



THE DISAPPEARING AGE:

A STRATEGY TO ADDRESS VIOLENCE AGAINST OLDER WOMEN



OLDER WOMEN'S NETWORK NSW INC

This document is a condensed version of ***The disappearing age: a strategy to address violence against older women***, presented to the Hon Verity Firth in December 2008.

This was a Project of the Older Women's Network NSW Inc.

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Cover illustration: Dorothy Cox celebrating OWN's 20th Birthday, 2008

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The Hon Verity Firth MP NSW Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Women



I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate you on a fine piece of work. It clearly challenges some of the misconceptions surrounding the issue of violence against older women and presents a comprehensive snapshot of Australian and international research and practice on this important issue.

The recommendations within the report – such as an awareness program, integrated service responses and greater training for health, aged care and domestic violence workers – will be taken into account as part of the NSW Domestic and Family Violence Strategic Framework process.

Letter to Older Women's Network NSW
(16 March 2009)

The Hon Paul Lynch Minister for Disability Services and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs



I would like to acknowledge the work that your organization has undertaken in preparing this detailed report. It raises a number of interesting issues, in particular the Interagency Protocol for Responding to Abuse of Older People.

Letter to Older Women's Network NSW
(7 May 2009)

Introduction

In the international debate on responses to family and domestic violence, one group, older women, has consistently disappeared. Older women fade away in the databases of homelessness, refuge residents, medical screening and any number of other critical indices. Do women move into a violence-free period of their life as they age? Not according to the most recent evidence that indicates that one in four women who have experienced an incident of physical violence in the past 12 months is aged 45 years and older (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006).

This Report describes the findings of the Project on Prevention of Violence Against Older Women (September – December 2008) conducted by the Older Women's Network NSW (OWN NSW), funded by a NSW Domestic and Family Violence Grant (Office of Women's Policy, NSW Department of Premier's and Cabinet) and supported by the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse. The Project aims were to describe our current understanding of violence against older women. The Project conducted a literature review; consulted with a broad range of key stakeholders in the aged care, health, housing, community legal and domestic and family violence sectors; and made a number of field trips to meet with older women, departmental staff and community services in three regional NSW centres. Following a NSW Roundtable on violence against older women, a draft strategy document on the prevention of violence against older women was developed.

The Report explores the challenge for the domestic and family violence sector of responding to the increased reporting of violence against older women. It highlights the urgent need to improve the capacity of the domestic violence, aged care and homelessness service systems to provide flexible, collaborative and sensitive support designed for the needs of older women, should they remain in the family home, leave or become chronically homeless.

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The OWN NSW draft strategy to Prevent Violence Against Older Women aims to:

- promote better awareness and visibility of violence against older women
- create a safe and supportive environment in which older women can report
- improve the ability of support services to identify violence against older women
- provide appropriate and proportionate levels of support and assistance to older women
- ensure that targeted training skills enable key agencies and staff to respond appropriately to the needs of older women
- promote collaboration across key agencies and staff supporting older women.

The Federal Government's homelessness White Paper (2008), *The Road Home*, commits the country to an ambitious reform agenda, recognising domestic violence as a key cause of homelessness, and the ageing of the homeless population. In this environment, a strategy concentrating specifically on reducing violence against older women is timely. Another timely factor is a new demand for a feminist analysis of ageing and the impact of gender-based violence on older women. Historically, feminism has not embraced ageing, preferring to focus feminist thought and practice on younger women (Calasanti, Slevin & King 2006; Hightower 2002). The ageing of many of the 1970s feminist activists is now helping to stimulate this discussion. It is in this context that OWN NSW seeks to foster a national debate on the issue of violence against older women, to develop a comprehensive national strategy to prevent the violence, and secure commitments

from governments and service systems to implement the strategy.

