

**Submission
No 72**

INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND ISSUES IN NSW

Organisation: Older Women's Network New South Wales Inc (OWN)
Date received: 13/12/2011



Older Women's Network

Attention: Merrin Thompson
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Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council Committees
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9 December, 2011

To the Standing Committee on Social Issues
Legislative Council
Parliament of NSW

Re: Inquiry into domestic violence trends and issues in NSW.

OWN NSW congratulates the Government on initiating this inquiry and appreciates the opportunity to make a submission.

The position outlined in this submission is supported by research, initiated by OWN NSW, the key aspects of which are referred to in the report *The Disappearing Age: a strategy to address violence against older women* (McFerran 2009). It is available on the website www.ownnsw.org.au

Our comments best fit the 4th Terms of Reference "Any other relevant matter". Our concern is for older women living with violence for which contact with the police is not an option they readily choose. Research indicates that strategies for women and children living with violence are not inclusive, and frequently not appropriate, for older women. Similarly, a focus on elder abuse frequently neglects to recognize the nature of the violence and the range of perpetrators older women are exposed to.

The definition of 'older', adopted by OWN NSW, and used by the Human Rights Commission, and by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in the Personal Safety Survey (2006) informs our position. The Personal Safety Survey (ABS 2006) indicates that one in four women who had experienced an incident of physical violence in the previous 12 months were aged 45 years and older. McFerran found that between 1996 and 2006, the greatest increase in those reporting violence was by women aged 55 years and over. The percentage of reports in this age group went from 4.4% in 1996 to 10.1% in 2006 (McFerran 2009).

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Research demonstrates that older women who have been living with domestic violence all their lives do not pass into a violent free zone when they reach the age of 45 years. They do, however, "disappear" and get 'lost in the cracks between the domestic violence and elder abuse services system" (Brandl and Cook-Daniels 2002, quoted by McFerran 2009). And, they may need different responses to younger women (Beaulaurier et al. 2007, quoted by McFerran 2009).

The most common reason given by older women for not speaking to anyone about their situation was shame and embarrassment. Older women have the view that leaving the relationship, going to refuge or calling the police were choices for younger women. Many feel that they have vested too much in their families and partners to leave, that they are too old to re-entre the workforce or were not prepared to be ostracised from their cultural community or the social networks they have developed over many years (Morgan Disney, 2000, quoted by McFerran 2009 p,5)

The 'Disappearing' Age Report (McFerran 2009) includes a strategy for the prevention of violence against older women developed as a consequence of considerable consultation with a variety of stakeholders in the aged care, health, housing, community legal and domestic and family violence sectors and with older women themselves in both regional and urban centres. We commend the strategy to you which follows:

"The OWN NSW strategy to prevent violence against older women:

- *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."*

(McFerran 2009, p 4)

McFerran (2009) points to the 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. This has been the experience in Victoria where a more integrated and diverse family violence service system has been introduced with a state-wide response of 18% of clients aged 45 years and over. One outreach service, for example, shows that 26.2% of outreach clients were aged 45 years and older with a marked increase in clients aged 60 and over.

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OWN NSW is aware of a growing concern in the domestic violence sector in NSW to reach out to older women. In this context OWN NSW is frequently requested to present on the issues facing older women living with violence. We have come to realise that the dichotomy between domestic violence and elder abuse limits the domestic violence sector reaching out to older women. To overcome these barriers additional resources are required by the services to assist in obtaining training and additional staff so that appropriate responses are made to older women. I have attached a report on the outcome of discussions by domestic violence workers following a recent Forum on violence and older women. Their comments reveal their interest, and need for additional resources, in diversifying their services to meet an emerging and challenging need.

Dr. Sonia Laverty
Chairperson
OWN NSW Management Team

References: McFerran, L. (2009). *The Disappearing Age: strategies to address violence against older women*, OWN NSW, Millers Point, Sydney

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