

# Violence against older women

HelpAge

International



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## Key messages

- Older women are frequently subjected to one or more forms of violence, abuse and neglect based on their age, gender and other characteristics. This can be driven by ageism, sexism, the intersection of different characteristics or as a result of accumulated discrimination across their life course.
- Violence against older women is not adequately addressed in the majority of research, policy and programmes to prevent and address violence against women and girls.
- International, regional and national legal frameworks fail to adequately address the violence, abuse and neglect to which older women are subjected.

## Introduction

*“Women have often faced a lifetime of coercion, bullying and violence. In older age, women are often afraid to talk about what has happened to them and have learnt to accept this ‘silent’ form of punishment.”* Woman, 61, UK

Older women may be subjected to violence, abuse and neglect due to a number of factors, including but not limited to their age, gender, disability, place of origin, marital status, class or sexual orientation.

Commitments under the Sustainable Development Goal 5 to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” saw a removal of an upper age cap from indicators on violence against women and girls. Yet women over 49 remain routinely ignored in data collection, despite accounting for nearly a quarter of the world’s female population.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion paper aims to highlight the types of violence, abuse and neglect older women experience; and offers recommendations for a collaborative approach to close the data, policy and programme gaps that prevent women living lives free from violence, including in older age.

## Violence, abuse and neglect of older women

Violence against older women is widespread yet mostly hidden. It occurs in multiple, often intersecting forms by perpetrators who may include intimate partners, family members (including male and female adult children), caregivers or members of the wider community.<sup>2</sup> Many older women experience one or more types of physical, sexual, financial and psychological violence, abuse and neglect.

Older women can also experience structural and systemic discrimination based on age and gender through, for example, discriminatory land inheritance laws or deprivation of autonomy in institutional care settings, and can be subjected to harmful practices such as witchcraft accusations.

Across all these examples, social stigma surrounding violence, abuse and neglect in older age leaves older women invisible, unable to access redress or adequate support.

### Violence across the life course

Gender-based violence can occur across the life course and may be exacerbated in older age.

Despite stereotypical attitudes that violence is typically experienced by younger women,<sup>3</sup> existing data on physical and sexual violence against women over the age of 49 shows it does continue in later life.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, violence against women is a systemic, widespread and pervasive human rights violation, experienced largely by women because they are women<sup>5</sup> and, as such, it affects women and girls of all ages.

Older women are also subjected to violence, abuse and neglect based on their age. Deeply rooted prejudices and dehumanising stereotypes about older people fuel ageism and perpetuate prevailing social norms that tolerate or even condone violence, abuse and neglect in older age.

*“If I want to wash my clothes, then I have to ask [my] daughter-in-law for the soap. Sometimes she hides [the soap]... She usually does not allow me to enter her room. Even my movement in the house is restricted.”*

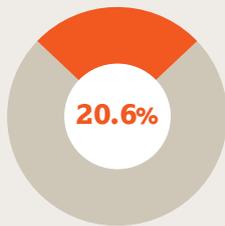
**Woman, 60, Nepal**

Such violence is often categorised as “elder abuse” and, despite occurring in many forms and in various settings, it remains dangerously invisible. The lack of prioritisation of the issue, surrounding shame and stigma, and the lack of adequate services might also contribute to the low reporting rates. WHO estimates that only 1 in 24 cases of elder abuse is reported.<sup>6</sup> There is even less evidence on violence, abuse and neglect experienced by older women in residential care settings.

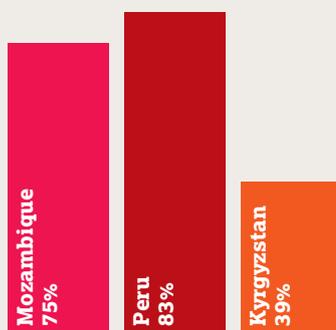
Tackling elder abuse entails adopting a rights-based approach to challenge negative social norms around ageing and to promote the dignity of older people.

### Definitions of elder abuse

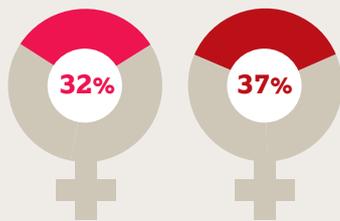
Violence against older women and men is often conceptualised as “elder abuse”. Globally, there is no agreed definition of elder abuse or what constitutes “old age”. This contributes to a lack of comparable and representative data on violence, abuse and neglect experienced in later life. Elder abuse is most often defined as a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person.<sup>8</sup> This definition does not take into account systemic and structural violence, nor perpetrators other than those in a position of trust. Furthermore, elder abuse definitions often fail to acknowledge gender dimensions of violence. On the other hand, policy and programmes on violence against women and girls lack understanding of how such violence is experienced and manifested in older age. The failure to consider the relationship between age, gender and violence may result in older survivors “falling between the cracks of the elder abuse and domestic violence systems”.<sup>9</sup>



WHO *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women* report (2013) found lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among women over 50 years old to be **20.6%**. This is likely to be under-reported as less is known about patterns of violence against older women than those between the ages of 15-49.



In a small scale (non-representative) piece of research conducted by HelpAge International and the London School of Economics in three countries, **75%** of the women who took part in the survey in Mozambique, **83%** in Peru and **39%** in Kyrgyzstan reported experiencing at least one form of violence or abuse since the age of 50.<sup>7</sup>



HelpAge's recent study into the prevalence of gender-based violence among older women and men living in protracted displacement found that **32%** of women over 49 experienced intimate partner violence (17% in the past year), while **37%** experienced non-intimate partner domestic violence (14% in the past year).<sup>10</sup>



The most comprehensive data comes from an EU-funded study in five European countries which found that **28%** of older women experienced violence and abuse in their own home in the last 12 months, including: emotional abuse (**24%**), financial abuse (**9%**), violation of rights (**6%**), neglect (**5%**), sexual abuse (**3%**) and physical violence (**2%**).<sup>11</sup>

### Intersectional violence

The prevalence of sexism and ageism means older women are subjected to new and distinct forms of violence and abuse, which can amplify their experience of gender inequality.

