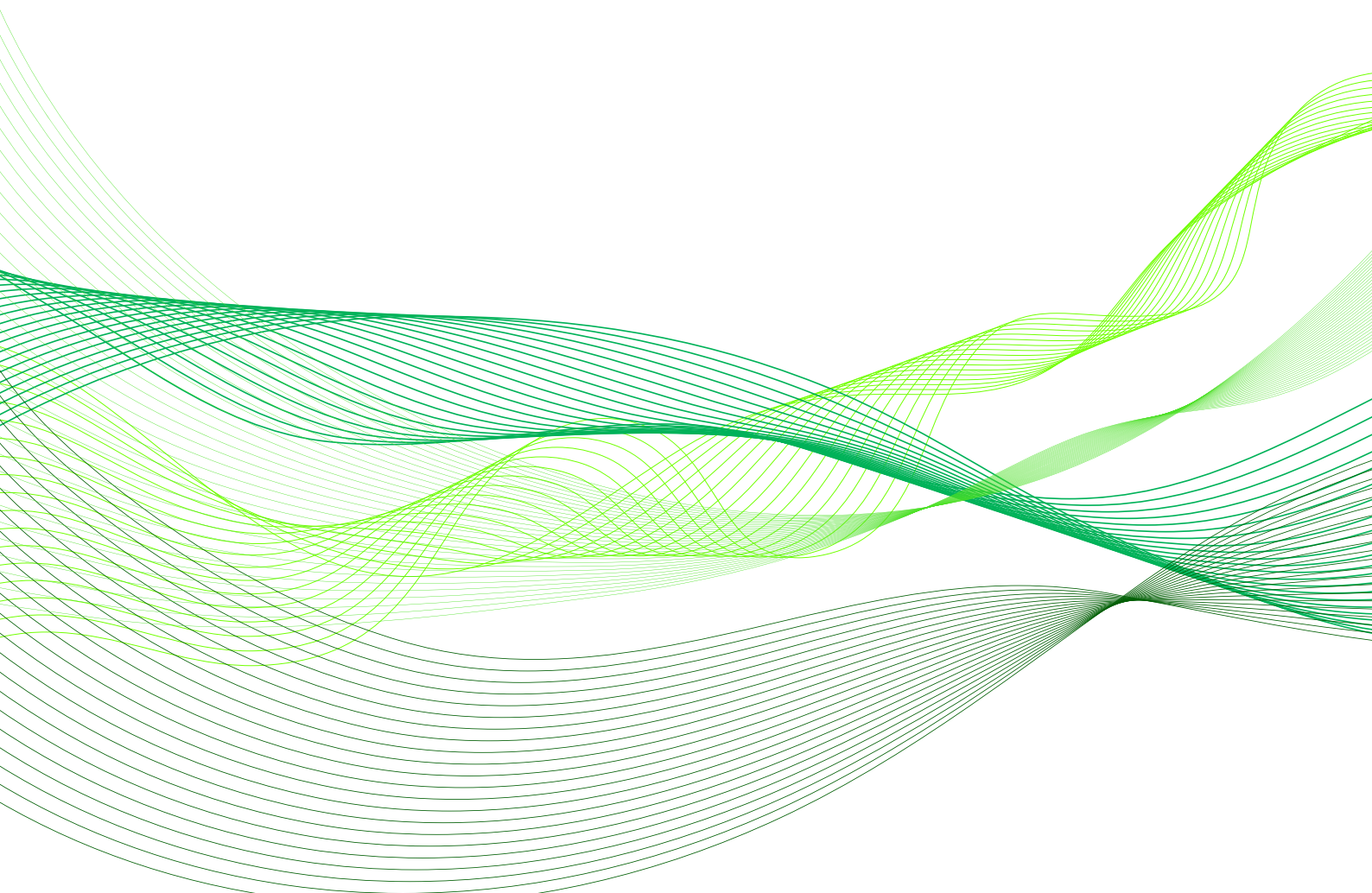


Domestic Abuse & Equality Older Women



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♀

+○ Domestic Abuse is experienced by women of all ages; however, older women are often overlooked.