Defining 'Older'

There is little consensus on the threshold of being an 'older' adult. The OWN Project chose 45 years and over as the benchmark age for becoming an 'older woman'. This decision reflects the lower life expectancy of Indigenous women and that 45 years is used as an ageing benchmark by the Personal Safety Survey, Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). In choosing the age of 45, the Project recognised that there is a great diversity of experience for women of different ages, with vulnerability, poor health and dependency usually increasing as women grow older. The Project also focused on violence against older women in their own homes, as the vast majority of older women continue to live in the community, with only 5% of older Australians living in aged care facilities.



Peg Hewett, Noreen Hewett, Dorothy Cora & Joy Ross at OWN's 20 Birthday Party, 2008

One in four

A number of factors have contributed to the abuse of older women being 'lost in the cracks between the domestic violence and elder abuse services system' (Brandl & Cook-Daniels 2002). These include a focus by the family violence sector on younger women and their dependent children; the defining by the aged care sector of abuse of older people as age-related, rather than a lifelong continuum of violence for many women; the framing of older people as sexless, and a



Jan Wood filming with OWN's Battle Axes

history of limited collaboration between aged, health and family violence services.

Reporting rates for family violence in the past have suggested that older women are less at risk than younger women (VicHealth 2004). Only 3.3% of women aged 45 years and over reported experiencing violence from their current partner in the Women's Safety, Australia survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996). Of female clients accessing the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services who were escaping domestic violence, less than 14% were aged 45 years and older (Marcolin 2005, p.15). Indigenous SAAP clients were the only cultural group in which older women outnumbered older men. Women seemingly appear to enter a violence-free zone between the ages of 45 and 65 years, to reappear in studies of 'elder abuse' with recorded rates of abuse two and a half times the rate of men (Boldy et al. 2002).

But there is clear evidence that the levels of violence are being seriously underreported. Mears (1997) critiqued the methodology of the Women's Safety, Australia survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996) for failing to acknowledge a greater reluctance of older women to disclose personal matters and, thus, ensure accurate reporting of violence against older women. In a 1998 CASA House phone survey on sexual assault, over 25% of calls were from women over 50 years of age, who said they called because their anonymity was assured (Duncan 2002). Morgan Disney (2000) in their study of older people and domestic violence found that over a third of the older women

interviewed 'had never known a life without violence'.

'Older persons should be able to live in dignity and security and be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse'

United Nations Principles for Older Persons No. 17, adopted by General Assembly resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991.

As an understanding of the rights of older people and elder abuse improved nationally and internationally (for example, the declaration of 1999 as the United Nations Year of the Older Person and see the NSW Advisory Committee on Abuse of Older People in their Homes 1993), the issue of violence against older women became more publicly debated (Blue Mountains Community Legal Centre 2005; Caringbah Women's Health and Information Centre 2005; Mears & Sargent 2000). This may have contributed to increased reporting by older women in the Personal Safety Survey, Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 20), which found that the proportion of older women aged 45 years and older reporting physical violence in the twelve months prior to the survey had increased to 25%. Further, the greatest increase in reporting between the two national safety surveys was by women aged 55 years and over: from 4.4% in 1996 to 10.1% in 2005.

Challenge for the domestic violence sector

That one in four women reporting physical domestic violence are older suggests that the domestic violence sector needs to ensure older women can access appropriate support. Morgan Disney (2000) found that the most common reason given by respondents for not speaking to anyone about their situation was shame and embarrassment. Older women thought that leaving the relationship, going to a refuge or calling the police were choices for younger women. Many of the women interviewed

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felt they had invested too much in their families and partners to leave, that they were too old to re-enter the workforce or were not prepared to be ostracised from their cultural community or the social networks they enjoyed as a couple. A common fear expressed by older women was that if they left their home they would be placed in an aged care facility.

