

# Older women, the invisible survivors:

## Ending violence against women and girls across the life course

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#### Woman, 63, Colombia

“I always imagined a quiet old age and next to my husband, but I learnt that **violence against women can come at every age**. Now, I can only advise women, especially older women, not to tolerate such situations of abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

#### Kate Horstead, Senior Policy Adviser, Age International

“**Older women must no longer be invisible** in the drive to end violence against women and girls. Those with power have a responsibility to ensure that every woman, at every age, can live free from violence, abuse and fear.”

## Key messages

- ▶ Violence against women and girls (often referred to as VAWG) remains one of the most widespread and pervasive human rights abuses, impacting nearly 1 in 3 women globally.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Progress to reduce VAWG has been slow. For example, intimate partner violence has declined by only 0.2% annually over the past two decades.<sup>3</sup> Yet change is possible. There is a growing global momentum to end VAWG and growing evidence that violence is preventable with the right policies, programmes and investments.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ The costs of inaction are profound. Violence against women and girls undermines fundamental rights and it harms health and wellbeing across the life course, with lasting impacts on women, families, communities and wider society.
- ▶ Older women are a growing cohort, and by 2050 women over 60 will represent nearly 25 per cent of the global female population.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, violence against older women remains significantly under-researched and under-measured. Most internationally comparable VAWG surveys only collect data from women aged 15–49, which excludes the majority of older women. As a result, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that older women are represented in just 10 per cent of global data on violence against women.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ Violence against women does not end in older age. Older women experience multiple and overlapping forms of violence and abuse, shaped by the intersection of ageism, gender inequality and other forms of discrimination. Yet they are often excluded from programmes and policies focused on ending VAWG.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ Violence is exacerbated by humanitarian crises, resulting in immediate and long-lasting physical, social, and mental health harms. Older women also face heightened risks of violence in crises due to ageism, disrupted support networks, limited resources, and health and care needs.
- ▶ Integrating a life course approach is essential to eliminating violence against women and girls of all ages. Evidence shows that approaches which address risks and inequalities across the life course, including multigenerational programmes that challenge harmful social norms, can help prevent violence and support women at different stages of life.
- ▶ The UK Government can help drive this change. Through its leadership of the International Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Girls, its planned international summit on VAWG, and its G20 Presidency in 2027, the UK can champion a life course approach, addressing the longstanding exclusion of older women – and strengthening efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls across all stages of life.



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# 1. Introduction

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) remains one of the most widespread human rights violations. Nearly one in three women – an estimated 840 million worldwide – have experienced physical, sexual or intimate partner violence during their lifetime.<sup>8</sup> Progress in reducing violence has been slow, with rates of intimate partner violence declining by just 0.2 per cent annually over the past two decades.<sup>9</sup>

Older women remain largely invisible in global efforts to end violence. International datasets that shape global evidence and policy, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), generally limit violence-related data collection to women aged 15–49. This systematic exclusion obscures the prevalence, forms and impacts of violence experienced by older women. It also contributes to their continued neglect in policy, funding and programme responses.

The costs of inaction are profound. Violence against women and girls undermines fundamental rights and it harms health and wellbeing across the life course, with lasting impacts on women, families, communities and wider society. It limits social, political and economic participation. Although the impact on rights is paramount, there are economic arguments for addressing the endemic issue of violence too. Evidence suggests that violence against women can cost countries around 1–2 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) through healthcare expenditure, lost productivity, justice costs and reduced economic participation.<sup>10 11</sup>

Violence against women and girls is preventable when the right policies, programmes and investments are in place.<sup>12</sup> Global political leadership is key. In the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Member States committed to ‘eliminating VAWG’. More recently, there have been renewed international commitments to accelerate progress on ending VAWG, including through the international ‘All In’ coalition<sup>13</sup> – as well as the Political Declaration adopted by UN Member States at the 69th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in 2025,<sup>14</sup> which reaffirmed commitments to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.

In this context, the UK Government has set bold ambitions to strengthen international action through new partnerships, and global commitments. Tackling violence and abuse is one of four foundations in the UK’s International Strategic Framework on women and girls.<sup>15</sup> And the UK will host an international summit on ending VAWG as part of the UK’s G20 presidency in 2027.<sup>16</sup> These international ambitions are matched by a domestic commitment to halve VAWG within a decade. Delivering on these targets will require new thinking, and a meaningful commitment to reach the most marginalised women and girls – including older women.

The absence of data on how older women are affected by violence does not mean the problem is insignificant. Violence, inequality and discrimination accumulate and evolve throughout women’s lives, often creating distinct patterns of risk, harm and exclusion. Yet policies and programmes to end violence often exclude older women. The UK initiative ‘What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale’,<sup>17</sup> for example, currently does not include older women in its repository of evidence, or in any of its funded programmes.

As populations age, governments that fail to measure and address violence in later life risk underestimating demand for health, social care, justice and protection services. This leads to higher long-term public expenditure and missed opportunities for prevention. Ensuring older women are visible in data, policy and programming is not only a practical necessity but also a matter of rights, dignity and the commitment to leave no woman behind.

