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REVIEW ARTICLE

Neglect, abuse and violence against older women: Definitions and research frameworks

Patricia Brownell¹

¹ Fordham University, New York City, New York, USA.

Corresponding author: Patricia Brownell, PhD, LMSW – Associate Professor Emerita of Social Service, Fordham University, New York City, New York, USA;
Email: brownell@fordham.edu.

Abstract

The aging of the global population with women living longer than men, resulting in the feminization of aging, focuses attention on the intersection of gender and age. Women across the lifespan can be victims of violence but there has been little attention to date to the neglect, abuse and violence against older women. Because of this gap in knowledge and remedies, little is known about neglect, abuse and violence against older women, particularly its prevalence as well as evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies. Several definitions of neglect, abuse and violence are reviewed here, along with conceptual frameworks that operationalize these definitions differently, resulting in differences in findings on prevalence as well as fragmentation in the way that older women victims of abuse are viewed. Three definitions of older adult abuse are discussed, including those formulated by the Toronto Declaration, the National Research Council, and the United States Center for Disease Control. Each focuses on a different aspect of abuse of older women: active ageing, old age dependency, and domestic violence in later life. A fourth conceptual framework, the human rights perspective, shows promise for addressing abuse of older women in a more holistic manner than the other definitions, but is not fully developed as a way of understanding neglect, abuse and violence against older women. This is the first of a four-part series on older women and abuse.

Keywords: ageing, elder abuse, neglect, older women, violence.

Older women, socio-demographics, and human rights

Population aging is a global trend that is changing economies and societies around the world (1). In 2012, people aged 60 years and older represented almost 11.5% of the global population and by 2050 this is expected to double to 22%. Older women outnumber older men: in 2012 for every 100 women aged 60, there were 84 men, and for every 100 older women aged 80 and above, there were only 61 men. The feminization of aging, representing the intersection of age and gender, has important implications for policy as the world continues to age. Gender discrimination across the lifespan has a cumulative effect, and neglect, abuse and violence across the lifespan results in a high lifetime rate for older women. Neglect, abuse and violence against older women have been largely overlooked as a focus of research; this is in spite of the fact that unique and compounded disadvantages are experienced by older women (2). Older women aged 60 years and older have been identified as subject to discrimination by the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) experts in 2010 and by the United Nations (UN) Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in their 10-year review of the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (3). One area of discrimination in the form of human rights violations that has been largely overlooked by policy makers, researchers and advocates for girls' and women's rights is neglect, abuse and violence of older women.

Because of this gap in knowledge and remedies, little is known about neglect, abuse and violence against older women, particularly its prevalence as well as evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies. In November 2013, to begin to address this gap, the UN DESA held an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) inviting researchers and other experts from around the world to New York City to review the state of knowledge, gaps and next steps to address this area of human rights violations against women and older people.

One of the recommendations in the final report, "Neglect, Abuse and Violence Against Older Women", prepared by the UN DESA Department of Social Policy and Development, is that "*while both quantitative and qualitative research have begun to develop salient factors in cultural differences, age-related differences and service needs and gaps for older women victims*" (2), more data are needed both on prevalence as well as practices to prevent neglect, abuse and violence against older women. In addition, unifying themes that connect older women in developing and developed countries, and in both modern and traditional societies, should be identified along with unifying themes that connect women of all ages.

Discrimination against older women

Women across the lifespan can be victims of violence, but neither the women's domestic violence movement nor the aging empowerment movement has mobilized to end violence against older women. While elder abuse has been the object of many studies, abuse of older women has had only modest attention in the gender based literature (4). Older women have lacked status as battered women in domestic violence research and activism. Older women are often excluded in studies of violence against women and often completely absent as though older women do not belong in the category of women.

Older women are often absent from discussions about shelters and hotlines, and there is the lack of a debate on circumstances and special needs of older women victims of abuse that may affect help seeking behavior. However, a gender analysis of violence against women and girls focuses on male dominance and subordination of women, and subordination seems especially relevant for older women (4). Is the women's domestic violence movement ageist? Why haven't older people taken ownership of mistreatment of their peers (5)? Why hasn't the professional leadership in this field joined with older people to form a grass roots movement like the women's movement to speak out against elder abuse? Could social ambivalence

about old age be one reason, and the double jeopardy of sexism and ageism another? Abuse of older women is neglected by advocates of gender equity, women's rights activists and aging advocates. Is it because the link to frailty and dependency makes older abused women appear to lack agency?