'Older women may need different systemic responses to younger women'

(Beaulaurier et al. 2007)

The nature of violence against older women has many features similar to that experienced by younger women but there are important differences in the nature of the violence and the choices available to them. Older women may be exposed to abuse by a broad range of family members and carers (Livermore, Bunt & Biscan 2001). Older women living alone are less likely to be physically or psychologically abused, but may be more at risk of financial abuse by an adult child after the death of a partner (Brozowski & Hall 2004). Social isolation of both victim and abuser is a common feature of violence against older women.



Marie Williams, our OWN film star

There is growing evidence that a more diverse Australian domestic violence response system, with greater capacity to provide outreach in the home, is creating greater access for older women. Victoria, for example, has introduced an integrated, diverse family violence service

system and a recent snapshot of services state-wide found that 18% of clients were aged 45 years and over (KPMG 2008). In one service, the Victorian Eastern Domestic Violence Outreach Service (2007-28), annual client data shows that 26.2% of outreach clients were 45 years and older, with a marked increase in the number of clients aged 60 and older. Domestic and Family Violence Support Services Queensland report a slightly higher use by older clients (15.8% aged 45 years and older 1/1/2007-30/6/2008) with the main support provided being court support.

Building on 'safe at home' strategies, safety planning and better security measures in the home can assist older women staying home to be safer. Technology commonly used to monitor health emergencies in the home, for example, can be also used for security alerts in cases of family violence.

After a national survey of U.S. shelters in 1998 mapped services for older women, a policy of recruiting older women as staff, management and volunteers was introduced, with increased collaboration between domestic violence and aged services, and cross sector training workshops. New provisions in the US Victim of Violence Prevention Act 2000 were directed to older and disabled victims. They included: grants for training and programs to improve the capacity of police and court staff to recognise, address, investigate and prosecute domestic violence and sexual assault against older people and people with disabilities (Hightower 2002).

Older women recounting their stories (Mears and Sargent 2000) of violence in their personal relationships described a range of survival strategies: blocking out the violence, channelling energy into work or study, leaving or waiting for the perpetrator to die. Of primary importance was being able to talk about and share their

experience with other older women. Support groups for older women who have experienced family violence have been found to be 'life-altering' (Brandl et al. 2003).

Family Violence Services

Recommendations

- Review supported accommodation and homeless models to ensure appropriate and proportionate access and responses for single older women
- Develop policies and protocols for services responding to family violence that recognise the prevalence, specificity and complex nature of violence against older women
- Develop safety plans for programs working with older women (including subsidised home security measures)
- Fund Community and Women's Health Centres to develop support programs for older women
- Incorporate strategies to address violence against older women into national and state and territory plans to reduce violence against women
- Enhance the capacity of one specialist domestic violence service per region to act as conduit between the programs supporting older women and to ensure skilled responses to referrals of older women experiencing violence.

Hidden Homelessness

Older women do leave abusive relationships but leaving can be financially problematic:

All of the women had found it a very difficult experience and, almost without exception, none were financially better off, although several commented that their quality of life had improved. Many women reported that their families had not been supportive of their leaving (Morgan Disney 2000).

The financial barriers for older women to leave a violent relationship are great: far greater numbers of older women than men live on the single Age Pension and as many as 55% of women in their sixties have no superannuation (Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia 2008).



Leaving a violent relationship also results in a high risk of homelessness for older women as there is a scarcity of services that they can access that are appropriate for their needs. In their study of homeless, single women in Western Sydney, Robinson and Searby (2006) argue that the policy and service emphasis on homeless women with children has led to a failure to address the complexities and diversity of women's homelessness.

