



Live Fear Free Helpline

Providing confidential support and information on domestic abuse, sexual violence and violence against women in Wales

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## Welsh Women's Aid Briefing June 2017

### Older Women Living with Violence and Abuse

**Violence against women including domestic abuse and sexual violence is experienced by women of all ages, although often the experiences of older women can be overlooked. We must challenge attitudes that neglect the experiences of older women, who are already markedly invisible across society.**

Violence against women including domestic abuse and sexual violence affects women across society, yet older women are frequently missing from the data. The Older People's Commissioner in Wales estimates that over 40,000 older people (age 50 years and over) in Wales are abused in their own homes every year.<sup>1</sup>

Older women experience violence and abuse from their partners or family members who use physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse to exert power and control over every aspect of women's lives. As a control tactic, domestic abuse re-creates and reinforces women's economic dependence and is a means by which abusers are able to achieve the financial power previously held over women by men.

While some older women experience abuse for many decades, others begin to experience it within previously non-abusive relations, or in new relationships. Coupled with the huge variety of abuse older women may face, grouping them as one homogenous group denies each survivor their unique experiences and ignores their individual needs.

#### Older People Living with Financial Abuse

**Financial abuse is often part of a wider pattern of domestic abuse. For many women this means being prevented from access to independent income, having their spending monitored, debts built up in their name, or being forced to steal by the abuser.**

Ann\*, a survivor of abuse, said that isolation is enhanced as an older person: **"My focus was my family...you don't go out at my age and try to enjoy yourself or anything like that."** After sustained abuse Ann sought safety in refuge. Initially reluctant to live with other people after years of isolation, refuge changed her life. Staff helped Ann to set up her own bank account because her partner had not allowed her any money, and to find her a home of her own. Ann made it clear that if it had not been for refuge she does not think she would be here: **"As an older woman you don't think you can do those things but support makes you realise that you can, that you're not too old for anything. At my age you think life has ended, they gave me a different outlook."**

<sup>1</sup> 'Domestic abuse and sexual violence: Help and Support for Older People in Wales', Older People's Commissioner for Wales, [http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/DVSA\\_Leaflet\\_2016.sflb.ashx](http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/DVSA_Leaflet_2016.sflb.ashx), [accessed 8 June 2017].

\* All names have been changed for anonymity purposes.

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The stark reality of financial abuse for many women means limited or no independent money or choice on spending or significant amounts of financial debt built up in their name. Financial abuse can also lead to survivors having criminal records from being forced to steal or commit fraud by the abuser. Financial abuse can take many forms, but this rarely occurs in isolation. Rather, it is often part of a larger, ongoing pattern of abuse and is intended to enforce control, restriction and isolation upon the life of the survivor. Financial abuse affects people across society but increased dependence upon others puts some older women at far greater risk of financial abuse and other forms of violence against women from not only within the domestic sphere, but also from close friends and care workers, neighbours and strangers.

### Wider Context

The term elder abuse is 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>2</sup> Welsh Women’s Aid supports this definition, while also recognising a more gendered understanding of all violence against women – including older women – than is often given to the term and adopting a much broader understanding of what constitutes as violence. Research and practice on elder abuse does not always take account of wider violence against older women including domestic abuse and sexual violence, focusing on the survivors age within the context of their increased vulnerability and need of medical and social care rather than situating older women’s experience within the wider context of violence against women across society.

The impact of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence for older women is under-recognised. The Local Government Association report ‘Adult safeguarding and domestic abuse: A guide to support practitioners and managers’ suggests that **“this may be due to the assumptions that pervade ‘elder abuse’, which can fail to acknowledge the underlying complexities of power relations within abusive relationship in later life.”**<sup>3</sup>

Trisha\*, a survivor of abuse from a family member, explained how abusive behaviour can be hidden easily dismissed for the older generations. **“More needs to be done to raise awareness among mature women about abuse... whether it’s domestic abuse, rape or sexual violence, people tend to think it’s younger people. Forcing someone to give up driving or not allowing them to work can be hidden easily among older generations because people will presume that someone has stopped these activities because of age, rather than making the link with domestic abuse.”**

With approximately 40% of the Welsh population over the age of 50<sup>4</sup>, more needs to be done to break the silence about the abuse experienced by older women who are far too frequently surviving abuse every day, year on year, and decade upon decade. Based on the number of women over 50 who are anticipated to have experienced violence and abuse, it can be assumed that the vast majority are yet

<sup>2</sup> This definition is used by Action on Elder Abuse and has been adopted by the World Health Organisation. ‘What is Elder Abuse?’, <https://elderabuse.org.uk/what-is-elder-abuse/>, Action on Elder Abuse, [accessed 8 June 2017].