In a consultation by HelpAge, older women reported that different intersecting characteristics put them at heightened risk of violence. This included living with disabilities, being a migrant or a refugee, living in rural areas, having low literacy levels, being single or widowed, or receiving care and support for independent living.<sup>12</sup>

More research is needed to understand the precise and often intersecting types of violence against older women, and the risk factors and drivers that lead to it occurring.

### Gaps in data, policy and response

Despite older women experiencing all forms of violence, abuse and neglect, they remain invisible in datasets and are routinely excluded from policy and programmes to prevent and address violence against women and girls.

The lack of data on prevalence of violence over the age of 49 was illustrated in the WHO's *Global and regional estimates of violence against women* report in 2013. Of the 392 estimates the WHO used in their analysis of sexual and intimate partner violence, only 66 were for women over the age of 49. The WHO explains that this is because most of the surveys on violence against women, or surveys with a violence module, are carried out on women aged between 15 or 18 to 49.<sup>13</sup>

There have been a number of initiatives to challenge this systematic exclusion, most notably the Sustainable Development Goal 5 indicator that commits to measuring violence against women from the age of 15, extending beyond the age cap of 49. However, few countries have gender and age-disaggregated systems in place for monitoring, recording and reporting violence against older women, with main global surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Survey, collecting data only from women between 15 and 49 years old.

Where data is collected on older age groups, it is rarely disaggregated or analysed. Also, sexual and physical violence by intimate partners tends to be prioritised over other forms of violence, abuse and neglect committed by a wider range of perpetrators.

This gap translates into a lack of protection mechanisms, limited access to tailored services and a lack of effective prevention programmes for older women. For example, a study of intimate partner violence in South Asia found that violence screening programmes were offered as part of pregnancy-related health services. This excluded older women despite them being as much at risk of violence as women of childbearing age.<sup>14</sup>

This focus on women of "reproductive age" is a manifestation of the intersection of ageism and sexism that sees women reduced to their reproductive function and only counted as "women" depending on their childbearing ability. If left unchallenged, it risks promoting a harmful stereotype that violence only happens in younger age, leaving older women's experiences invisible.

There is an urgent need to ensure data on violence, abuse and neglect experienced by women over 49 is collected, analysed and used to inform policies and programmes addressing violence against women and girls.

### The right to freedom from violence, abuse and neglect

Attention to violence and abuse against women in their older age has increased in recent years, but at an unsatisfactory pace.<sup>15</sup> States' human rights obligation to protect older women from violence is not explicitly articulated in existing international human rights law.

National legislation, policies, strategies and plans of action to eliminate and provide redress for the varied forms of violence against older women vary widely, resulting in inconsistent and different levels of protection across different countries.

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**HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.**

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Of 133 countries surveyed in the 2014 WHO's *Global status report on violence prevention* survey, only 59% said they have laws to prevent elder abuse and only 30% said these were fully enforced.<sup>16</sup>

Domestic violence legislation does not, in general, specifically include older women.<sup>17</sup> As part of the 2015 20-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, only 13 of the 131 government reports reviewed recognised that women are at risk of violence in older age, and only two referred to a specific form of violence that disproportionately affects older women: medication abuse (Germany) and witchcraft-related killings (Tanzania).<sup>18</sup>

This patchwork of protection undermines the universality of human rights and every woman's right to freedom from violence, abuse and neglect throughout every stage of their lives. Failure to do due diligence to prevent such incidents and to provide support and redress for violence in older women's private lives is a violation of a state's human rights obligations.

The right to freedom from violence, abuse and neglect should be comprehensive, covering all forms, both individual and structural, all perpetrators and all settings. One of the reasons for the inconsistent and patchy approach to protection at the national level is the absence of any universal human rights standards that would specifically address violence, abuse and neglect of older women. Adoption of such universal standards within a convention on the rights of older people would provide every government with guidance on how to improve their domestic legislation and practice so that it is in line with international human rights standards.

## Recommendations

1. All stakeholders must recognise that older women experience violence, abuse and neglect, and include them in a meaningful way in any new and existing research, policy and programmes on violence against women and girls.
2. Data to monitor the achievement of gender equality across the SDGs must be disaggregated by sex, age (in five-year cohorts), disability, location and other grounds for discrimination prohibited under international human rights law. Monitoring must include the 900 million women (24% of the world's women) who are over 49 years old.
3. In order to be inclusive of older women, data, policy and programmes addressing violence against women and girls must widen their focus from sexual and physical intimate partner violence to include different forms of violence, abuse and neglect, and a wider range of perpetrators and settings.
4. States should have an obligation to take steps to prevent violence, abuse and neglect of older women in relation to, among other things, legislation and its effective implementation; training of care providers, healthcare and social workers, the judiciary and law enforcement; provision of access to a range of support services for older survivors; public prevention campaigns; and research into the intersectional drivers of violence.
5. A convention on the rights of older people should be adopted with explicit provisions on protection from violence, abuse and neglect faced by older women and men.

*"I always imagined a quiet old age and next to my husband, but I learnt that violence against women can come in every age. Now, I only can advise women, especially older women, not to tolerate such situations of abuse."*

**Woman, 63, Colombia**