As an example of this complexity, most SAAP services for single people are for single men. The small number of single women's services (there is no funded service specifically for homeless older women) receive only 3% of recurrent SAAP funding (AIHW 2009) and accommodate less than 7% of older¹ SAAP female clients (Lai 2003, p. 14). Yet, the latest SAAP data collection reports that in 2007-2008, older women accessed SAAP services in greater numbers than men (AIHW 2009). According to a monograph on older SAAP clients, older female clients (40%) were more likely than younger women to cite domestic violence as their predominant reason for seeking SAAP support (Lai 2003, p.16). Where older

¹ Defined as 45 years and over for Indigenous people and 50 years and over non-Indigenous

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women are able to access SAAP services, they are predominately supported in services for women escaping domestic violence (Lai 2003, p. 14), many accompanying their adult daughter and grandchildren: three generations of displaced people. A new monograph is required to map the reality of older women's homelessness, capturing the impact of the significant number of unfunded places for homeless women being provided by the large charities, including an unfunded refuge for older women in Western Sydney that has operated for twenty years.

For according to Sharam (2008), who estimates that up to 30,000 older single women at housing risk are living on the Australian eastern coast, the levels of older women's homelessness will continue to escalate:

Young women also tend to link their housing to partnership, more so than men, which means if the relationship breaks down in later life they are left more vulnerable to housing stress. Combine this with the lowest housing affordability since the early 1980s and we're looking at an unprecedented number of pension-aged single women entering the primary homeless population in the next 20 years.

Older women need specific accommodation options, including specialised refuges and long term housing (Beaulaurier et al. 2007). Community housing is a major provider of housing for single people and older women: 62.5% of head tenants aged 45 years and older were women (AIHW 2008). Access is, to a large degree, dependent on available single person housing stock, which tends to be concentrated in the inner cities. The Australian Government has announced \$6.4 billion for new public and community housing (the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Housing and the Status of Women 2009). Advocates are concerned that as a result of the hidden nature of older women's homelessness, this group may not benefit proportionately from the new housing provisions (S. Cripps, [Homelessness NSW 2009], pers. comm. 27 April). Future long term housing options for older women must also address the

issue of appropriate housing stock. This will require a 'growth in higher density housing forms' as the:

...dramatic increase in lone person households into the future (the majority of which will be female lone person households) will likely account for much of the growth in higher density housing, particularly as older women demand smaller properties to minimise maintenance and costs (Tually, Beer & Faulkner 2007).

Homeless and Social Housing Recommendations

- Urgently provide funded proportionate levels of supported crisis accommodation services for older women
- Recognise older people as a specific target group in homelessness programs
- Conduct snapshot data collections to monitor usage of SAAP and housing services by older women
- Review social and public housing programs to ensure appropriate and proportionate access and responses for single older women
- Conduct research to map the hidden homelessness of many older women
- Develop a strong advocacy base to ensure the rights of older homeless women are not neglected.

Promote collaboration across key agencies and staff

The bulk of support for older women at risk in their own homes is being provided by the aged care sector, where an estimated two thirds of clients are women.² Yet many plans and

² The aged care sector comprises a range of Commonwealth and State programs, including Aged Care Assessment Teams (ACATs), Home and Community Care

strategies on abuse of older people have neglected the gendered nature of the violence and, despite advocating for collaboration across support services, they fall short of a comprehensive inclusion of all key agencies. The lack of collaboration between the aged care sector and the domestic violence sector has resulted in women falling through the cracks and not receiving adequate support and assistance.

The NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (DADHC) Interagency Protocol for Responding to Abuse of Older People (2007) does incorporate an understanding of the effects of domestic and family violence on older people. The Protocol specifies that staff employed in NSW Government agencies 'must report to the NSW Police regardless of the victim's views' where there is: serious injury, the perpetrator has access to a gun or other weapon and is threatening to cause harm, and there is immediate serious risk to individuals or workers are threatened. The Protocol stresses the need for collaboration with domestic violence services. It provides NSW with an imperative to improve collaboration across the key sectors and to include the aged care sector in an integrated response to family violence.

