Competing Paradigms of Elder Abuse: Learning from Intimate Partner Abuse, Active Aging, and Vulnerable Older Adult Research (Emphasis on Older Women)

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Population Ageing and Gender

- Global trend changing economics and societies around the world
- In 2012, people 60+ represented 11.5 percent of global population; by 2050 will double to 22 percent.
- Older women outnumber older men: in 2012 for every 100 women age 60+ there were 84 men; for every 100 women age 80+ there were 61 men.
- The feminization of ageing, representing the intersection of age and gender, has important implications for policy and practice as the world continues to age
- Neglect, abuse and violence against older women remains largely invisible: it must become visible in order to end.
Older Adult Abuse in Three Frames: Implications for Older Women - fragmentation

Neglect, abuse and violence against older women can be understood as:
- Intimate Partner Abuse
- Active Ageing
- Vulnerable Older Adult
Imagine the next 3 slides depict women age 71 years

- When we think about domestic violence we think often think about women of reproductive age;
- When we think about abuse of older women in the community we often think about mothers who are homebound and dependent, leading to caregiver stress;
- When we think about elder abuse, we often think about the elderly in nursing homes.
First, IPV
Active Ageing
Vulnerable Older Adult
What do these three women have in common? What is different?

- They are all the same age
- They are all victims of family abuse
- They are all victims of physical abuse
- They are all women

What is different?

- Their health status differs
- They appear to have differing cognitive status
- They represent different stereotypes of older women and abuse
Definitions of Older Adult Abuse: IPV

- Intimate partner abuse is defined as violence against women that “incorporates intimate partner violence (IPV), sexual violence by any perpetrator (spouse/partner; dating partner), and other forms of violence against women, such as physical violence committed by acquaintances or strangers” (Saltzman et al., 2002).
- This definition was developed by an expert panel convened by the United States of America (USA) 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.
Definitions of older adult abuse: Active Ageing

In the Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse (2002), 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” (WHO/INPEA, 2002).
Definition of Older Adult Abuse: Vulnerable Elders

- 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” (NRC, 2003, p. 40).
- 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.
Forms of Abuse Against Older Women

- Physical
- Sexual
- Emotional or psychological
- Financial Exploitation
- Neglect
- Abandonment
- Harmful traditional practices
- Femicide
Abuse Against Older Women as a Human Rights Violation

- Madrid 2002 International Plan of Action on Ageing: “Older women face greater risk of physical and psychological harm due to discriminatory societal attitudes.”
- United Nations Principles of Human Rights for Older Persons: “Living a life of dignity, free of abuse, is an important human right for all older people, including older women.”
- Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): “Violence against women is rooted in historical and structural inequity in power relations between men and women.”
Prevalence of Abuse Against Older Women

- Prevalence estimates range from 1-2% of older women up to 38% of older women age 60+.
- Discrepancies are due to differences in theoretical frameworks, measures used and samples drawn.
- Estimates of lifetime experiences of abuse remain fairly stable at 20-23%.
Intimate Partner Abuse and Older Women

- IPV studies that include older women in study samples show the lowest prevalence of abuse.
- Definitional criteria limit perpetrator categories to spouse/partners, dating partners and strangers in instances of rape.
- Types of abuse are limited to physical, psychological and sexual.
- Locations of abuse include home and community.
- Ages of sample participants are often limited to women up to age 49.
Active Ageing and Abuse

- Studies in the active ageing framework include samples age 60+.
- Generally limited to abuse in the community.
- Abuse can include physical, sexual, psychological, financial, and neglect.
- Categories of perpetrators can include, in addition to spouse/partners, adult children and other relatives, neighbors and formal and informal caregivers.
Vulnerable Older Adult Abuse

- Can include abuse in institutional settings like care homes and hospitals as well as community based.
- Older adult subjects often age 65+ and have physical and cognitive impairments.
- Perpetrators can include spouse/partners, adult children and other relatives, formal and informal care providers, and other residents of care homes and institutions.
- Types of abuse can include physical, sexual, psychological, financial, neglect, abandonment
Implications of Different Frameworks