+○ Older women experiencing Domestic Abuse have very specific needs. However, these needs have until recently received little attention.

+○ Definitions of 'older' vary. The UK Government and Welsh Assembly Government define an older person as anyone aged 50 or over.

+○ However, it is important to recognise that other factors such as life experiences may be more significant than age and that assumptions shouldn't be made about a woman's situation and needs based solely on her age.

+○ Domestic Abuse can be perpetrated by any person in an ongoing relationship with the victim. For older women, this can include a spouse, partner, adult child, other family member or caregiver. However, it is important to recognise the differences between Domestic Abuse and Elder Abuse.

+○ Domestic Abuse against older women may be long-term and have persisted for many years, or it may occur in a new relationship, for example, following the death or divorce from a previous partner.

+○ Many older women were born in an era when there were very few Domestic Abuse services, and many women suffered in silence. Until the 1960s,

“There were no refuges, no safe havens, few housing, medical and social services, no counselling centres. There was no publicity or media coverage, not much in the way of legal remedies, and very little help from the police. The abuse of wives within families was almost invisible”

+○ Gender roles have also changed considerably over the last few decades, and what is considered acceptable behaviour may be very different for women from an older generation.

+○ Having lived through a time when Domestic Abuse was not recognised, older women are likely to have a very different perception of what services they can access, and considerably different support needs.

+○ A study conducted in 2004 found that

“even for nondependent older women, physical and verbal abuse is occurring at rates similar to or higher than, those for younger women”

+○ However, only 1.2% of victims of reported incidents of domestic abuse to the Scottish police were over 61, and only 5.2% were aged between 51 and 60 .

+○ These figures suggest that although older women experience Domestic Abuse at similar rates to younger women, they are less likely to report it.

+○ Lower rates of reporting Domestic Abuse may be due to the barriers to disclosure experienced by older women, or that some older women do not consider their experiences to be abuse.

+○ Research suggests that in up to 25% of cases where adult women are abused, the perpetrator is an adult child. This could make seeking help even harder.

+○ The long-term effects of Domestic Abuse on older women are likely to be similar to those on younger women; however, the effects are likely to be more severe the longer the abuse has occurred. For older women who have lived in an abusive relationship for many years, the effects can include:

“ permanent physical damage, chronic eating disorders, disability, self-harm, self-neglect, loss of confidence, and mental health problems ”
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+○ There is a serious danger that these effects can be misconstrued as a normal part of the ageing process, rather than the consequences of abuse.

+○ In cases where abuse is physical, many older women have longer recovery periods and higher mortality rates as a result of physical injuries⁶.

+○ A study in the USA found a significant link between an increased likelihood of suicide, and a history of abuse in women aged 55 and over⁷.

+○ It is important to note that older women experiencing Domestic Abuse may not report increased ill-health, despite being very likely to suffer from specific health conditions such as depression, anxiety, digestive problems, and chronic pain.

+○ Consequently, the risks older women face are often heightened and they are less likely to seek help:

“ older women are more likely to have been exposed to long-term trauma, are more likely to currently live with an abuser, and are more likely to remain within the relationship ”
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+○ Barriers to disclosing abuse and seeking help and support are magnified for older women.

+○ Older women may have different perceptions of abuse having grown up in a society where Domestic Abuse was a private issue, and where outside support was not easily available to women.

+○ Domestic abuse may only be seen as physical abuse, and other forms of abuse such as emotional and psychological, may not be considered abuse.

+○ Feelings of powerlessness as a woman are greater for women from certain generations. Respondents to one study indicated that they had been

“ socialised to be passive and to believe that divorce was not an option ”
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+○ Older women may not believe that they are experiencing Domestic Abuse as victims are often portrayed as younger women with children.

+○ Some older women who have been experiencing Domestic Abuse for many years, may have previously attempted to disclose the abuse but received little or no support and have since stopped trying.

+○ Older women may feel ashamed or embarrassed at having experienced abuse. Following a long relationship, self-blame and shame are increasingly powerful deterrents to disclosing abuse¹⁰.

