

ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN

Violence is experienced by people of all ages. Often considered a hidden crime, abuse against older adults is a very complex issue and in many cases is part of the continuum of family violence. There is a limited body of research and knowledge of the reality of abuse against older adults in Canada due to under-reporting of incidents because of fear, shame and lack of services for older persons or awareness of where to report.

Elder abuse, or abuse of older persons, is any action or inaction which endangers the health or well being of an older individual. Abuse can be physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, a violation of rights, financial or neglect. The best information available indicates that between 4% and 7% of persons over 65 years in Canada experience abuse. This means that in Nova Scotia at least 5,000 to 10,000 older people experience harm because of abuse or neglect. However, this number is likely far greater due to under-reporting of abuse.

Seniors will comprise 25% of the population in Nova Scotia by 2026. Women live longer and there are more older women in our population. In 2005, there were 103 women for every 100 men between 55 and 64 in Nova Scotia. This measure increases dramatically and steadily with age and there are 277 women for every 100 men in the 85+ age group (NS Seniors' Secretariat Statistical Profile, 2005). Because women live longer than men and there are more older women than there are older men, elder abuse is and will continue to be a significant women's issue.

Any woman can be abused, despite her age, living arrangements or conditions, physical or mental health, sexual orientation, financial status, education, culture, or social status.

SOME FACTS RELATED TO THE ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN

- Values and negative attitudes about aging and women can result in *ageism* and disrespectful behaviours toward older women.
- Older women are often devalued in our society. Many devalue themselves because they stayed at home to raise a family and did not work outside the home. Older women frequently established their identity based upon the circumstances, position or success of their partner.
- Many women accept or internalize the stereotypes which society perpetuates about aging *and* about being female. This can result in poor self-esteem, negative self-image, lack of confidence, and low morale. These are all tremendous barriers to reaching out for help.

- Older people experience isolation and lack of family or supports more frequently than other age groups. This leaves many older women vulnerable to abuse.
- A British study indicated that women are the victims of almost 80% of abuse of persons over 60 years of age. The highest incidence of abuse occurred from 80 – 90 years.
 - Source: Pritchard, J.(2000) *The Needs of Older Women. Services for victims of elder and other abuse.* The Policy Press, Bristol.
- Abuse of older women occurs more often in relationships with sons, daughters and partners. Grandchildren, acquaintances, service providers and care providers can also be perpetrators of abuse.
- Sexual assault of older women is more often ignored or denied because of attitudes and beliefs about sexuality and older people.
- Many older women feel that services available for victims of violence, including shelters, are intended for younger women.
- Countless older women have lived in abusive relationships for many years, oftentimes decades, and appear to be tolerant of abuse. For some women, the abuse began in childhood and continued through adulthood into their later years.
- Older women may be more vulnerable to financial dependence on their abuser and therefore be more tolerant of abuse because of a lifetime of working inside the home, leaving little to no opportunity for pensions or possible future earnings.
- Many older women stay in abusive relationships because of religious beliefs and an acceptance of the vows “till death do us part”. The belief in sanctity of the marriage is particularly strong among today’s older women.
- Women from different cultures can experience abuse of all forms but most commonly encounter emotional abuse. Older women in these communities may be particularly vulnerable due to increased social isolation, greater language barriers, and traditional relations within families.
- Like younger women, older women want to protect their children. In this case, it is their adult children – who may be their abusers. Older women have complicated loyalties which create more barriers to help than younger women experience.