Gender inequality and the life course

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women observes that the inequality and discrimination experienced by women intensifies with old age (6). Discrimination against older women on the basis of age and gender can result in situations where they experience neglect, abuse and violence (7).

Ageism

Ageism is defined as “*the systematic stereotyping and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplished this with skin color and gender*” (8). Ageism reinforces systems of oppression in two ways. It focuses on individual perspectives and actions and leaves hidden insidious forms of discrimination. Age blindness implicitly uses the privileged as the norm and judges others by that standard (9). Ageism and sexism create a socially constructed dependency in old age of which feminization of poverty is a key factor. These factors make discrimination and disadvantage seem inevitable. For older women, invisibility is symbolic of this process (10). Whittaker (10) suggests that the failure of gender experts to do this analysis is a measure of the entrenched ageism within the women's movement.

Cultural norms and social expectations

Social expectations and changing social norms can also create a perception of abuse toward older family members (11). In studies of older adult abuse in Asia and South Asia, the daughter-in-law is often identified as an abuser for not serving a traditional role of caregiving in the home while engaging in paid work or a career (12).

Public policy and availability of social and health programs

Political decisions about social protections for older women, and availability of health, mental health, criminal justice and other resources can limit options within families and communities for addressing issues of neglect, abuse and violence, according to Shankardass (13).

Multi-dimensional nature of neglect, abuse, and violence against older women

Manjoo (6) argues for a holistic approach to understanding abuse of older women and how to address it. Recognizing intersectionality and the continuum of violence against older women requires analysis of violence in four spheres: violence in the family; violence in the community; violence that is perpetrated or condoned by the State, including custodial settings like care homes and hospitals; and violence in the transnational sphere as it affects migrant, refugee and asylum seeking older women (6).

Gender inclusion

While abuse can affect all older adults, older women are arguably more likely to experience many of these forms and levels of abuse than older men. First, women live longer and with chronic impairments for which they may need support in the home and community. Second, older women are less likely to have adequate pensions and other benefits than older men, giving them fewer resources to ensure their independence. Finally, women across the lifespan

experience cumulative disadvantages and lower status than men, leaving them more vulnerable to abuse and neglect in old age.

Purpose

The purpose of this series of articles is to discuss the current state of knowledge about abuse of older women. It explores various definitions of neglect, abuse and violence against older adults and discusses whether there are agreed upon definitions of neglect, abuse and violence against older women. It addresses main forms or categories, prevalence and risk factors of neglect, abuse and violence against older women, as well as health consequences of violence and abuse, and data sources along with problems in collecting such information. It also provides an overview of needs of older women survivors of neglect, abuse and violence. It discusses preventive measures to address the issue, presenting evaluations of their effectiveness where available. It provides an overview of main approaches to addressing abuse of older women, and key interventions including policies and programs for the protection of older women victims of abuse along with outcomes where evaluations have been completed. Finally, recommendations are offered for further improvement of policies in these areas.

This paper focuses on definitions of neglect, abuse and violence against older adults based on current conceptualizations of abuse. It proposes that there are three dominant conceptual frameworks for understanding neglect, abuse and violence against older women. These are: older adult mistreatment, informed by social gerontology and using a definition proposed in the Toronto Declaration on Elder Mistreatment (14); older adult protection, informed by geriatrics using a definition that was formalized by the National Research Council (15); and intimate partner violence or domestic violence against older women, informed by feminist gerontology and adapting a definition originally formulated by the USA Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (16). A fourth, a human rights perspective, is an emergent framework for examining abuse of older women, and is currently under development (17) (Bridget Sleaf, Senior Policy Advisor, HelpAge International, Personal Communication, August 8, 2013).

Differing definitions have led to research findings, policy responses, and programs and practices that may appear contradictory and confusing to those not familiar with the field of elder abuse and neglect (18). Each is linked to different assumptions and theoretical explanations for abuse of older women, and interventions including policies, and programs and practices to prevent and end neglect, abuse and violence against older women.