Recommendations for Improved Collaboration

- Include Aged Care Services and Departments in State, Territory and National Plans and Strategies to Reduce Violence Against women
- Include Family Violence and Homelessness Services and Departments in State, Territory and

(HACC) Services, and Community Aged Care Packages. Australia wide, there were a total of 683,322 ACAT and HACC clients aged 65 years and over in 2004 - 2005; two thirds of clients were women (AIHW 2007). In contrast, there were 1279 female SAAP clients aged 45 years and older whose main reason for seeking assistance was domestic or family violence or relationship or family breakdown in the year 2006-2007, according to data provided to the OWN Project by the Supported Accommodation and Crisis Services Unit, AIHW.

National Plans and Strategies to Reduce Abuse of Older People

- Establish Interagency Protocols for Responding to Abuse of Older People in every State and Territory, which incorporate strategies to develop collaborative networks of domestic and family violence, aged, health and legal services to reduce violence against older women
- Develop collaborative and accredited training on violence against older women for the domestic violence, aged and health sectors
- Fund and train ACATs and HACCs to the levels necessary to respond to the reported levels of abuse of older people.

The role of the medical and health community

General Practitioners represent a critical group of service providers to improve older women's awareness and reporting of violence and abuse. They were identified by Morgan Disney (2000) as the professional group most likely to be accessed by older women (46%, compared with 38% accessing police and 9.6% accessing refuges), although judged to be more unhelpful than helpful. The Australian Society for Geriatric Medicine (2004) states that 'the medical profession should play a major role in recognition, assessment and management of cases of abuse' and should be part of referral and decision making processes. The provision of a clinical referral pathway to domestic violence specialist support may assist GPs:

Beyond their initial response, most generalists have neither the expertise nor the capacity to meet the needs of women experiencing partner violence...A key step is an offer of referral to specialist support, such as domestic violence advocacy (Hegarty, Taft, & Feder 2008).

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Advances have been made in screening and training in the medical community. Routine health screening for domestic violence in NSW Health early childhood, alcohol and drug and mental health services was introduced in 2001, and is now routinely conducted in women's health centres. Women are asked: 'within the last year have you been hit, slapped or hurt in other ways by your partner or ex-partner?' and 'are you frightened of your partner or ex-partner?' This program screens 10,000 women a month, with around 7.3% reporting physical abuse by their partner or ex-partner in the past 12 months (Spangaro 2007). The Practice Incentives Program (PIP) Domestic Violence Initiative pays general practices in rural and remote areas a subsidy to identify and appropriately refer patients experiencing domestic violence. There is no fee for practice nurses or Aboriginal health workers to undertake the primary training course (DiVeRT) delivered by Lifeline across Australia as part of the PIP Domestic Violence Initiative (Medicare Australia 2009).

Medical and Health Community Recommendations

- Extend routine screening of women for domestic violence by NSW Health to services accessed by older women such as breast screening (with questions adapted to be sensitive to older women)
- Provide training to services utilising Routine Screening to ensure that appropriate assistance and referrals are made
- Encourage Divisions of General Practice to take a lead role in encouraging general practices to identify and respond to cases of violence against older women and, where possible, refer to a specialised family violence service
- Deliver training to medical and allied health workers on violence against

women and the abuse of older people as part of their core curriculum.

- Extend the Commonwealth funded Practice Initiatives Program (PIP) Domestic Violence Initiative scheme to ensure the training of all GP Nurses and Aboriginal Health Nurses.

Legal challenges

There has been much discussion in the Aged Care sector about the adequacy of existing legislation to protect older people from abuse, with calls for aged abuse specific legislation and mandatory reporting of all cases of aged abuse. New legislation in Victoria and Tasmania has specifically included economic abuse as a form of family violence and carers as people against whom orders can be made. Legal practitioners agree that older people should seek independent legal advice on their wills and early inheritance arrangements (Legal Aid NSW).

Any strategy or protocol to address these issues must be linked to training of the professionals involved. There is only one semester course on elder law given to law students (University of Western Sydney) and in NSW a small and recently established Older Person's Legal and Education Program initiated by Legal Aid NSW to educate Community Legal Centres on abuse of older people.