This briefing focuses on older women's experiences of VAWG and examines how ageism, gender inequality and other intersecting forms of discrimination increase their risk of violence, and shape their access to support, protection and justice. It adopts an intersectional life course approach, recognising that older women's experiences are shaped not only by age and gender, but also by factors such as disability, poverty, ethnicity, race, displacement, and sexual orientation. Exposure to global

challenges – including in relation to climate, food and economic security – can also play a role in defining older women's experiences. The briefing concludes with recommendations for the UK Government, other governments, and international stakeholders to strengthen efforts to prevent and respond to violence against older women, address age-related gaps in VAWG policy and programming, and integrate a life course approach across efforts to eliminate VAWG.

## 2. The invisible survivors: A focus on older women

Women aged over 60 are a growing demographic cohort. They currently represent 15 per cent of the global female population, and this is projected to rise to nearly 25 per cent by 2050.<sup>18</sup> Many older women have experienced a lifetime of inequality and disadvantage, often shaped by intersecting factors and identities. These shape their risk of exposure to violence, and their ability to access support and participate in their communities and economies in later life. Yet, prevention and response efforts often fail to recognise these experiences and the barriers older women face.

### 2.1 Violence against older women: where ageism and gender discrimination intersect

VAWG is any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering of women and girls, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.<sup>19</sup> VAWG is a human rights violation, and is rooted in gendered inequalities.

The abuse of older people – also known as elder abuse – is 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. This type of violence includes physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse; financial and material abuse; abandonment; neglect; and serious loss of dignity and respect.<sup>20</sup> The abuses which older people experience are human rights violations rooted in ageism.<sup>21</sup>

Older women sit at the intersection of these forms of violence and abuse. Their experiences of these human rights violations are rooted in different power inequalities related to age and gender. They are also shaped by, and interact with, other intersecting systems of oppression.



## 2.2 Older women's experiences of violence

Violence against women does not end in older age. Among women over 60, physical and sexual violence by intimate partners remains the most prevalent form of abuse.<sup>23</sup> Yet older women remain largely invisible within global efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that specific evidence about violence against older women is included in just 10 per cent of global data on violence against women.<sup>24</sup> Both WHO and the UN Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons have highlighted the significant evidence gap on violence against women aged 60 and over, particularly regarding patterns of abuse, barriers to help-seeking, and effective prevention and response measures.<sup>25 26</sup>

The lack of evidence on older women and VAWG does not mean that violence is uncommon, rather it remains hidden and underreported. For example, evidence from Mexico shows that rates of intimate partner violence among women aged 50–79 are comparable to those experienced by younger women.<sup>27</sup> The Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons notes that physical, psychological, sexual and financial abuse, as well as neglect, are pervasive globally but frequently go unreported due to stigma, shame, social expectations and fear of reprisals.<sup>28</sup>

**Woman, 61, UK <sup>22</sup>**

“Women have often faced a lifetime of coercion, bullying and violence. In older age, women are often afraid to talk about what has happened to them and have learned to accept this ‘silent’ form of punishment.”



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For many women, violence in older age is not a new experience. It forms part of a pattern of abuse, control and discrimination experienced across their lives. The impacts of this violence can affect their physical and mental health, economic security, social participation and overall quality of life. For example, exposure to intimate partner violence has been associated with reduced use of healthcare and mental health services later in life.<sup>29</sup>

While older women experience the same forms of violence as younger women, violence in later life also takes distinct forms, including neglect, financial abuse, coercion, and abandonment by family members or caregivers. Violence may continue into older age, escalate, or emerge for the first time in later life. Changes in household dynamics, including retirement, disability, ill health, increasing care needs, children leaving home, shifts in financial dependency, or women wanting to engage in activities outside the home, have been shown to increase the risk of escalating intimate partner violence.<sup>30</sup>

## Physical and sexual violence

In a review of qualitative studies involving women aged 60 years and older, physical violence was one of the most frequently reported forms of violence.<sup>31</sup> Sexual violence, including intimate partner sexual violence, is also experienced in later life but remains poorly understood and inadequately documented.<sup>32 33</sup> Ageist assumptions that older women are not at risk of sexual violence, combined with stigma, inadequate institutional responses and limited research, contribute to its continued invisibility.<sup>34</sup>

Research by HelpAge International also highlights the range of physical violence experienced by older women, including intimidation and threats by family and community members.<sup>35</sup> An older woman from Kenya described how she faced constant physical violence from her son:

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*“When he is hungry... he comes home very angry. I lock the house, keep quiet and sleep. Because he... [has mental health issues], he can kill you any time.”*<sup>36</sup>

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## Psychological abuse, coercion and loss of autonomy

Older women frequently experience psychological and emotional abuse, coercion and controlling behaviours. After physical violence, emotional and psychological violence were among the most frequently reported forms of violence experienced by older women, yet they often remain hidden and under-recognised.<sup>37</sup> Research conducted by HelpAge International with older people during the COVID-19 pandemic found that many older women did not identify verbal and emotional abuse as violence, with some accepting it as a normal part of daily life and others believing that they deserved such treatment.<sup>38</sup> It is also often not taken seriously by authorities or service providers. An older woman in Chile observed:

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*“There is also a lot of psychological violence against older people, but in Chile if it is not accompanied by physical violence, the authority does nothing about it.”*<sup>39</sup>

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Psychological abuse frequently occurs alongside economic violence. Evidence from a programme in Moldova documents older women’s experiences of intimidation, humiliation, restrictions on daily decision-making and social isolation that are often linked to financial dependence on family members. These experiences reduced women’s ability to challenge or report abuse, and reinforced patterns of control and dependency.