<sup>3</sup> S. Lewis and C. Williams, ‘Adult safeguarding and domestic abuse: A guide to support practitioners and managers’, Local Government Association, 2013, <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/adult-safeguarding-and-do-cfe.pdf>, [accessed 9 May 2017], pp. 28.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland’, Office for National Statistics, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/populationestimatesforukenglandandwalescotlandandnorthernireland>, 2016, [accessed 8 June 2017].





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to speak out about their abuse and access the specialist support they may need. A change in employment, retirement and/or illness can have a profound effect on abusive behaviour, and can lead to increased isolation and degradation.

Data on the prevalence of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence experienced by older women is limited however, it seems likely from what evidence exists that older women experience violence and abuse at similar rates to younger women.<sup>5</sup> Welsh Women's Aid member services stated that 5.4% of those in refuge in Wales in 2015/16 were aged 55 and older, and 6.7% of people supported by member services in the community were in this age category.

In 2016-17, 9.2% of survivors who called the national Live Fear Free Helpline in Wales and disclosed their age, were over 55 years old. Some of these survivors also discussed disability (5.6%), mental health problems (10.7%), homelessness (2.8%), debt issues (1.1%), substance misuse (0.5%), attempted suicide (0.5%) and living within a travelling community (0.5%). Older survivors are not one homogenised group but have individual, specific needs.

Despite this prevalence, violence against older women is one of the less explored areas of research.<sup>6</sup> Though Welsh Government has adopted the term 'older people' to cover those over the age of 50, within the small pool of existing data on violence against older women, any comparison between findings is made all the more difficult as there is no consensus to the age at which women are considered 'older'. Some studies and statistics categorise women from the age of 55 while others from 66 and over. In addition, sources such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales and the Office for National Statistics collate domestic abuse data of survivors exclusively between the ages of 16-59, effectively making survivors over 60 years old invisible.<sup>7</sup>

### **Older Women Femicide**

Within the Femicide Consensus report, of the 936 women known to have been killed by men in England and Wales between 2009-2016, 149 women were over the age of 66 (15.9%). This figure rises to 25.7% when it includes all women over 55. 34% of the 149 women were killed by their partner or spouse. Of all women killed by their children across all age categories, there is a considerable increase of risk to those over 66: 23% of the 149 women killed over 66 were killed by sons, compared to 7.8% across women of all ages.<sup>8</sup> A further 15% of women aged 66+ were killed during a robbery or burglary.<sup>9</sup> 34% of women aged 66+ were killed by intimate partner violence (by their partner or ex-partner), while 8% were victims of so-called "mercy killing" by either their spouse/partner or son. Some victims

<sup>5</sup> Women's Aid Federation of England, 'Women's Aid Annual Survey 2016', Women's Aid Federation England, March 2017, <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Annual-Survey-2016.pdf>, [accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2017], pp. 41.

<sup>6</sup> D. Brennan, 'Femicide Census: profile of women killed by men', *Women's Aid*, 2016, <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Femicide-Census-Jan-2017.pdf>, (accessed 20 January 2017), pp. 16.

<sup>7</sup> 'Domestic Abuse in England and Wales – Year ending March 2016', *Office for National Statistics* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesbulletintables>, [accessed 30 May 2017].

<sup>8</sup> D. Brennan, 'Femicide Census: profile of women killed by men', *Women's Aid*, 2016, <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Femicide-Census-Jan-2017.pdf>, [accessed 20 January 2017], pp. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.





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were supposedly involved in suicide pacts, though all too often the presiding narrative of what happened relies far too heavily on the account left by the perpetrator.<sup>10</sup>

In 2016, 46% of the women killed by men in Wales were over 50 years old.<sup>11</sup> These women were killed by partners, sons and neighbours.<sup>12</sup> In many cases, the mainstream media portrays these men as 'acting out of character' and focuses on the perpetrator not the victim, rather than considering the patterns of abuse that so often precedes these abhorrent acts.

### **Older Women's Needs**

***Older women will have grown up at a time when violence against women, domestic abuse or sexual violence was not recognised and this will likely impact on their understanding of what support services are available. When abuse happens to older people they should know where to go for support and specialist services must have the resources to respond to their needs.***

Welsh Government's 'The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023' aims to improve social participation and access to information for people over 50 in Wales by 2023, ensuring older people enjoy a better quality of life, have active social lives (if desired), that they don't suffer from loneliness or unwanted social isolation and that older people in Wales are not subject to abuse. By 2023, older people should have improved access to information and advice about services and opportunities, and must not be disadvantaged when accessing them.<sup>13</sup> In order for this to be achieved, the violence and abuse experienced by older women must be dramatically reduced, with increased disclosure opportunities, national awareness raising of the issues, and training across the public sector that focuses specifically on enhancing public and professional understanding of older women's experiences of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence as both a violation of their rights as women and also within the context of human rights.