Forms of abuse

Main forms of abuse used to categorize mistreatment of older women include: physical, sexual, psychological (also called emotional, verbal and non-physical) abuse, financial (also called material) exploitation, neglect, and violation of personal rights (19). Different conceptual frameworks use a combination of different forms to operationalize abuse. The Elder Mistreatment and Older Adult Protection frames use most of the forms cited above, with the possible exception of violation of personal rights, sometimes termed social abuse (20). The Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) frame uses physical, sexual, and psychological forms of abuse, and sometimes violation of personal rights, but not neglect and usually not financial exploitation (unless included in a measure of psychological abuse) (16).

Physical/Sexual: Some studies of older women and abuse categorize sexual abuse as a sub-set of physical abuse. Physical abuse includes actions intended to cause physical pain or injury to an older adult, such as pushing, grabbing, slapping, hitting, or assaulting with a weapon or thrown object. Sexual abuse can include offensive sexual behaviors as well as physical contact of a sexual nature (14).

Psychological: This form of abuse is also called verbal or emotional abuse, which may be further defined as active or passive. This describes actions intended to inflict mental pain, anguish or distress on an older person (19).

Qualitative research studies have examined forms of psychological abuse against women in greater depth. Montminy (21) found 14 types of psychological abuse, which can be active or passive, perpetrated by intimate partners against older women. These include: control, denigrate, deprive, intimidate, threaten, abdicate responsibility, manipulate, blame, harass, negate victim's reality, sulk, infantilize, show indifference, and provoke guilt. In IPV studies, financial exploitation or material abuse (use of property or possessions without victims' permission) can be a subset of psychological abuse. Also in IPV research, psychological abuse may be limited to threats of physical or sexual violence.

Neglect: The National Research Council (NRC) definition of elder abuse, with its inclusion of vulnerability as a core concept associated with victims, provides the most explicit link with neglect of older care dependent adults. This definition is further operationalized to include neglect as an "omission by responsible caregivers that constitutes 'neglect' under applicable federal or state law" and caregiver as "a person who bears or has assumed responsibility for providing care or living assistance to an adult in need of such care or assistance" (15). It is further operationalized as refusal or failure of these responsible for providing a care-dependent older adult with assistance in daily living tasks or essential supports such as food, clothing, shelter, health and medical care. This can also include desertion of a care dependent older adult, also called abandonment (14).

There is no overarching theoretical framework for elder abuse (22). This makes it difficult to operationalize neglect of older women as part of a larger discussion of neglect, abuse and violence. In addition, in spite of a general observation that older adult caregiving dyads are most likely female (23), there is a paucity of studies that focus on neglect as a form of elder abuse perpetrated against elderly care dependent women by female formal or informal caregivers. Research and discussions that link caregiving of care dependent older adults and neglect by caregivers in general are either gender neutral or treat gender as a study variable.

Financial exploitation and material abuse: This form of abuse describes actions of illegal or improper use of an older person's money, property or assets. Women have been found to be especially vulnerable to this form of abuse and were twice as likely to be victims of financial abuse as men in a recent study conducted in the USA (24). Most victims in this study were between the ages of 80 and 89 years old, lived alone, and had some care needs that required help in their homes.

Violation of Personal Rights: Linked to the concept of individual human rights, this form of abuse includes the infringement of personal rights as a form of elder abuse (19). It includes behaviors that violate an older person's right to privacy, right to autonomy and freedom, and right to have access to family and friends. This form of abuse is also known as *social abuse* (20).

Definitions, differences and agreements

Most professionals in the field of elder abuse agree that lack of a generally accepted definition of abuse, mistreatment or maltreatment of older adults is a barrier to understanding this social problem. The lack of a commonly accepted definition of elder or older adult abuse is also a challenge for understanding the abuse of older women from a global perspective. Because definitions tend to use similar language in different frameworks, it can be confusing to differentiate among them. The discussion below attempts to clarify some of this definitional confusion.

Purposes of definitions

Definitions of elder abuse and neglect are used for research, particularly prevalence and population studies, policy and program development, and practice. Three influential definitions reflecting divergent underlying assumptions about elder abuse and abuse of older women have guided research and policy decision making. They are presented here.