### **Economic abuse, neglect and abandonment**

Economic abuse can include the confiscation of pensions, control of property or savings, coercion in financial decision-making, and exclusion from inheritance and property rights. Neglect and abandonment may involve failure to provide adequate care, food, healthcare, shelter or support with daily living.<sup>40</sup>

Economic abuse is often intertwined with other forms of violence. For example, HelpAge International's work on violence against older women in Tanzania demonstrates how the consequences of lifelong gendered roles can contribute to violence, intimidation and discrimination in later life. Older women may be subjected to harmful stereotypes linked to age-related changes in health, appearance or functioning. Traits such as red or inflamed eyes, resulting from years of cooking over smoky fires, have been used for accusations of witchcraft. Evidence also suggests that older women with dementia and other age-related cognitive impairments can face heightened risks of violence and discrimination, including in contexts where accusations of witchcraft occur.<sup>41</sup> These accusations are often linked to property and inheritance disputes, significantly increasing older women's risk of displacement, loss of property and physical attack, which can lead to maiming and even death.<sup>42</sup>

Economic abuse is also taking new forms as services become increasingly digitalised. Limited digital literacy, lack of access to mobile phones, and reliance on others to access social protection payments or financial services, can increase older women's vulnerability to financial exploitation. An official interviewed for research into older women's access to social protection in Tanzania described this form of violence:

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*"We have used the mobile payment and found it user-friendly for younger people but challenging for older people. [...] Most of the time you find that the mobile phone is with her grandchildren who, when they receive a message for the payment, could go and take the money from the agent and delete the message. [...] When she comes to ask us, we trace it and find that the money has been taken."*<sup>43</sup>

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## Violence against older women in conflict and crisis

Violence is exacerbated by humanitarian crises, resulting in immediate and long-lasting physical, social, and mental health harms. Humanitarian crises tend to amplify the root causes of violence, including abuse of power, gender inequalities, discrimination, and harmful societal norms. Older women also face heightened risks of violence in crises due to ageism, disrupted support networks, limited resources, and health and care needs.

A study by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and HelpAge International found that 32 per cent of displaced women aged 49+ in protracted displacement settings experienced intimate partner violence.<sup>44</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo, at Panzi Hospital (a specialist service for survivors of sexual violence), 10.6 per cent of sexual violence survivors were 65 or older, even though this age group makes up just 2.6 per cent of the population.<sup>45</sup>

Sexual violence against older women in conflict settings is often ignored even though older women may be at heightened risk. One reason for this silence could be ageism and internalised prejudice and stereotypes regarding older women and sex. However, it is important to remember that sexual violence is not only about the physical act of sex, it can be a way of asserting power and this abuse continues in older age.

Evidence also suggests that older women are at risk of sexual victimisation, but with patterns of vulnerability that differ from younger survivors.<sup>46</sup> A multi-country study conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières found that older female survivors accessing sexual violence services in humanitarian settings were more likely than younger women to report rape.<sup>47</sup>

Alongside this, older women may feel ashamed to report violence perpetrated by partners and family members. This can create additional barriers to seeking help, as many of those responsible for the abuse provide care, housing, financial support, or companionship. As a result, available data are likely to underestimate the true extent of violence experienced by older women.

The issue is receiving growing policy attention. In a recent UK parliamentary debate,<sup>48</sup> Members of Parliament highlighted the heightened risks faced by older women in conflict settings. They called for the explicit inclusion of older women in humanitarian protection and gender-based violence programmes, specifying a life course approach to preventing and responding to violence against women and girls. John Milne MP said:

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*“If the Government want to talk about return on investment in their development spending, this is exactly where that return is the greatest. Supporting older women is not a niche ask; it is a multiplier for entire households and communities.”*

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## 2.3 Intersecting risk factors

Ageism and gendered inequalities interact with other systems of oppression to increase older women's exposure to violence, abuse and neglect. The WHO estimates that one in two people globally hold ageist attitudes towards older people, reflecting the extent to which age-based stereotypes and discrimination are pervasive.<sup>49</sup> These attitudes alongside other factors such as poverty, ableism, ethnicity, marital status, racism and homophobia, contribute to both the heightened risk of violence and the silence about violence against older women. These risks can be further intensified by humanitarian crises, conflict, displacement and climate-related shocks, which often deepen existing inequalities and barriers to protection.

### Economic insecurity and violence

Women suffer from higher levels of relative poverty than men at all ages, but the gap is largest in later life.<sup>50</sup> In low and middle income countries, around 27 per cent of women aged 80 and over live in relative poverty, compared with 24 per cent of men.<sup>51</sup> This reflects the cumulative effects of gender inequality across the life course, including lower earnings, limited access to pensions and savings, and long periods spent in unpaid care roles.

