

**'IT'S MY LIFE NOW':
OLDER WOMEN SPEAK
UP ABOUT VIOLENCE**

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research on older women and violence. Neither the ageing literature nor the domestic violence literature pay much attention to the problem of violence against older women. The most startling gap is the absence of the voices of older women telling of their experiences of violence. This paper reports on a project that aimed to give a 'voice' to those most dramatically affected the older women themselves. Over two hundred women were involved in the first stage of this study. Most of the women who participated in the study had experienced violence directed towards them at some time in their lives and were still dealing with the effects and consequences of this violence. Listening to the ways in which these older women describe in their own words their experiences of violence graphically illustrates the dramatic lasting and long term effects and consequences. It was clear from the discussions that violence is a problem of major concern for many older women. This paper discusses the first stage of this project focusing on the stories the older women told of how they survived the violence and abuse.

This paper reports on a collaborative project conducted by two older women, Dr Margaret Sargent and myself. I wish to both acknowledge and thank Margaret for her major contribution.

Introduction

Violence in the home against older people, especially women, is a major problem, but it is only in recent years that researchers have started to examine it. This social problem has been described by some commentators as a relative 'latecomer' as the focus of attention of researchers and policy makers. Some commentators have argued that there was a 'sequence of discovery'. Child abuse was 'discovered' and became the issue of the 1970s, domestic violence, or violence against women, became the issue of the 1980s, with abuse of older people being the issue of the 1990s.

Unfortunately the domestic violence literature and elder abuse literature have developed separately, and the problem of violence against older women has been neglected by both groups of researchers. 'The domestic violence literature has barely concerned itself with older people and the elder abuse literature has barely concerned itself with domestic violence' (McCreadie, 1996 p 17). In research and practice violence against older women is often subsumed under the category of elder abuse. Through this categorisation, 'the realities of the lives of older women are lost when age alone is seen as major factor precipitating abuse' (Hightower et al., 2001). Older women's voices telling of their experiences of violence are rarely heard.

We live in a society where violence against women in the home is a substantial problem. This problem has been extensively documented by many researchers, and recognised by governments at all levels throughout Australia. However, the research focus has been mainly on younger women. Little work has been done documenting and listening to the stories of older women and their experiences of violence. This is a major gap in the research and literature in Australia

The Project: Older Women Speak Up

This project is an attempt to fill this gap. It is an action research project that gives a voice to those most dramatically affected by this problem, older women themselves. We provided, through this project, a safe space and the opportunity for older women to talk about the violence in their lives.

Older Women's Own Stories

Speaking up about a problem to others, and sharing experiences, can be a form of social action and can bring about empowerment. Sharing our experiences can also act as a stimulus for others to do likewise, including women who have never spoken up before. The intention of the project was to open for discussion a hitherto 'hidden' problem, a problem many see as an individual personal problem, and transform it to a social issue (Wright Mills, 1959). We wanted older women to talk to us about experiences of violence in the home and, through talking about their experiences, to bring about a variety of changes in the ways they understood and dealt with violence.

We took as our starting point research that demonstrates that women experience violence throughout their lives so assumed that older women would have many stories to tell. We assumed correctly. The stories convey a powerful picture of the violence experienced by older women and how they make sense of their violent experiences. By using this living ethnographic material we can to some extent enter into their lives and come to understand the meanings older women give to violent situations and how they can change and improve their lives.

When we commenced the study, we had considered having an arbitrary cut-off age of about fifty. We thought that women would relate stories to about the violence that had occurred in their lives when they were older. However, when the women began telling their stories it became clear that they saw and experienced their lives as a continuous whole, and so using an arbitrary 'cut off' age in regard to the age at which the violence occurred, was just not appropriate. Indeed, many of the women told us stories of violence they had experienced as children and as younger women and described graphically how the violence they had experienced earlier in their lives continued to profoundly affect them as they grew older.

As we listened to these stories it became clear to us that we had to include all the experiences that the women wanted to talk about. It was clear that it was very important to the women that we acknowledge this pain and take these past experiences into account. For us, this experience was a salutary and graphic reminder of the long lasting effects violent experiences have on women's lives and reinforced dramatically the devastating consequences this violence had on the way women live their lives. Many of the women who

spoke to us had been living with the lasting effects of this pain every day of their lives for a very long time. Some of the women had been living with this pain for their entire lives, for seventy, eighty and even ninety years. Many of these women had never spoken about these experiences before their involvement in this project.

As highlighted in *Two Lives – Two Worlds: Older People and Domestic Violence*, older people experienced a world where domestic violence was not widely recognised or talked about, they are now ‘caught between two worlds—the life experiences and norms borne of their era and current attitudes’ (Morgan Disney, 2000 p iii). Australian women in their older years have been much less exposed to influence from the feminist movement than younger women. To some extent they have mostly continued the compliant female culture typical of their mothers’ generation – mothers who told them, ‘You made your bed – you must lie in it,’ when violence was their regular lot. Thus they were discouraged from changing or leaving the violent situation. Their male partners generally expected to be dominant and sometimes felt it was their right to possess their partner. Small wonder that until recently – when feminism has penetrated their lives rather more successfully – few women have expected to set up a new independent life.

