

Invisible Survivors: Domestic Violence and Women Over 50

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The Overlooked Reality of Domestic Violence in Later Life

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS WHY DO THEY STAY

Why victims don't "just leave"

Hidden in Plain Sight Traumatic Brain Injury - Strangulation an Domestic Violence

OCTOBER NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AWARENESS MONTH

STOP THE VIOLENCE

Why DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS Stay

Abuse Does Not Discriminate by Age



- **The Reality:** Domestic violence affects older women, either starting late in life or continuing from previous years.
- Domestic violence against women in middle age and later life occurs in two main contexts:
 1. **Late-Onset Violence:** Begins later in life, often due to retirement stress, health changes, or new relationships.
 2. **Domestic Violence “Grown Old”:** Abuse that has continued for decades, often shifting from physical to emotional control.
 - The more common of the two.
- As both the victim and abuser age, the severity of physical abuse decreases.
 - However, emotional or financial abuse remains as the abusers no longer need to use physical violence, to control them.
 - Instead, the threat of violence and emotional abuse over the years are enough to intimidate and manipulate these women.

Elder Abuse and Domestic Violence Later Life



- **Similarities:**
 - **Types of Abuse:** Both involve physical, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect.
 - **Victim Vulnerability:** Older adults in both situations face challenges like physical frailty and social isolation.
 - **Barriers to Reporting:** Both are underreported due to fear, dependency, and stigma around family and privacy..

Elder Abuse and Domestic Violence Later Life



- **Differences:**
 - **Abuser Relationship:** Elder abuse can involve family members or caregivers, while later-life domestic violence typically involves intimate partners.
 - **Abuser Motivation:** Elder abuse often involves financial exploitation, whereas domestic violence focuses on control over the victim's autonomy.
 - **Support Systems:** Elder abuse cases involve adult protective services, while domestic violence services emphasize crisis intervention and shelter.
 - **Awareness:** Elder abuse is more commonly recognized by healthcare providers, whereas domestic violence in older adults lacks targeted resources and awareness.

Physical and Mental Health Considerations



- **Exacerbated Physical Health Issues:** Older women can be more likely to suffer severe physical injuries than younger women.
 - These injuries can be exacerbated by pre-existing health conditions linked to age, such as arthritis, diabetes, or osteoporosis.
- **Exacerbated Mental Health Issues** Although it is often seen in younger groups, older women often develop mental health issues from long-term abuse.
 - Including depression, anxiety, and PTSD.
 - The mental health toll is compounded by isolation and the fear that they will be left without support or companionship.
- **Coping Mechanisms:** Studies show that older women may rely more on alcohol as a coping tool than younger women.

Barriers to Leaving



- **Why Stay?**
- **Financial Constraints:** Women over 50 who have been financially dependent on their partners or who retired without personal financial security often find it difficult to leave.
 - Older women may come from generations where women were less likely to work and have financial independence.
 - With limited access to work or income, they may fear poverty or homelessness.
- **Generational Stigmas:** Many older women believe reporting abuse or leaving their partner would be seen as airing “dirty laundry,” which was more stigmatized in their youth.
 - As a result, they may stay silent or view the abuse as a private matter.
 - Older women often believe violence is a normal part of a relationship and that such matters should be kept private and within the family.

Barriers to Leaving



- **Self-Blame:** Often older women blame themselves for the abuse.
 - For not being a good wife, or for expecting too much from their husbands.
- **Reluctant to Leave Their Home:** Having a stable home and career can also make it harder for older women to leave abusive relationships.
 - Unlike younger women, they are more likely to have lived in the same place for years, accumulating possessions, memories, and emotional connections that are difficult to part with.
 - This sense of stability and attachment to their home can create a significant barrier to starting over.
- **Family:** Many of these women are also grandmothers, with caregiving responsibilities that make it even more challenging to leave an abusive relationship.
 - They often face inner conflicts, feeling both a sense of duty to provide childcare and a fear of the stigma associated with revealing that their grandfather may be abusive.

Psychological Barriers: “Why Now?” — Challenges of Leaving After Decades of Abuse



- **Familiarity with Abuse:**
 - For women in long-term abusive relationships, there may be a sense of “normalcy” around the abuse due to its prolonged presence.
 - They may find it psychologically difficult to envision life outside this pattern, even if harmful.
- **Fear of Loneliness and Belief “*It’s Too Late*”:**
 - Many older women believe it’s too late to begin again, either from concern about remaining single or losing shared friendships, family connections, and financial stability.

Intersection of Caregiving and Domestic Violence for Women 50+



- **Abuse as Caregiver Stress:**
 - In relationships where one partner becomes a caregiver, stress and frustration can increase the risk of abuse.
 - If the caregiver is also the abuser, the victim may feel trapped due to their physical dependence on the abuser for basic needs.
- **Vulnerability in Care Settings:**
 - Abuse may also arise when older women become dependent on institutional or family care, facing mistreatment from family or caretakers due to their vulnerable position.

Barriers to Accessing Help



- **Social and Physical Limitations:**
 - Years of abuse can erode confidence, making it hard to join group sessions, especially with younger women.
 - I.e., After years of abuse, an older woman may feel too intimidated to join a support group where most attendees are younger, fearing she will not relate or will be judged if she shared her story.
 - Depending on their age, physical limitations, such as difficulty with stairs or sensitivity to noise, can make some shelters unsuitable.

Barriers to Accessing Help



- **Awareness and Accessibility:**
 - Lack of awareness that DV affects older women contributes to service gaps.
 - **Service gaps-** areas where DV support systems are not meeting the needs of older survivors, often due to a lack of tailored resources or appropriate accommodations.
 - *I.e.*, facilities may lack accessibility features, such as ramps or elevators, making them difficult for older adults with mobility issues to use.
 - Many DV campaigns are tailored mainly to people between 18 and 45 years old, limiting the availability of assistance to older people.
 - A study found that many older women are unaware of support services or believe they are only for younger survivors.

Social Support Gaps for Older Domestic Violence Victims



- **Resource Limitations:**
 - Resources for older victims, including shelters and legal services, are less accessible or suited to older populations, who may require specialized assistance.
- **Underreporting:**
 - Older women are also less likely to report abuse, partly due to fears of not being believed or of being forced into nursing care (which might be worse or just as bad).
 - This underreporting skews the available data, making it difficult to tailor support services adequately.