Gendered expectations that women continue to provide unpaid care well into older age, often without adequate social or financial support, can increase their vulnerability to violence and abuse. These dynamics entrench unequal power relations within households and caregiving arrangements, limiting older women's autonomy and ability to seek help. Violence can also further undermine women's economic security through the loss of assets, property and income. In Uganda, for example, an 83-year-old woman reported:

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*"The men and children beat their older women and the children also steal our property ... I have seen ... my own daughter stealing my land and selling it without my permission."*<sup>52</sup>

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### Disability and violence

46 per cent of people aged over 60 are likely to have a disability,<sup>53</sup> and women with a disability are 2-4 times more likely to experience VAWG.<sup>54</sup> Older women with disabilities can face compounded forms of discrimination linked to the intersection of age, gender and disability, increasing both their risk of violence and the barriers to seeking help.

### Gender identity, sexual orientation and violence

Older lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) people often face a lifetime of discrimination. LGBTQI individuals in many contexts around the world are criminalised by the state,<sup>55</sup> and many will have experienced systemic violence and discrimination.<sup>56</sup> They are also more likely to have experienced sexual and intimate partner violence.<sup>57</sup> The Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons notes that some people may keep their sexual orientation and/or gender identity private throughout their lives for fear of rejection and violence. Meanwhile, others who have been open about their sexual orientation and gender identity earlier in life may have to conceal it in older age to seek government and family support, or move to care facilities.<sup>58</sup>

### Widowhood and violence

Widowhood, which affects both younger and older women, can trigger acute forms of economic abuse and violence. Following the death of a spouse, women may be dispossessed of land, housing, property or inheritance, despite legal protections intended to safeguard their rights. Evidence from multiple countries shows that widows frequently face disinheritance, property grabbing and loss of livelihoods, often as a result of discriminatory social norms and customary practices.<sup>59 60</sup> An older woman from Nepal reported:

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*"My in-laws and society started to discriminate against me after the death of my husband. They took my husband's land and property and compelled me to leave my village."*<sup>61</sup>

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### **Institutionalisation and violence**

Older women living in residential care settings and other institutions face heightened risks of abuse, neglect and loss of autonomy. While data is rarely disaggregated by sex and age in later life, evidence indicates that abuse of older people is common in institutional settings. WHO reports that around one in three staff in nursing homes and long-term care facilities reported carrying out at least one act considered abusive in the past year.<sup>62</sup>

Dependence on caregivers, limited privacy, social isolation and a lack of independent oversight can increase vulnerability.

Research also suggests that sexual violence against older women is more prevalent in institutional settings than is often recognised.<sup>63</sup> In addition, inadequate support, neglect and involuntary separation from family and community networks can constitute violations of older women's rights and further undermine their dignity, wellbeing and autonomy. While violence, abuse and neglect of older people has led to serious harm and premature death, there is limited research on the prevalence and consequences of violence, abuse and neglect experienced by older women in institutional settings.

## **3. Taking a life course approach**

### **What is a life course approach?**

A life course approach recognises that women and girls' experiences of violence, the risk factors they face, and their support needs change at different stages of life. Social norms, power relations and life events shape both the impacts of violence and access to support across the life course. These patterns are rooted in gender inequality and ageism, and can be further affected by other forms of discrimination, such as ableism, race, class, displacement, ethnicity, marital status, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Using a life course approach helps us to understand how experiences of violence, risks, and support needs evolve over time. It helps ensure that prevention and response efforts are relevant, accessible and effective for women and girls at every age.

### **3.1 Why a life course approach matters**

Women, men and gender-diverse people of all ages experience violence. However, the forms of violence they experience, risk and protective factors, and their ability to access support can vary across different stages of life. Understanding these differences is essential for designing effective prevention and response efforts that meet the needs of women and girls at every age. Global experts reinforced this recently by outlining what it will take to “get to zero” violence against women,<sup>64</sup> and highlighting the importance of scaling up multi-sectoral, evidence-based interventions across the life course.<sup>65</sup>



### 3.2 Violence across the life course

Different forms of violence, abuse and harmful practices may become more or less prevalent at different stages of life, reflecting changing social norms, power relations and lived experiences. While physical, sexual and emotional violence can occur throughout the life course, certain forms of violence and harmful practices are more likely to occur at particular stages of life. Girls are at higher risk of child marriage or female genital mutilation (FGM), while older women may face neglect, abandonment, financial abuse, inheritance-related violence or in some communities, accusations of witchcraft. Experiences of violence can also accumulate over time, with lasting impacts on health, wellbeing, economic security and access to support in later life.<sup>66</sup>

Despite growing evidence on what works to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, much of the existing evidence base, policy and programming continues to focus on women of reproductive age.<sup>67</sup>

A life course approach can help ensure that prevention and response efforts reflect the realities of women's lives, address risks and vulnerabilities at different life stages, and reach groups who are often overlooked. This is essential for realising the basic human rights that all women and girls are entitled to, as well as achieving greater effectiveness in reducing violence prevalence and advancing global ambitions to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.