Mistreatment of older adults (elder mistreatment)

In the Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse, 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. It can be of various forms: physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and financial or simply reflect intentional or unintentional neglect” (14). This is linked to the active ageing concept of older adulthood, in which older women and men are considered to have the capacity to be productive contributors to society (25).

This definition originated with a United Kingdom NGO, Action on Elder Abuse in 1995 (26), and was adopted by an expert group on elder abuse from the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) that met in Toronto, Canada in 2002. Age of the victim is not defined as part of this definition but is usually 60 years of age and older in studies that use this definition, because they tend to focus on older adults living in the community. This definition used in elder abuse research, policy and practice formulation is influenced by social gerontology.

Critics of the WHO definition state that while it has become popular for policy purposes, it is difficult for researchers to operationalize and includes data elements, such as ‘appropriate action’, ‘expectation of trust’, and ‘distress’, which are largely subjective. The use of ‘a single or repeated acts’ as a baseline measure has been identified as ambiguous (26). ‘Trusting relationship’ is a key concept in both Elder Mistreatment and Older Adult Protection frameworks. This speaks to the nature of the relationship between older adult victims and perpetrators of abuse: crimes committed against older women by strangers are not defined as elder abuse in these research frames. This is not the case in IPV research, where rape and other forms of violence can be perpetrated against girls and women of all ages through casual dating experiences and by strangers.

Abuse of vulnerable adults (older adult protection)

Abuse of vulnerable older adults refers to “intentional actions that cause harm or create a serious risk of harm (whether or not harm is intended) to a vulnerable elder by a caregiver or other person who stands in a trust relationship to the elder, or failure by a caregiver to satisfy the elder’s basic needs or protect the elder from harm” (15).

This definition of elder abuse was developed by an expert panel (Panel to Review Risk and Prevalence of Elder Abuse and Neglect) convened by the National Research Council of the United States National Academy of Science for the purpose of creating a suggested uniform definition and operationalized data elements on elder abuse for research, policy, and program development and practice purposes. In this definition, self-neglect, victimization by strangers, and intimate partner abuse of older adults, unless vulnerability exists above and beyond old age, is not considered elder mistreatment (27).

The conceptualization of elder abuse victims as frail and vulnerable older adults in need of protection falls under this definition. Care dependent older adults in home or institutional care settings with physical, mental or cognitive impairments, including Alzheimer’s disease, may be viewed as potential victims of physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or financial

exploitation by family or professional caregivers with whom they have the expectation of a relationship of trust.

The vulnerable older adult conceptualization of elder abuse has been criticized as reflecting too closely the measures used in child abuse (18). While the Toronto definition is broad, the definition promoted by the US National Research Council on Elder Mistreatment has been criticized as overly narrow in defining victims as vulnerable, rendering it unusable for studies on late life domestic violence life, which can be experienced by able-bodied older people (26), and in precluding self-neglect. It has also been criticized as too broad in other definitional elements, such as “any harm ... and - can include but is not limited to”, which allows too much discretion and latitude (26).

The concept of vulnerable adult, which is a key dimension of the NRC definition, has been criticized for being ambiguous and meaning different things in different frames. Goergen & Beaulier (28) have engaged in a critical analysis to better understand the concept of vulnerability within the context of elder mistreatment. In the Elder Mistreatment frame, older adults may range from unimpaired and independent to impaired and dependent, with only the latter group identified as vulnerable. In the contemporary feminist frame, often older women are assumed to be vulnerable based on age alone, and grouped with other categories of marginalized women as reflected in the panel for International Women’s Day sponsored by UN Women at the United Nations, New York, on March 8, 2013.

Intimate partner violence against girls and women of all ages

Intimate partner abuse is defined as violence against women that “incorporates intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence by any perpetrator, and other forms of violence against women, such as physical violence committed by acquaintances or strangers (28).

This definition was developed by an expert panel convened by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1996 to formulate a uniform definition and recommended data elements for gathering surveillance data on intimate partner violence. It was intended to promote consistency in data collection for public health surveillance and as a technical reference for automation of the surveillance data (29).

