Understanding elder abuse: ageism and gendered practices

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‘Elder abuse is a serious human rights violation that requires urgent action. It is also a major public health problem that results in serious health consequences for the victims, including increased risk of morbidity, mortality, institutionalisation, and hospital admission, and has a negative effect on families and society at large.’

# Global Epidemiology of Elder Abuse

Aggregated prevalence estimates in community-based samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Pooled prevalence estimates for different types of abuse:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological/emotional</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial exploitation</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td><strong>15.7%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘The institutionalization and imbrication of ageism in Western society through the legal, political, economic and other systems mean that ageism has in many and diverse ways become “naturalized”, thus hard to detect and counteract. A seemingly well-meaning attitude can easily become paternalistic, with references to old age as a second childhood.’

Elder Abuse and Gender

• **Women are victims more often than men** (Laumann, et al., 2008; Lowenstein, et al., 2009; Biggs, et al., 2009; Naughton et al., 2010; Smith, 2012; Gil et al., 2015).

• **Rates of abuse are similar for women and men** (Poole and Retschlin, 2012; Acierno and Amella, 2013).

• **Men are victims more often than women** (Tatara, 1993; Pillemer and Finkelhor, 1998; Acierno et. al., 2010).
‘... our research found no significant difference in prevalence between older women and older men. ... our findings contribute to this growing evidence for gender symmetry in abuse victimisation.’ (p. 153).


‘Abuse of older men is thus real but still remains under-recognized and under-detected, under-investigated and under-theorized’. (p. 4)

‘Attention to the abuse of older men should be seen as no different than attention to the abuse of older women. In the final analysis, the reasons for the abuse of older men and older women are more similar than different, including conditions that promote violence and abuse in society, and negatively characterizing older persons and other populations who are vulnerable, dependent, or perceived to be different.’

‘The abuse of older men is no more important than is the abuse of older women; so, too, the abuse of older men is no less important than the abuse of older women’.

Policy, ageism and gendered practices

- Systematic invisibility of older people in general surveys of domestic abuse and as recipients of domestic abuse services

- Policy goals focus on violence against women and girls
‘Although the BCS [British Crime Survey] includes respondents aged 16 and over, the questions on interpersonal violence were only asked of those aged between 16 and 59. This was for two main reasons. First older people have greater difficulty with or resistance to using a computer in this way ... Secondly, it was thought that issues of elder abuse (from family members other than intimates) might get confused with responses about violence from intimates and that these issues were more appropriately dealt with in a specialised survey.’

‘Ageist attitudes towards older people can contribute towards domestic abuse in older people not being accurately identified by professionals. A failure to recognise and effectively respond to domestic abuse in an older person may lead to inappropriate referrals and potentially unsafe outcomes. It is important that practitioners do not stereotype or make judgements in relation to older people and that they explore all potential experiences of older people in transparent and open minded ways.’

Older People’s Commissioner for Wales (2017) Information and guidance on domestic abuse: Safeguarding older people in Wales, Welsh Government.
**Coercive Control**

**Controlling behaviour:** a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour.

**Coercive behaviour:** a continuing act or pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim.

*Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationship: Statutory Guidance Framework (Home Office) 2015*
‘Well in some ways it is different isn’t it and some ways it is the same. For men like myself, I think it’s taken me a very long time to talk about it. They [men] are supposed to be the stronger ones aren’t they, the idea is unless you are old and a silly old man like me you don’t get fooled by other people, but unfortunately we do. At the start it was like ... she said “I shouldn’t go out tonight, you are not up to it, I’ll go”. Gradually, I just sort of, over time, went into a corner and just hid myself. Basically ... I think you say less and put up with more perhaps.’

(Male victim)
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