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## 4. Why older women remain invisible

### 4.1 Social norms on ageing and gender

The violence that older women experience is often reinforced by harmful social norms on both gender and ageing. Many older adults – and women in particular – internalise beliefs that discourage reporting, viewing violence as “normal”, “inevitable” or “deserved.”<sup>68</sup>

Others may lack confidence that they will receive support, or feel obliged to endure mistreatment for the sake of family harmony, caregiving responsibilities or a sense of self-sacrifice.<sup>69</sup> These norms contribute to the silence and stigma surrounding violence against older women, making abuse more difficult to recognise and address. Older women are also less likely than younger women to leave abusive relationships or seek justice due to fear of social consequences, loss of housing or care, and entrenched norms around endurance and family unity.<sup>70</sup>

As one 70-year-old woman in Jordan explained:

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*“I don’t want to file a complaint against my son because customs and traditions do not accept a mother doing such a thing.”*<sup>71</sup>

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Ageism can further discourage disclosure. Older women often fear they will not be believed, that their experiences will be overlooked or dismissed as a normal consequence of ageing, or that support services are not intended for them. Consultations with older people from across the globe highlight how shame, stigma and low confidence in available services prevent many older women from reporting violence or accessing support.<sup>72</sup>

### 4.2 Gaps in data on VAWG across the life course

There is a growing global evidence base on what works to prevent and respond to VAWG. This evidence shows that violence is preventable if the right policy environment, investments and actions are made.<sup>73</sup>

However, older women’s experiences of violence are a significant gap in this evidence base. Data, discourse, and action on VAWG have mostly focused on women of reproductive age – with Demographic and Health Surveys, and other global data sets, rarely capturing the experiences of older women.<sup>74</sup> A systematic review on violence against older women found that evidence gathering globally is limited regarding the patterns and types of violence against women aged 50 and older, as well as the barriers to reporting and help-seeking for older women.<sup>75</sup>

According to a report on violence against older persons by the Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons, only 17 per cent of 133 countries surveyed in 2014 gathered data on the abuse of older people.<sup>76</sup> This evidence gap is also reflected in the UK flagship initiative, ‘What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale’, which currently does not include older women in its repository of evidence, or in any of its funded programmes.<sup>77</sup> As a result, violence experienced in later life remains poorly understood and inadequately addressed.

Beyond prevalence, more data is needed on patterns of violence across the life course, the cumulative impact of different forms of violence experienced, and help-seeking behaviour from formal or informal support systems.<sup>78</sup> The collection, analysis and reporting of disaggregated qualitative and quantitative data can provide essential information about violence patterns, avenues for reporting abuse, existing support for survivors and access to remedies.

Disaggregated globally comparable data can feed into more effective prevention and response programmes that work across the life course, and integrate the specific needs and rights of women and girls of all ages.



### 4.3 Barriers to services and protection

Even where older women seek help, they often encounter specific barriers in accessing appropriate services,<sup>79</sup> as well as isolation from friends and family. Older women may face practical barriers such as distance to services, inaccessible transport, digital exclusion, communication barriers and limited information about available support. This not only limits their access to services, it also makes their experiences of violence less visible to authorities.

Concerns about not being welcomed, believed or taken seriously can further discourage help-seeking behaviour. Research has highlighted how ageist attitudes and assumptions among service providers can result in signs of abuse being overlooked or dismissed. This can reinforce older women's perceptions that reporting violence will not lead to meaningful support, justice or protection. One older woman from Kenya described her experiences of being excluded from public services:

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*"... when you go to the hospital, they say, 'this one is too old, we are wasting medicine, it's better she dies.' And if a younger woman goes, they know that she still has more years to live."*<sup>80</sup>

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### 4.4 Gaps in policy and legal frameworks

The invisibility of older women within data and research is often reflected in policy and legal frameworks. Age is rarely recognised explicitly as a risk factor within violence against women policies, and the widespread exclusion of women over 49 from major surveys and monitoring systems has contributed to older women's exclusion from policy and programmes.

Forms of abuse that disproportionately affect older women, including neglect, economic abuse, inheritance-related violence and abuse in institutional settings can receive limited attention within legislation, prevention initiatives and protection services. In the UK, for example, 'Freedom from violence and abuse: A cross-government strategy to build a safer society for women and girls' aims to take a 'whole of society approach'. Yet older women, and the forms of abuse that disproportionately impact them, are not referenced in the strategy at all.<sup>81</sup>

As a result, older women are frequently excluded – either explicitly or in practice – from violence prevention and response systems that are designed primarily around assumptions about women of reproductive age. These gaps contribute to the continued invisibility of older women's experiences and limit opportunities for prevention, protection and access to justice.

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## 5. Change is possible – what works in preventing and responding to violence against older women

There is growing recognition that efforts to end violence against women and girls must include women of all ages. Global experts have highlighted that achieving the goal of ending violence will require scaling up multi-sectoral, evidence-based interventions across the life course.<sup>82</sup> This section explores the promising approaches and emerging evidence on what works to strengthen action to prevent and respond to violence against older women and across the life course.