Operationalized data elements broaden the scope of this definition somewhat. The victim is anyone who is the target of violence or abuse. The perpetrator is the person who inflicts the violence or abuse or causes the violence or abuse to be inflicted on the identified victim. In this definitional set, the perpetrator is assumed to be an intimate partner, defined as current or former spouse or common-law spouse, and current or former non-marital partner including dating partner (heterosexual or same sex), boyfriend or girlfriend. Violence can include physical, sexual, threat of physical or sexual violence, and psychological or emotional abuse. Psychological abuse is defined apart from threat of physical or sexual abuse to include humiliating the victim, controlling the victim’s behavior, withholding information from the victim, getting annoyed if the victim disagrees with perpetrator, deliberately doing something that makes the victim feel diminished, using the victims’ money, taking advantage of the victim, disregarding what the victim wants, isolating the victim from family or friends, prohibiting the victim’s access to transportation or telephone, getting the victim to engage in illegal activities, using the victims’ children to control victims’ behavior, threatening loss of custody of children, smashing objects or destroying property, denying the victim access to money or other basic necessities, and disclosing information that would tarnish the victims’ reputation. It also includes consequences such as impairment, injury, disability and use of health, mental health and substance abuse services (29).

This conceptualization of abuse is not necessarily gender or age specific although it typically is applied to analyses of abuse and violence toward women of reproductive age. It does not

define the victim as incapacitated or care dependent. Financial or material exploitation if included at all is defined as a form of psychological abuse. It assumes a power and control relationship between the victim and perpetrator. According to this definition, sexual abuse could be perpetrated by an acquaintance or stranger; physical abuse could be perpetrated by a one-time date.

Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO) has used another definition of violence for a multi-country study of intimate partner violence against women. In this definition, violence is defined as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, or deprivation (30). It links intentionality with the commitment of the violent act, and] links the acts to a power relationship. This includes threats and intimidation as well as physical violence. It also includes neglect and all types of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, as well as self-abusive acts such as suicide (31).

This definition of violence against women was used in the WHO Multi-country study on women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women focused on intimate partner abuse of women that includes physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, controlling behaviors and physical violence in pregnancy. It also includes a life course perspective on violence by non-partners since 15 years of age, and childhood sexual abuse before 15 years of age. Victim subjects were defined as ever partnered (currently or in the past) and even though the definition of victim did not specify age, in this study subjects were between the ages of 15-49 (22). Lifetime abuse prevalence is sometimes calculated across the lifespan for girls and women of all ages: this provides a relatively standardized prevalence measure that can be used to compare abuse rates across cohorts of women into old age (32).

Human rights and abuse of older people

Human rights is a recent conceptual framework that was the subject of discussion in fora like the Expert Group Meeting on Neglect, Abuse and Violence of Older Women and the Elder Abuse Symposium sponsored by the Elder Abuse Interest Group at the 2013 Gerontological Society of America meeting. The human rights framework is believed by some elder abuse experts to hold promise for understanding neglect, abuse and violence against older women in a holistic way without the potential for fragmentation of other frameworks (33).

While it is still too early to propose a human rights theory of neglect, abuse and violence against older women, some of the elements of such a theory can be tested using existing data. This includes applying a life course perspective using longitudinal data, and focusing on the experiences of older women specifically, not older people in general or women in general. It also includes awareness of intersectionality, specifically related to gender and age, but also including race/ethnicity, class, access to health and mental health, and relationships.

Including the concept of intersectionality begins to draw on a human rights framework. This states that human rights are interdependent and the level of enjoyment of any one right is dependent on the level of realization of the other rights. The Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the CEDAW General Recommendation No. 27 (human rights of older women) lay out the rights of older women to live lives of dignity free of discrimination and abuse (34).

The human rights framework defines older adults as rights bearers, because they have a right to live lives of dignity, free of abuse, and family members and caregivers as duty bearers, to explain their obligation to ensure that older adults to whom they are related or to whom they

have a commitment to provide care. The State (government) is a duty enforcer, with the obligation to ensure that the rights of older people are upheld, and sometimes are duty bearers, when the State is directly responsible for older people's care. The most recent research on older adults and abuse using this framework has been undertaken by HelpAge International in collaboration with the London School of Economics.

Each of the frameworks used to study and understand neglect, abuse and violence against older women leads to different and conflicting findings, including prevalence and risk factors associated with the neglect, abuse and violence. In the next issue of the journal, findings from prevalence and qualitative studies as well as risk factors will be presented and discussed.

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