Aims

The original aims of the project were to:

- Provide the opportunity for older women to speak up about violence and abuse in their lives and thus to empower themselves to actively participate in changing their lives.
- Collect information from older women themselves regarding their experience of violence in the home.
- Produce a booklet that offers a resource particularly for older women experiencing violence, by providing access to stories relevant to their needs and experience, and information about resources and services that may assist them.
- Bring the hidden and often unreported social problem of violence in the home against older women into public view.

- Convince policy makers and service providers of the need for greater recognition of the problem and the need for increased provision of appropriate services.
- Convince women's and older people's organisations that they have a role to play in informing and supporting older women to combat violence in their lives.
- Produce a resource that may be useful to those involved in community education programs focusing on violence against older women.
- Ultimately to reduce violence of all kinds (physical, psychological, sexual, social and financial) experienced by older women in the home.

We excluded from the project both violence in public places and violence in institutions, although we believe that violence in these settings also has devastating effects on older women. These problems also require in-depth research and investigation that is beyond the scope of this study.

Methodology

For a two-year period leading into the study we prepared to collect older women's stories. A description of the project and the request for stories was widely publicised. We made contact with a range of community based organisations where an interest in violence against older women was appropriate. We inserted articles in relevant newsletters, newspapers and email discussion lists, for example, the Older Women's Network (OWN) newsletter and the Australian Pensioner newspaper. We also offered to run workshops and seminars around the issue of violence against older women.

The Participants

Approximately 250 women participated in the seminar groups and interviews, about 20 women contacted us by phone or letter and told us their stories, and 42 participated in the pilot study. We do not claim that those involved in this study make up a representative sample of older women in Australia. This is clearly not the case. All the participants identified themselves as older women. A small number came from the range of cultural backgrounds that make up the Australian population and some were Indigenous women. They came from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and a number of the

participants were women with disabilities. There were no women in the sample who could not speak English.

Most of the women were well and active although some came from retirement villages and hostels. We did not visit any nursing homes or hospitals. This means that comparatively few were from the 'old old' age group – although women up to 90 years attended.

Seminars

We conducted eleven seminars throughout NSW and the ACT to groups averaging between 30 and 40 older women. We commenced each seminar by telling the participants what we were doing and why, and then broke into smaller discussion groups to talk about the women's own experiences. Each group was facilitated by one of the researchers. At the beginning of each group we re-stated our desire for first-person stories, but after that gave little or no direction. We did not ask questions, but used affirming techniques to support a speaker and maintain a particular topic. We tried to be non-directive as we wanted to obtain stories in the women's words not ours and we wanted to hear their own interpretations of violent experiences.

These group discussions were recorded and later transcribed with the permission and informed consent of the women involved. We guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Whenever possible, we organised to have counsellors available to participants after our meetings in case they were needed.

In addition women who wished to tell stories individually were invited to do so. We interviewed individual women and also did some telephone interviews. We received a number of letters from women documenting their experiences. We put together excerpts from many of the stories into a draft booklet.

The Pilot Study

We conducted a pilot study, to evaluate the reactions of a group of older women to the draft booklet of stories we had compiled. We also used this as an opportunity to collect more material, and distributed the draft booklet and a questionnaire in two parts: multiple choice and open-ended questions, and a sentence completion form. The sentence completion form was included to enable exploration of the emotional aspects of these issues. The draft

booklet was used as the basis of the pilot questionnaire. One hundred and five older women were invited to read the booklet and fill in the questionnaire by recording, among other things, their responses, ideas and reactions to the booklet. We wanted this feedback partly to improve the booklet and to find out more about older women's experiences and interpretations of violence.

Results

Our results confirmed that violence in the home is a major problem for older women. Many older women are acutely aware of this fact, and many are keen to contest and change the situation, both for themselves and for other older women. Quite a number of the participants commented that they were so pleased to see that the issue was finally being discussed and brought out into the open.

Most perpetrators were men – fathers, sons, brothers, and uncles as well as partners. Occasionally violence by women was reported – mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, and carers. The themes I'll concentrate on in this paper are surviving and getting help, leaving the violence, and independence and empowerment.

Surviving

The women had utilised a range of creative strategies to survive despite the violence that was being perpetrated on them. A common survival strategy they adopted was to block out the violence to try and avoid the problem completely. 'I went into a fantasy world', 'I took Valium', 'I felt sorry for myself', 'I withdrew from people', 'I don't think about it', 'I've kept all the memories hidden', 'I endeavoured to think of myself only', 'I pushed everything back in my mind until I was sixty-four years of age'. One hoped, vainly as it transpired, for improvement in the situation, 'I thought it may improve'.

Another way of coping was to channel their energy into other activities, 'I found work and my independence', 'I worked hard', 'I survive, worked and walked', 'I studied hard and became a trained nurse', 'I read books', 'I try to educate the younger women', 'I laugh at ignorance, refuse to give in, and keep on',

Some had utilised a range of the above strategies, and then waited patiently until the perpetrator died, and then they were able to live free of violence.