+○ For women who have started a new relationship in later life, they may feel embarrassed to admit that they are being abused.

+○ Older women from BME backgrounds may be particularly ashamed or embarrassed at experiencing abuse from their partners. Family honour may particularly influence an older BME woman's decision not to seek support.

+○ Older women from BME backgrounds are sometimes less likely than younger women to speak or understand English, which can make disclosing abuse very difficult where specialist services are not available¹¹.

+○ Professionals who may normally encourage disclosure of Domestic Abuse such as health and social work professionals, may assume that injuries and confusion are the results of age-related conditions rather than the result of abuse¹² or be reluctant to discuss Domestic Abuse with an older woman.

+○ Protecting family is a complex barrier to disclosing abuse. Older women in particular often feel that revealing Domestic Abuse may disrupt the family, and worry about their children's reaction. Fears that they will not be believed or even blamed often discourage women from disclosing.

+○ A further barrier which is characteristic of older women is concern for the abuser. Some women fear that reporting Domestic Abuse may result in the arrest or removal of the perpetrator and where they are of a similar age, there is a worry that they will not be suitably cared for. One study found that:

“The need to care for an ailing abusive spouse was more important than escaping that abuse. In other cases, respondents who needed care or companionship believed that no one but the abuser would care for or talk to them”¹³

+○ Once a woman has recognised that she is experiencing Domestic Abuse, seeking help can be very difficult for older women for several reasons:

+○ Older women may be even less aware than younger women of the services available, and may think that they are aimed at younger women or women with children¹⁴.

+○ Women brought up in an era where private family matters were not discussed may feel reluctant to seek help. Accessing services requires revealing details which many older women will feel uncomfortable talking about. One study focussing on older women found that

“Revealing information that should be secret seemed to exacerbate feelings of shame and embarrassment, particularly for those respondents who already felt that they were to blame for the abuse in the home”¹⁵

+○ Older women are more likely than younger women to have health problems or disabilities¹⁶ which can make seeking help increasingly difficult.

+○ Leaving a house that has been a home for many years, may be particularly difficult for older women. The prospect of leaving a house, community and support network is often very daunting.

“Some women may have lived all their lives in the same community, and may not be willing to leave the area and all their friends; this is a particular problem in rural areas where it may be impossible to resettle anonymously”¹⁷

+○ Older women may have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives, dependent children, or grandchildren which makes seeking help difficult and the prospect of moving very daunting.

+○ Older women may be financially dependent on their abusers and have no independent form of income which may discourage women from leaving.

+○ While adult children may offer older women support in seeking help, others may create further barriers. Some adult children may encourage their mothers to stay in the relationship, or even blame their mother for the abuse.

+○ The adequacy of services for older women can be a key barrier to seeking help.

“Refuge accommodation in particular may be uncomfortable or inappropriate for older women – too noisy, too many children, too stressful, and inaccessible for women with disabilities”
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+○ However, specialist services are being developed which seek to overcome this barrier such as designated refuges for women over 50¹⁹

+○ Once help has been sought, older women may face particular issues which discourage them from accessing services.

+○ Women who need to access a refuge may find them noisy or chaotic, or difficult to access if their mobility is reduced²⁰

+○ Some older women may care for older male children who may not be able to be accommodated by refuges²¹. Leaving dependents behind is a very difficult choice to make and will often prevent women from accessing refuge.

+○ Further problems may be faced when older women are seeking re-housing if they have particular access needs or require supported housing.

+○ Outreach services can be an effective way for older women to access services. Furthermore, some refuges are attempting to make their provision more attractive to older women by offering self-contained units, or specialist over-50 refuges²²

Wales Domestic Abuse Helpline
www.wdah.org.uk or 0808 80 10 800

Welsh Women's Aid
www.welshwomensaid.org

Age Cymru
<http://www.ageuk.org.uk/cymru/>

HACT – The housing action charity
<http://hact.org.uk/>
 (co-authors of Older Women & Domestic Abuse: An overview)

The Changing Ageing Partnership
<http://www.changingageing.org/>

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