- Low prevalence found among older women in IPV studies: older women are more likely to be widowed (without spouse/partners); less likely to be raped by strangers (WHO, 2005).
- High prevalence found among older women in active ageing studies: older women are more likely to live with adult children, to be victims of financial abuse, and to be caregivers for impaired abusive family members (Luoma et al., 2010).
- Unknown prevalence among vulnerable elderly women in care homes and institutional settings: older women in these settings are more likely to be unable to self-report abuse, to be unavailable for studies that require informed consent.
Implications for Policy and Practice

- Laws and services based on prevailing stereotype of elder abuse, for example, adult protective services.
- Older adult protective programs that assume cognitive incapacity not appropriate for IPV with older woman victim.
- DV services assuming IPV not appropriate for older women victims of adult child abuse.
- Concept and Impact of polyvictimization not generally recognized in elder abuse field.
What Forensic social workers and partners need to know about interventions: IPV

- **IPV in later life**: DV shelters often don’t offer age-appropriate programs for older women; can’t admit care dependent victims
- **Law Enforcement**: older women may resist reporting abuse by family members to police
- **Guardianships** are not appropriate for victims who have capacity
- **Criminal and family court**: may minimize abuse of older women although orders of protection can be helpful if used appropriately.
Active Ageing in the Community

- **Aging service programs** can provide temporary assistance with meals, social programs like senior centers, interim homecare, transportation to courts, link to law enforcement for seniors
- **Adult Protective Services (APS)** may be useful in assessing capacity and need for social services; link to District Attorney offices; law enforcement
- **Community-based elder abuse programs** with counseling, support groups are available in some communities (not many)
- **Faith Communities** can provide opportunities for outreach and abuse prevention; limited capacity for assistance, intervention for abuse among members and families.
Vulnerable Older Adult Abuse

- For community dwelling older women: APS services
- For institutionalized older women: Ombudsman services through aging service networks, some APS services in jurisdictions that include nursing homes as part of territory
- For older women who lack capacity: guardianships; district attorney offices; forensic centers
Barriers to Effective Elder Abuse Practice

- Ageism remains a significant barrier to effective practice with older women and abuse. Practitioners and researchers must work together to reach a better understanding of the unique needs of older women victims of neglect, abuse and violence. Research can inform practice. A new list serve of the NAPSA and NCPEA allows practitioners to ask questions of researchers about practice concerns (r2plistserv@napsa-now.org).

- In a technical guide on producing statistics on violence against women promulgated by the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs in 2013, readers are advised that “some countries have opted to set an upper age limit for respondents, the reasons being that older people are more prone to memory recall problems and tend to have a general reluctance to discuss sensitive subjects ...It is also likely than an older age category will be too small to allow for separate analysis” (United Nations, 2013, p.15).

- Misguided and misinformed statements like this discourage researchers from including older women in studies on violence against women, and seemingly encourage nations to exclude data on older women from domestic violence reports that inform national and international policy making. Funding limitations drive choices as well. Lack of research on older women and abuse limit policymakers and practitioners’ ability to make informed choices about needed resources and appropriate interventions.
Gaps in Prevention and Intervention

- National legislative initiatives, when they exist, have largely been bifurcated between domestic violence and aging or protective service approaches.
- Older women often fail to fit into either approach. When the problem is intimate partner abuse, older women may be referred to aging service programs that lack capacity to address domestic violence among elder spouse/partners.
- Older women may not meet the eligibility requirements for protective services for the elderly, such as guardianships, if they are not physically or cognitively frail.
- Consequently, older women victims of abuse are likely to fall between the cracks of a bifurcated legislative and legal system.
- In addition, laws related to abuse and neglect of older women by family members or formal caregivers may be legislated but not funded.
Summary and Recommendations

- This discussion of prevalence of neglect, abuse and violence against older women based on different and sometimes competing conceptual frameworks demonstrates the difficulties in using these data to understand and promote older women’s right to live free of abuse.

- In order to address the current fragmentation in services to older women and neglect, abuse and violence, forensic social work practice and research communities must come together to address gaps in knowledge and practice, eliminate ageist stereotypes, and reflect a more holistic view of older women in society.

- DV service system should acknowledge older women and plan to accommodate them. APS service system may be appropriate for older women who lack capacity. Aging service system can work collaboratively with law enforcement to address crimes against older women, particularly those committed by adult relatives.

- Forensic social workers should be familiar with elder abuse and the various service systems that serve older women victims of neglect, abuse and violence.
Contact me for references and resources:

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Thank you!