Domestic Homicide Review case: ***"The triage nurse says that Jill\* was reluctant to say what had happened but remembers that Ben\* arrived during this conversation and introduced himself as Jill's carer. Jill said, 'He beats me up' and Ben replied, 'You know I don't beat you up'. He said that Jill did not react to this and did not show signs of being anxious. The triage nurse notes in his statement to the police that Jill was under the influence of alcohol. He also says that he did not include Jill's accusation in his notes as he did not know if it was true."***<sup>14</sup>

The Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis: Report for Standing Together<sup>15</sup>, which analyses domestic homicide review cases, has called for adequate adult social services training on the dynamics

<sup>10</sup> D. Brennan, 'Femicide Census: profile of women killed by men', *Women's Aid*, 2016, <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/The-Femicide-Census-Jan-2017.pdf>, [accessed 20 January 2017], pp. 23.

<sup>11</sup> K. Ingala Smith, *Counting Dead Women 2016*, <https://kareningalasmith.com/2016/03/03/2016/>, 2016, [accessed 8 June 2017].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Strategy for Older People in Wales 2013-2023', Welsh Government, 2013, <http://gov.wales/docs/dhss/publications/130521olderpeoplestrategyen.pdf>, [accessed 7 May 2017].

<sup>14</sup> N Sharp-Jeffs and L. Kelly, 'Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis: Case Analysis', [http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV\\_DHR\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV_DHR_Report_Final.pdf), 2016, [accessed 9 June 2017], pp. 36.

<sup>15</sup> N Sharp-Jeffs and L. Kelly, 'Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis: Case Analysis', [http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV\\_DHR\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV_DHR_Report_Final.pdf), 2016, [accessed 9 June 2017].





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of domestic abuse, identification and risk assessment, which should take an intersectional approach and explore the multiple barriers and increased risk faced by particular groups, including older people, those with disabilities, substance misuse issues and mental ill health.<sup>16</sup> The report further acknowledges that disabled survivors face complex and additional barriers when accessing support, especially in cases where the perpetrator is also their carer.<sup>17</sup>

Eirlys\* told Welsh Women's Aid how services normalised the abuse she experienced from her son and expected her to simply deal with it: *"Neighbours called the police and they just came and asked him 'have you hit your mother again?'. I'm older, I suffer from ill health and I'm disabled and the health worker had to stop coming around my house because he's so dangerous. But they expect me to live there".*

There are a number of factors why older women may not disclose experiencing abuse such as: no experience of work outside the home, no independent economic resources, shame and embarrassment about the length of abuse, concern about being isolated following the end of the abusive relationship, lack of awareness about services and options, a false perception that specialist violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence services are for younger women with children only, in addition to a lack of training amongst universal services in recognising the unique characteristics of abuse experienced by older women.<sup>18</sup> Understanding the barriers that older women face, it is incredibly important that professionals provide opportunities for disclosure for older survivors, especially for those who may find it harder to speak out about the abuse, taking the onus to disclose away from the survivor and putting the responsibility of creating the space to enable disclosure onto professionals.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ask and Act Framework**

New public sector duties within the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 require trained public sector professionals including health and social services professionals to make targeted enquiries, called 'Ask and Act'. This is a targeted enquiry across the Welsh public service in relation to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence.<sup>20</sup> It increases the opportunities for survivors to identify and disclose abuse and increases access to

<sup>16</sup> N Sharp-Jeffs and L. Kelly, 'Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis: Case Analysis', [http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV\\_DHR\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV_DHR_Report_Final.pdf), 2016, [accessed 9 June 2017], pp. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 12.

<sup>18</sup> S. Lewis and C. Williams, 'Adult safeguarding and domestic abuse: A guide to support practitioners and managers', Local Government Association, 2013, <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/adult-safeguarding-and-do-cfe.pdf>, [accessed 9 May 2017], pp. 35.

<sup>19</sup> N Sharp-Jeffs and L. Kelly, 'Domestic Homicide Review (DHR) Case Analysis: Case Analysis', [http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV\\_DHR\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.standingtogether.org.uk/sites/default/files/docs/STADV_DHR_Report_Final.pdf), 2016, [accessed 9 June 2017], pp. 35.

<sup>20</sup> See Welsh Government, 'The National Training Framework on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence: Statutory guidance under section 15 of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 and section 60 of the Government of Wales Act 2006', *Welsh Government*, 2016, <http://gov.wales/docs/dsilg/publications/commsafety/160317-national-training-framework-guidance-en.pdf>, (accessed 5 January 2017).





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specialist support via referral pathways, by signposting to appropriate specialist support and enabling earlier interventions.