### 5.1 Multi-generational approaches to shift social norms on VAWG

Multi-generational approaches can play an important role in preventing violence against women and girls. These help to shift harmful social and gender norms, and they promote gender equality. Because these norms are often passed through and across generations, engaging people of different ages can be an effective way to challenge them and support more equitable relationships.

Working across generations creates opportunities to foster mutual understanding, strengthen positive relationships and build support for gender equality within families, communities and institutions. By addressing attitudes and behaviours across the life course, these approaches can contribute to more sustainable and far-reaching change. Below are some practical examples from Senegal, Zimbabwe and Kyrgyzstan.

In Senegal, an organisation called ‘The Grandmother Project’ uses intergenerational dialogues and involves grandmothers as allies in their work to reduce FGM. Their work has helped in its reduction across the community, as well as increasing older women’s sense of self-confidence and their feeling of being respected and useful in their own community. Grandmothers may be the ‘missing piece’ for ending harmful practices such as FGM.<sup>83</sup>

Another example of how multi-generational approaches can shift social norms is the Friendship Bench that was originally developed in Zimbabwe.<sup>84</sup> The project works with community health workers to provide mental health support to those experiencing mild to moderate symptoms of poor mental health. Whilst the evidence on the Friendship Bench approach does not specifically look at whether it reduces VAWG, there is evidence that experiences of violence have a profound impact on mental health,<sup>85</sup> and that mental health interventions can strengthen violence prevention programmes.<sup>86</sup>

The Friendship Bench programme has evidenced significant impacts in reducing symptoms of poor mental health and has shown that programme participants who experienced intimate partner violence reported mental health improvements.<sup>87</sup> It has since been adapted and scaled up globally.<sup>88</sup> Older women working as health promoters in their local communities have been key to the programme’s success. As trusted community members, they share a similar context to those using the bench. Their role also builds on positive cultural associations for older women, as caring listeners or custodians of wisdom, for example.<sup>89</sup>

## Violence against older women in Moldova: Breaking the silence

HelpAge Moldova<sup>91</sup> has been working to prevent and respond to violence against older people in Moldova since 2012. They conducted the first national research on violence against older people which found that 29 per cent of older people surveyed had experienced some form of abuse in older age. A recent programme developed by HelpAge Moldova responded to this by providing, among other things:

- ▶ Clubs for older women to learn about violence, how to prevent it and where to get support, whilst also engaging in handicrafts like knitting and crochet.
- ▶ Group sessions with psychologists for older women survivors.
- ▶ Information (through flyers) on what violence is, how to access services, and a special hotline number that people could call.
- ▶ Training and support to multi-disciplinary teams who provide support to survivors to better understand and respond to older women's needs.
- ▶ Support to improve the accessibility of two survivors' referral centres.
- ▶ Inter-generational summer schools where adolescents were able to take part in sports, games and music, whilst also discussing with older women the issues of gender equality and healthy relationships.

As a result, 100 per cent of older women participants reported increased knowledge of how to recognise violence and identify help-seeking pathways, 95.7 per cent reported an improved feeling of safety, and 87.1 per cent reported improved family dynamics.<sup>92</sup>

The programme highlights the importance of creating dedicated, safe spaces for older women to discuss issues around violence. Many women had not recognised that they were experiencing psychological or financial abuse before taking part in the sessions. It also demonstrates the importance of inter-generational dialogue. The summer schools were the most popular activity, and older women were able to share wisdom and experience with younger generations. They had open discussions about healthy relationships and the importance of gender equality that many younger people attending had not engaged in before.

### “Survivor, Moldova

“I feel like I'm not alone anymore. I'm glad to know there's someone I can address for help and I also learnt that there are special services for victims.”<sup>90</sup>

## 5.2 Gender and age-responsive social protection across the life course

Gender and age-responsive social protection can play an important role in preventing violence against women and girls, by strengthening women's economic security, social inclusion, autonomy and resilience across the life course. Social protection programmes, including cash transfers and social pensions, can help address some of the underlying drivers of violence while supporting women's wellbeing and access to resources.

Evidence shows that cash transfer programmes can contribute to reducing violence against women and children, particularly when they are designed and delivered in ways that promote women's safety and minimise risks for women.<sup>93 94</sup> However, designing effective interventions can be complex. While increasing women's access to income and resources can have positive outcomes, shifts in household decision-making and traditional gender roles can sometimes create tensions that lead to a short-term increase in violence – particularly in situations where women previously held limited power or influence.<sup>95</sup>

Programme design and implementation are therefore critical to ensuring women's safety and minimising unintended harms. Meaningfully engaging women – in the design, implementation and monitoring of social protection programmes – can help identify potential risks, strengthen safeguarding measures, and ensure interventions are responsive to women's needs, priorities and lived realities. Evidence also suggests that combining economic interventions with complementary programming that addresses harmful gender and social norms promotes equitable decision-making. Engaging men and boys can help reduce these risks and support more sustainable change.<sup>96 97</sup>