Justice and Legal Sectors Recommendations

- The National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children to review Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation in order to recommend good practice legislation to reduce violence against women and specifically older women
- Incorporate legal and justice sectors in collaborative protocols with domestic violence, aged and health sectors to

ensure effective pathways for older women experiencing violence to appropriate legal services

- Introduce core training and ongoing professional development across mainstream justice and legal services on elder abuse and violence against older women.

Promote Community Awareness

There is low community awareness of the abuse of older people (Artcraft Research 2004; Northern Rivers Social Development Council 2008). Community awareness campaigns have encouraged victims or third parties to report, stressed the dignity and respect due to older people, reinforced cultural values of ageing and promoted safety strategies for older people (Beaulaurier et al. 2007; Morgan Disney 2000; Zink et al. 2006). They have engaged the support of third party sources to alert services, including bank employees, postal workers, hairdressers, pharmacies and libraries. The support of religious leaders is critical for many older women, who tend to have stronger spiritual beliefs than younger women (Morgan Disney 2000). Campaigns that best reflect the concerns and sensitivities of specific communities of women are those designed in collaboration with those communities (Mears et al. 2003; Office of Public Advocate 2006).

Community Awareness Recommendations

- Fund local community awareness campaigns with older women as the target group using non-threatening and appropriate language
- Encourage older women to report to confidential and expert services, with the message that 'it is good for older women to talk with older women' at their local older women's group
- Develop the campaigns as a collaborative initiative of the

community, together with local aged, health and domestic violence services

- Distribute the message through radio and other local media, and through local groups and services frequented by older women such as hairdressers, libraries, social and sporting clubs, and through religious leaders and general practitioners
- Design specialised campaigns for specific communities (older women with disabilities, CALD women and Indigenous women) in collaboration with these communities
- Fund a broader campaign to raise the status of older women; e.g. as mentors, survivors, backbones of their community

Conclusion

Older women constitute a significant proportion of the Australian female population and ensuring they can enjoy a safe and healthy old age will be a challenge for Australia. ³ The overarching message to emerge from the OWN NSW Project is that violence against women does not stop at the age of 45. Instead, the violence may become more complex, insidious and debilitating, compounded by factors such as the financial insecurity of single women in their fifties and early sixties, and a culture of silence and stoicism among older women.

The greatest immediate challenge is to provide older women experiencing violence and abuse with a safe and appropriate pathway to effective support and assistance. To do so requires an urgent response to the historically low funding of services for homeless older women, particularly appropriate permanent accommodation. A positive strategy is to include Aged Care Services in integrated family violence systems

³ More than two thirds (39%) of the Australian female population is 45 years and older (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008)

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and maximise collaborative opportunities, such as joint training across all key sectors. Support to older women in the domestic violence response system should be appropriate and proportionate to the reporting rate indicated in the Personal Safety Survey, Australia (2006). Key professionals, such as General Practitioners, can help to increase the reporting of violence against older women by accessing specialist referral pathways. There is value in both a broad campaign to raise the status of older women as mentors, survivors, and backbones of their community, as well as localised campaigns to encourage older women to talk confidentially to a counsellor or join a local support group for older women.

Despite the challenging economic conditions, the Federal Government declares itself committed to the long term planning necessary to tackle homelessness and reduce violence against women. More than ever, it is time to ensure that being an ageing, single, older woman is not a barrier to being safe, well and housed.

One clear message from discussions as part of the OWN Project was that older women need to be recognised, respected and honoured for their survival, their wisdom and their ongoing contribution to their communities.

Older women are often unsung heroes, forming the backbone of communities under stress. They raise the grandchildren, are mentors to younger women, and often feed and care for extended families.

Older Indigenous women who have grown up through the stolen generations, CALD women who have raised children in a foreign culture, and women who have survived wars, depressions, and the transformation of the world around them, will tolerate a great deal in order to keep their family together.

June 2009



Marjorie M summoning her Valkurian Fairy, 2008

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