‘Ask and Act’ training is delivered in partnership with specialist violence against women sector trainers, whose involvement has been highly praised by public sector professionals, increasing the support for trainees as they begin to see how learning about the domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women affects their day-to-day professional and personal experiences. For example, by naming recognised behaviour as coercion and control, practitioners have been able to empower survivors by giving them the words to describe their experiences. Practitioners have also been able to recognise early or established abusive behaviours within patients.

‘Ask and Act’ aims to further empower practitioners to understand the complexities of violence against women, sexual violence and domestic abuse of both survivors and perpetrators. By working hard to understand each person’s individual life story, they can offer compassionate care and appropriate support to offset and take action to reduce the risk of these experiences being repeated.

‘Ask and Act’ training for health and social services professional who work with older people, with a particular focus on older people’s experiences and specific needs should be covered as part of the training, whilst also challenging institutional ageism. In addition, all services need to be alerted to the increased risk of domestic abuse for disabled women and the increased risk of abuse in a caring relationship where the carer is a partner.<sup>21</sup>

### **Specialist Services Provisions**

#### ***Specialist violence against women services across Wales offer a lifeline to survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence of any age.***

In 2015-16 in Welsh Women’s Aid member services, the second most common reason survivors were unable to be supported was because the refuge-based support was unable to meet the needs specified and/or the service had no further capacity to support survivors with perceived complex and multiple needs. This was the case for 115 survivors referred for refuge-based support last year. In addition, 6 women couldn’t be accommodated as there were no suitable disabled facilities.

Older women told Welsh Women’s Aid in the 2016 survivor consultation<sup>22</sup> that they needed access to housing that was more suitable and adapted for their needs, given some of the health issues they were now facing. For some, these were exacerbated by long-term substance use and involvement in the sex industry.

In the last financial year, Welsh Women’s Aid member services suffered collective cuts of at least £760,000 from the previous year. With specialist violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence services already stretched to the bone, further cuts make existing services potentially unable to meet the needs of older women and unable to create innovative practices which better suit the requirements of survivors over the age of 50 years old in Wales.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.





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In Welsh Women's Aid's survivor consultation 'Are you Listening and am I being heard?'<sup>23</sup>, some older women perceived that there was a lack of services for them to access. Bronwen\* spoke of the lack of options open to her to leave her abusive husband, highlighting that the support services required might not be as readily available to meet older women's needs: **"Financially at my time of life I can't start over again, and there's still a strong assumption in our generation you need a man to survive. I would live on my own in a small flat if I could have support."**

### Community Wide Response

Welsh Government have supported Welsh Women's Aid to develop a model for early intervention and prevention of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, called "Change that Lasts / Newid sy'n Parhau".<sup>24</sup> The model is underpinned by a strengths-based, needs-led, trauma informed approach for supporting survivors. For older survivors this would mean a community that is able to recognise their experience and respond to their specific individual needs. The model recognises survivors with multiple support needs, including those related to age and life experience, and aims to maximise specialist services ability to respond to those individual needs.

The model also aims to increase the opportunities for older women experience violence and abuse to access support by maximising a communities' understanding and creating safe spaces where older people who have experienced abuse can feel safe to access vital information and be directed to the help that they need; this could mean services accessed by older people including community centres, clubs, activity centres etc. The model complements the Wales 'Ask and Act' framework, training trusted professional on how to recognise the signs of abuse so that violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence is not missed and is included as a support need in case management.

Everyone has a role in creating communities that are knowledgeable and don't tolerate abuse. It's time we invested in a new approach to supporting survivors of abuse in Wales, so that every point of interaction with survivors and perpetrators is an opportunity for getting help and support, which should not be missed. Our focus, at Welsh Women's Aid, is to transform community and public service responses whilst making sure specialist services collaborate to continue to provide the vital lifeline that survivors need.

*Anyone affected by older people abuse or any other form of violence against women can contact the Live Fear Free Helpline - a 24 hour helpline for women, children and men experiencing domestic abuse, sexual violence or other forms of violence against women - on 0808 80 10 800, via it's webchat or via email [info@livefearfreehelpline.wales](mailto:info@livefearfreehelpline.wales).*

*Welsh Women's Aid will continue to work with survivors and specialist services to improve responses to older people abuse and the support that survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and*

<sup>23</sup> Welsh Women's Aid, 'Are you listening and am I being heard? Survivor Consultation: A report of the recommendations made by survivors of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence, to inform the National Strategy in Wales', *Welsh Women's Aid*, 2016, pp. 24.

<sup>24</sup> The model has been developed in partnership, with initial support from Welsh Government, the Home Office and Women's Aid England, and is informed by a review of the literature and current approaches and by wide-ranging stakeholder engagement including consultation with survivors and specialist services.

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*sexual violence and their children may require. If you have any comments or questions about this briefing, please don't hesitate to get in touch with:*

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