Evidence focusing specifically on older women remains limited, but existing studies highlight important considerations for policy and programme design. Research from Mexico found that women who had recently become eligible for social pensions initially experienced an increased risk of intimate partner violence, although this risk declined over time as households adjusted to changing economic circumstances.<sup>98</sup> The study also found no increase in violence where male partners also became eligible for pensions,

highlighting the importance of considering household dynamics when designing and targeting social protection programme.<sup>99</sup>

Other research from South Africa found that older women's pensions were frequently used to support multiple generations within a household, with older women often carrying significant responsibility for the wellbeing of family members.<sup>100</sup> This could increase pressure on older women to use their money to support others, and contribute to family tensions.<sup>101</sup>

These findings demonstrate the potential of gender and age-responsive social protection to contribute to violence prevention across the life course. To be most effective, social protection programmes should strengthen women's economic security while also addressing the harmful gender and social norms that can shape household dynamics and experiences of violence. A life course approach can help prioritise women's safety, autonomy and wellbeing, and it recognises the different ways economic insecurity and violence are experienced at different stages of life.





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### 5.3 Leadership of older women through community structures, and within peace building and conflict resolution

Older women have an important role to play in maintaining social cohesion, supporting dialogue and resolving disputes within families and communities. Even so, they are often overlooked in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, community leadership and decision-making processes.

Older women have proven themselves to be effective mediators and advocates for peaceful coexistence.<sup>102</sup> They can draw on lived experience, historical memory and community trust, and are often the custodians of collective memory and oral histories. They can provide important perspectives on how communities lived together before conflict, and how violence can be prevented and resolved. They can also play important roles in passing these experiences on between generations and building understanding across communities.

For example, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, older women have contributed to peacebuilding efforts by sharing memories of pre-conflict coexistence and inter-community solidarity across the Nagorno-Karabakh divide. Younger women worked alongside older women to document and share these stories, including accounts of neighbours protecting one another during periods

of violence. These experiences demonstrate how older women's knowledge and lived experiences can contribute to reconciliation, dialogue and peacebuilding efforts as well as intergenerational solidarity.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, in Northern Ireland, before the start of the peace process, cross-community gatherings of grassroots women's groups of all ages helped address the lack of policing for domestic violence. These gatherings then paved the way for women's cooperation in driving forward the peace agreement.<sup>104</sup>

Beyond formal peacebuilding processes, older women play important leadership roles through Older People's Associations (OPAs) and other community structures. When supported to organise collectively, older women can become powerful advocates for their rights and the rights of others within their communities. For example, in Ethiopia, older women in OPAs worked with community leaders, local authorities, faith leaders and service providers to raise awareness of VAWG, challenging harmful social norms, strengthening referral pathways, and promoting safer, more inclusive communities. This demonstrates that programmes that combine leadership opportunities with access to livelihoods, savings groups, and economic empowerment initiatives can help reduce dependency, strengthen autonomy and increase older women's ability to respond to and challenge domestic violence.<sup>105</sup>

## 5.4 Specialist services for older women

Older women experiencing violence require services that are age, gender and disability inclusive, safe, accessible, survivor-centred and responsive to their specific circumstances and needs. Many violence prevention and response services are designed primarily around the experiences of younger women. Older women face additional barriers related to mobility, disability, health conditions, social isolation, digital exclusion, cognitive decline, dependency on others and economic dependency. Effective responses need to go beyond simply including older women as beneficiaries and should address some of these gaps.

A step in the right direction would be services adopting age, gender and disability inclusive, person-centred approaches that respect older women's autonomy, dignity, choices and lived experiences – while recognising the diversity of

older women and the different forms of violence they may face.

Older women should be actively involved in the design, delivery and monitoring of violence prevention and response programmes. Meaningful participation helps ensure that services are accessible, relevant and responsive to their needs and priorities, while also strengthening accountability and improving programme effectiveness. With appropriate support and resources, older women can act as advocates, peer leaders and agents of change within their communities. They can work alongside community leaders, local authorities, women's organisations, faith leaders and service providers to raise awareness of violence against older women, challenging harmful social norms, strengthening referral pathways, and increasing access to support and protection services.

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## 6. Recommendations

We urge the UK Government, other governments, donors, and international organisations to grasp this opportunity to better understand, recognise and address the violence experienced by older women.

The renewed attention to ending VAWG – by the UK Government and global actors – is necessary. But it will only be meaningful if women of all ages are included. Urgent action is needed to ensure that policy responses and programmes move beyond a focus on women of reproductive age, to take a life course approach that reaches women and girls in all their diversity. The UK Government and other international stakeholders have a significant opportunity to reshape how we prevent and respond to VAWG, by ensuring that efforts reach women and girls at every stage of life – including older women.

The UK is preparing to host the G20 in 2027, and all international stakeholders are beginning to think about what will succeed the Sustainable Development Goals post-2030. Now is the time for specific commitments to investing in, and scaling up, a life course approach to VAWG prevention and response. They must be survivor-centred, evidence-based and leave no one behind.