I stayed with him for 39 years. It was a long time to put in, but I wasn't brave enough to leave... We moved down here and he and he only lived for another two years... And then I was free. I don't know whether you ever saw Penelope Keith in *To the Manor Born*, the episode where she went to her husband's funeral? She came out of the church and said to her friend, 'Is there anybody looking?' Then she threw her hat in the air, jumped with joy and shouted, 'Hooray, hooray!' That was exactly how I felt (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 21).

Getting Help

The stories of their attempts to get help were revealing. For those who had sought help in the past, 'help was just not available then', and even today 'help is not easy to find', although they expressed the 'hope that, these days, more help and understanding and support is available to women in need'. However, there was an acknowledgement and a realisation that asking for help can itself be problematic. For many older women it is very difficult to ask for help. 'Help is always there if you seek it, but it's always a daunting task to get out of such a violent atmosphere'. 'The worst part is that so many regard it as a secret and don't seek help', 'help needs to be requested and wanted'.

Many stressed how important it was that more assistance be available to older women experiencing violence, 'help should be available to all women in a violent situation', 'to survive I think there must be more help given', 'help must be holistic, and agencies must be accountable', and 'help is desperately needed by all service and legal organisations to provide protection and ongoing support and intervention'.

Leaving the Violence

At least 9 of these women had left the perpetrator sooner or later. Two spoke of surviving by seeking the support of others, 'I looked to my support networks', and 'I told a friend'. Some felt they had taken decisive control of the situation, 'I called on inner strength', 'I have always managed to be self reliant and independent', 'I decided to take a stand', 'I got out of there quickly', 'I live alone', 'I told him to leave'.

I went on and on and eventually got out of a very emotionally abusive relationship and got divorced. And that was the biggest day of my life. I was scared, I was shaking. But the day after the divorce, I felt I could fly... It was such a relief... (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 11).

With one supporter, I did it. I walked away. Since then I've had lots of support. At the time I left, I was a new member of the Older Women's Network, and there wasn't a group. You only need one supporter. The more the merrier though, the bigger the group and the more the better, but I can do with just one (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 12).

For the women there was a realisation that 'changing the situation is difficult', 'was hard', 'frightening' and often 'impossible, move out!' However, as one woman said, 'changing the situation is absolutely vital'. They found it important and useful to share their experience, 'changing the situation one has to become stronger and talk!' 'I read Germaine Greer's *Female Eunuch*, and took part in OWN violence segment'.

They spoke of the support of others to assist in changing the situation. 'In changing the situation I needed support from friends, mother, sister, and daughters', 'I couldn't have done it without my parents' support'.

In my experience remaining in the situation because of fear isn't the solution. Now I have left, my self esteem is higher, and I have the courage to make changes. I just wish I'd had the strength to do something sooner (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 22).

Independence and Empowerment

The women spoke enthusiastically about what it was like to be no longer living with violence. 'Now I feel strong and help others'.

... It's changed my whole attitude. I don't call it scars. I call it 'betterment of my life'. I feel I've been empowered. I've become a real woman. A real woman- someone who is independent, who can stand up and say, 'I don't like this,' who can speak up and still do what I want with my life. I don't have to kowtow to anybody (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 36).

They also spoke at some length of the importance of support networks, and how empowering and liberating it was to speak out about the violence.

Support networks are what's needed. Give a woman a chance to speak, and when they hear even one woman's story, it gives them the courage also to speak out. Then you know you are not alone, there are lots of others out there... (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 36).

It took me a long time to be able to talk about it. I don't think I could ever write my story on paper. But now I think it is important. I think if people hear my story, it might make it easier for you to cope with yours (Sargent & Mears, 2000 p 11).

A very strong theme that emerged throughout the project was the central importance to these women, both in surviving the violence and building worthwhile lives, was that their stories be believed. They spoke of the importance of listening and believing women, 'help lies in listening, believing and helping women to take action as they choose it'.

Conclusion

We know that the chances of women experiencing violence during their lives are high, indeed one in four for women in Australia in 1996 reported experiencing violence (ABS, 1996). For many women the effects of these experiences are carried throughout their lives. It is clear from this research that to experience violence and abuse is not a personal problem that affects just one individual older woman, but is a problem that many, many older women experience. It is also clear from this research that violence and abuse has long lasting effects, the pain and trauma experienced throughout our lives has devastating consequences. Many older women have carried this pain throughout their lives and are still experiencing the effects of this violence.

This research also demonstrates the importance of sharing stories. For many of the women who participated in this project, it was the first time they had spoken out about the violence in their lives. Despite the difficulties and the shame many older women feel, older women will speak about the violence in their lives if they are given the space and opportunity to do so, and if they are believed and listened to. We need to listen to older women. This research is just one contribution to understanding older women's experiences of violence. We hope it will go a small way towards ensuring a future where older women not only survive violence and abuse but also are empowered to deal with it and lead lives free of violence and abuse.

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