencies that older people are likely to access and that multi agency procedures are in place to increase safety for victim-survivors.

Some groups of older people will have experienced repeated discrimination and may be less willing to seek help from public services, particularly in cases where they have experienced discrimination from any public service previously. For example, focus groups conducted by Age Alliance Wales showed that for older LGBTQ+ people, their experiences from previous years that have built up over time means that distrust in public services is still high, and prevent them accessing services they need.<sup>7</sup>

In order to gain trust, all public service staff should be trained in equality and diversity, with a specific emphasis on intersectionality. Learning from other research, such as that from the Dewis Choices project at Aberystwyth University, should be utilised to help tailor the development of support services more appropriate to older people's needs.

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<sup>6</sup> Safe Later Lives: Older people and domestic abuse, Spotlight report October 2016 available at <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Later%20Lives%20-%20Older%20people%20and%20domestic%20abuse.pdf> accessed 24/4/23

<sup>7</sup> <https://storage.googleapis.com/wzukusers/user-13045718/documents/38d4d381fa804be78333e343fcc68750/THE%20CONCERNS%20OF%20PEOPLE%20IN%20LATER%20LIFE%20-%20LGBT%2B.pdf>