

INQUIRY INTO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE TRENDS AND ISSUES IN NSW

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**Submission to the Legislative Council Standing
Committee on Social Issues**

Inquiry into domestic violence trends and issues in NSW

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Addressing the issue of domestic violence towards older people

Introduction

Domestic violence towards older people, particularly older women, is a neglected area of policy and research that needs urgent attention. The causes of domestic violence towards older people are complex, so solutions require an all of government approach that encompasses medical, social, political, legal and psychological interventions (Wolf; Kurrle 2004).

Many researchers agree there is a likelihood of growing domestic violence and abuse against older people with the ageing of the population and increasing pressures on family caregivers (Walsh et al, 2007). According to the Victorian Report of the Elder Abuse Prevention Project (2005, P.14) factors contributing to an increase in the abuse of older people in Australia include increasing numbers of people in the next 15 years, in particular those 75 years of age and older, increasing longevity and increasing numbers of people with dementia.

However there is little detailed data available on domestic violence towards older people, which makes it difficult to estimate the prevalence of the problem in Australia. The *Personal Safety Survey Australia* (ABS 2006) found the proportion of women aged 45 years and older reporting physical violence against themselves in the past 12 months had increased significantly since 1996 (from 15% to 25%), while the rate for women aged 55 years and over increased even more markedly (4% vs. 10%). In addition, 26 percent of women aged 55 years and over had experienced violence from their current partner (ABS 2006). Older women are much more likely to experience violence and abuse than their male counterparts and the majority of victims are long-term victims (Morgan & Chadwick 2009).

Studies do suggest that physical forms of abuse and neglect of older people are not as common as psychological or financial abuse (Schofield *et al.* 2002, p. 25; Cohen *et al.* 2007). However the complex nature of domestic violence towards older people, combined with a lack of access to supports, reporting and centralised data-gathering, means the problem is probably underestimated.

Issues

1. Inconsistent use of definitions

Clarification and further discussion is needed around creating consistent use of definitions and data across areas of 'elder abuse' and 'domestic violence'. Experts warn that varying use of the terms across the literature have diluted the issues, with the two areas of investigation often taking place with little reference to the other. Domestic violence literature barely recognises violence against older people and elder abuse literature does not focus on the issue of domestic violence against older people. Broadly the term 'elder abuse' is used to include various types of abuse including physical, psychological and financial abuse, whereas 'domestic violence against older people' mostly involves discussions of physical violence within the home environment perpetrated by a family member. Sometimes the terms are used together or interchangeably.

2. Siloed research areas

Although the use of the terms are often confused, used together or interchangeably, elder abuse and domestic violence research that includes an investigation of violence towards older people, have developed quite separately from one another and have quite different theoretical approaches to issues of abuse. Morgan Disney & Associates (2000) caution that the different theoretical approaches to domestic violence and elder abuse have had the effect of diluting the issue and muddying the response.

3. The majority of abusers of older people are mostly close family members

Research demonstrates the majority of abusers of older people are close family members (Kurrle 2004, p. 809). Major factors that contribute to abuse, according to Kurrle (2004) are the personality of the abuser, psychopathology alcoholism, drug abuse, psychiatric illness and cognitive impairment or dementia. Other wider structural factors may include power based differentials in the family or within the family and wider society. (Biggs, *et al* 1995; Penale & Kingston 1997; Wolf 2000; Ramsey-Klawnsnik 2000). A number of researchers point to caregiver stress as a major factor contributing to the abuse of older people. The danger of this approach is that interventions then focus on supporting the caregiver and by default, ignore the needs of the abused older person. (Brandl 2000; Wolf 2000). Any proposed interventions must include programs that support and empower the older person who is being abused.

4. Multiple barriers to reporting abuse

South Australian researchers Bagshaw, Wendt & Zannettino (2007) identified a multitude of barriers faced by older people when confronted with an abusive or violent situation. Those barriers include

- Diminished cognitive capacity
- Mental or physical disability
- Restricted mobility
- Lack of awareness of what constitutes abuse
- Lack of knowledge of their rights or resources
- Social isolation or fear of alienation
- The need to preserve a relationship
- Dependency on others
- Stigma and shame
- Literacy and language barriers
- Religious, generational and cultural barriers
- Fear of reprisal from the abuser
- Perceived lack or actual lack of options or access to services.

5. Violence against older women is a hidden issue

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) found that one in four women 45 years of age and older have experienced an incident of physical violence. This finding was supported by other Australian research undertaken by Morgan & Disney Associates (2000). Despite this research the domestic violence sector has tended to focus on younger women and their dependent children and not paid much attention to older women who may have experienced ongoing domestic violence from their partners and then by other family members. In addition, researchers argue that elder abuse and domestic violence literature does not adequately address issues of violence against older women. Researchers argue that older women have “fallen between the gap between two overlapping definitions of family violence, namely elder abuse and domestic violence, and the two government sectors responsible for policy development and service delivery for each – the domestic violence sector and the ageing sector” (Bagshaw, Wendt & Zannettino 2009 p .7). Other research has found that often older women have often been the victims of physical and sexual abuse for years, with the patterns of abuse established early in the spousal or partner relationship (Harris 1996; Ramsey-Klawnsnik 2003).

6. Dementia and abuse

Researchers Weeks and Sadler (1996) found a strong link between abuse and dementia. People with dementia who lacked capacity were likely to experience financial abuse and neglect, while carers of people with dementia were often the recipients of both physical and psychological aggression and violence. As the prevalence of dementia increases in the community, there is a likelihood that physical violence may increase towards carers of those with dementia.

7. Culturally diverse communities

There is very little research that investigates the abuse of older people in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Experts speculate that the lack of research could be due to family privacy and fears of retribution, but that many of the complex factors that contribute to physical and other forms of abuse of older people may be exacerbated by lack of English language skills, isolation and dependence on family members and cross-generational expectations of care and support. Researchers have also cited the issue that many older people in CALD communities fear being excluded or isolated from their communities by family members (Bagshaw, Wednt & Zannitino 2007).

8. More public and professional education is needed

As with other forms of domestic violence and abuse, abuse of older people involves an abuse of power, which can give rise to fear and intimidation (Bagshaw et al 2000; Bagshaw, Wendt & Zannettino 2007). Researchers and experts agree that there is a need to raise awareness of the issue and expand community and professional understanding of the various forms of elder abuse, including the growing issue of domestic violence towards older people.

Recommendations

- 1. Domestic violence is not limited to younger people. We urge the Committee to consider the need for more investigation of domestic violence related to older people, particularly older women.**
- 2. Standardised definitions of 'elder abuse' and 'domestic violence towards older people' are needed across research, literature and policy domains to improve quantitative data collection and create more useable comparative data.**
- 3. Quantitative data on domestic violence has failed to pick up detailed statistics on violence against older people, so qualitative studies are needed to complement quantitative data. Quantitative data surveys should include questions that focus on violence or abuse towards older people, particularly older women.**
- 4. To be able to more accurately predict the prevalence of abuse or neglect, a central register for statistics on the abuse of older people is needed that includes data on domestic violence.**
- 5. Programs need to focus on supporting the person who is at risk of being abused, by empowering them to seek help.**
- 6. Public and professional education and other awareness-raising activities are needed to help family, friends, neighbours, professionals and others in communities recognise and respond to disclosures of abuse by family members.**
- 7. Increased dialogue is needed between the domestic violence and ageing academic, research & policy sectors.**
- 8. Peak organisations addressing ageing issues and rights in New South Wales should be given opportunities to work together to develop programs and policy that encourage the education and empowerment of older people, particularly women.**

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