## For the UK Government

### 1. Through global leadership, champion a life course approach to ending violence against women and girls

- 1.1. Ensure UK policies, strategies and international commitments on ending VAWG adopt an intersectional life course approach that reflects the experiences and voices of older women alongside others.
- 1.2. Use the UK-hosted international summit on ending VAWG and the UK's G20 Presidency in 2027 to elevate violence against older women as a global policy issue and promote action across the life course.
- 1.3. Champion the inclusion and meaningful participation of older women, including those with disabilities and other marginalised groups, within international VAWG commitments, accountability frameworks and financing mechanisms. This should include ensuring that the UK-led International Coalition to End Violence against Women and Girls actively incorporates the voices, priorities and experiences of older women into its prevention, policy, accountability and financing agenda.

### 2. Be accountable to survivors across generations and support multi-generational action

- 2.1. Consult with, and be accountable to, women's rights organisations – including older women's groups and younger feminist groups – in the development of any new campaigns and initiatives on ending VAWG.
- 2.2. Ensure the meaningful participation of both older and younger women survivors in advisory, leadership and decision-making structures linked to the UK-led International Coalition to End Violence against Women and Girls, the planned UK-hosted international summit on ending VAWG, and wider VAWG initiatives.
- 2.3. Ensure commitments arising from the UK-hosted international summit on ending VAWG include mechanisms for monitoring progress and accountability to women and girls across the life course, and support the meaningful participation of older women in monitoring progress.

## For all governments, multilateral institutions, international donors and other stakeholders

### 3. Embed a life course approach in VAWG policy and action

- 3.1. VAWG strategies should address the root causes of violence across the life course, including ageism, sexism, ableism, racism, harmful social norms, unequal power relations, patriarchal systems, conflict, climate-related risks and economic inequality.
- 3.2. VAWG strategies should adopt an intersectional life course approach, recognising that the forms of violence experienced, risk factors, and barriers to accessing support change across different stages of life and that age intersects with disability, ethnicity, displacement status and other factors.
- 3.3. Ensure that taking a life course approach to the elimination of violence against women and girls of all ages is included in the post-2030 framework to replace the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **4. Strengthen the evidence base across the life course**

- 4.1. Support the collection, analysis, use and reporting of sex, age and disability-disaggregated data on VAWG across the life course.
- 4.2. Invest in research on forms of violence experienced by older women, including sexual violence, abuse and neglect in institutions, economic violence, and violence in conflict and humanitarian settings.
- 4.3. Integrate multi-generational approaches as part of a comprehensive strategy on shifting the social norms that sustain and perpetuate violence against women and girls across the life course.

#### **5. Ensure laws, services and systems are inclusive of women of all ages**

- 5.1. Engage fully in the UN Human Rights Council process to create a new international legally binding human rights treaty for older persons (a UN Convention), ensuring that the rights of older women to live free from violence and abuse are fully incorporated.
- 5.2. Identify gaps in services for older women and invest in specialist and appropriate support where needed.
- 5.3. Promote accessible gender, age and disability-inclusive – and survivor-centred – services across health, social care, justice and protection systems.
- 5.4. Ensure women across the life course, including older women, can safely access support and protection services in both development and humanitarian settings – including through age, gender and disability-inclusive triaging, referral and case management systems, and the provision of accessible community and home-based support.

#### **6. Invest in prevention and response across the life course**

- 6.1. Recognise and support older women's leadership in violence prevention and response, including through Older People's Associations (OPAs) and other community-led structures.
- 6.2. Support gender and age-responsive social protection across the life course, including social pensions, while addressing potential risks and ensuring women's safety is prioritised in programme design.
- 6.3. Integrate multi-generational approaches as part of comprehensive efforts to challenge the social norms and inequalities that sustain violence against women and girls of all ages.
- 6.4. Ensure VAWG prevention and response programmes in development, humanitarian and conflict settings are designed to reach women across the life course, including older women and women with disabilities, and address the specific risks and barriers they face.

#### **7. Increase financing and accountability for older women**

- 7.1. Allocate dedicated funding for VAWG prevention and response initiatives that reach women across the life course, including older women and women with disabilities.
- 7.2. Support long-term, flexible funding for women's rights and community-based organisations, including those led by and representing older women.
- 7.3. Track and report on investments, participation and outcomes by age, sex and disability at a minimum – including specific indicators on older women within monitoring, evaluation and accountability frameworks.

## Conclusion

The growing global momentum to end violence against women and girls presents a real opportunity for the UK Government and other stakeholders to address a long-standing injustice – of older women’s rights and needs being marginalised in violence prevention and response. A life course approach does not create a separate agenda for older women. Instead, it ensures that their rights, experiences and voices are recognised equally within efforts to prevent and respond to violence against all women and girls.

Change is possible. There is evidence showing the impact of multi-generational approaches to challenging harmful norms, the leadership

of older women in conflict mediation and as advocates in their community, and age and gender responsive social protection across the life course. All can meaningfully contribute to reducing rates of violence. Recognising how violence evolves across the life course – and investing in strategies that take a life course approach – must be part of an inclusive, evidence-based, survivor-centred approach to ending violence. Only then can the UK Government and other international stakeholders accelerate progress towards a future free from violence for all women and girls.

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