



*Federation Northern Ireland*

Response in relation to:

**Active Ageing Strategy**

**Office of the First Minister and deputy First  
Minister**

**23 May 2014**

**Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland**

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**24 Hour Domestic & Sexual Violence Helpline**

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Open to *all women and men* affected by domestic & sexual violence

## Section 1 – Domestic Violence and Older People

- Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft *Active Ageing Strategy 2014 - 2020* on behalf of our local groups. Our comments are focused mainly on issues relating to domestic violence and abuse / elder abuse, safeguarding and issues relating to older women in particular.
- We welcome the inclusion of safeguarding and abuse within Strategic Aim 3 – Care. However, it is disappointing that there is no explicit mention of domestic violence and abuse within the draft document, or sufficient recognition that abuse of older people can occur in contexts other than care homes or institutional settings.
- Domestic violence and abuse is defined within the draft *Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland* strategy as:

*“threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) inflicted on anyone (irrespective of age, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation) by a current or former intimate partner or family member”*

While it is widely recognised that abuse of older people occurs within institutional settings or takes the form of elder / financial abuse by younger relatives, the wider issue of domestic abuse of older people remains hidden and largely unrecognised in our society. However, such coercion and abuse does occur within intimate relationships between older people, and it is vital that it is recognised in the context of safeguarding, elder abuse and promoting active ageing.

- Domestic violence is relevant to each Strategic Aim within this Strategy. Living a life of safety, free from domestic abuse and violence, is pertinent to the UN Principles for Older Persons, under all main themes: independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. Therefore recognising that domestic abuse and violence happens to older people in this document, and including measures to tackle it, should be embedded in many of the strategic aims of the document.
- Where domestic violence and abuse exists, an older person’s independence and ability to participate in society is curtailed, as abuse is fuelled and compounded by isolation. Domestic violence is also not limited to physical abuse, but can include financial abuse of older people by partners, family members etc. Financial abuse further contributes to the poverty and isolation of an older person, yet this enforced poverty has not been addressed within the strategy.

- Domestic violence and abuse has significant ramifications for the care of older people, due to the number of negative health and wellbeing impacts on those affected, both in terms of physical and mental health and wellbeing.
- The perpetration of abuse goes to the very core of a person’s right to dignity and self-fulfilment, as abusers deny basic human dignity to their victims. Victims are prevented from living the life they wish to, for example by being prevented from taking up employment or recreational activities by perpetrators, are deliberately isolated from family and friends, and are denied contact with support networks and the outside world through the control and manipulation of their perpetrator.
- The Strategy document alludes to the “stereotypes of ageing” at 1.14, yet the document has unfortunately failed to address one of the major stereotypes of ageing, that domestic violence and abuse does not occur within relationships between older people. In the course of our work, Women’s Aid has found that there are persistent stereotypes surrounding domestic violence and older people. These include the myths that domestic violence only affects younger people, or that abuse of older people is solely connected with their age and only perpetrated within a care setting by professionals or younger relatives of victims. On the contrary, domestic violence and abuse is not just a young people’s issue and it does exist between partners, and it is not something that stops just because victim and perpetrator reach old age.
- In fact, research<sup>1</sup> on domestic violence and older women shows that domestic violence and abuse affects at least 1 in 6 older women in Northern Ireland, most having lived with the abuse for many years. Evidence also shows that domestic violence is a common experience, damaging older women’s wellbeing and the self-esteem needed to take control and make decisions in their lives. In addition, abuse of older women is not age-based, rather domestic violence grown old – a continuation of violence started in earlier life. In the experience of our local Women’s Aid groups who provide support to older women, these women have many of the same needs and risks as younger women suffering domestic violence, but they face additional barriers to accessing support and many do not seek or receive the help they need. These barriers include:
  - ⇒ Lack of knowledge of support services, or a belief that the services exist only for younger women;
  - ⇒ Lack of knowledge of their rights;

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<sup>1</sup> 'Older Women’s Lifelong Experience of Domestic Violence in NI’ - Changing Ageing Partnership (CAP) 2010  
 Women’s Aid Federation Northern Ireland, Response to: Active Ageing Strategy – FINAL – 23 May 2014

- ⇒ Fear – that no one will believe them and it will make the violence worse; Older women may fear the consequences of intervention, and may be afraid of appearing in court, leaving their homes, losing financial independence, having their decision-making rights taken from them by service providers and being placed in nursing homes;
- ⇒ Shame that they have put up with abuse for so long, or to admit it is happening in a new relationship;
- ⇒ A belief that it is “too late” for them, and that it is not worth making difficult changes now in later life;
- ⇒ Isolation - some women may never have disclosed the abuse to anyone. This is particularly the case where abuse started many years ago, at a time when people were expected to keep quiet about problems, particularly around family matters. Other victims may have disclosed in the past, but given up after years of receiving negative reactions to their disclosure. Some victims may not recognise their experience as domestic violence despite coping with it for many years;
- ⇒ Health problems and disability, which may make them dependent on the perpetrator and unwilling to leave a specially adapted home. On the other hand, some victims are their abuser’s carer and may feel guilty about leaving;
- ⇒ Financial barriers – many victims have never worked or have fulfilled the role of homemaker within the household, do not have joint accounts and are financially dependent on the perpetrator.
- ⇒ Lack of transport - older women are less likely to drive or can’t afford to travel. 47% of pensioners in NI live in rural communities.
- ⇒ Divorce or separation may seem impossible to contemplate and there may be pressure from adult children to remain in the home
- ⇒ Leaving their home, pets and community may be particularly difficult for older women. They may have never lived on their own.
- ⇒ Negative reactions – Health and other professionals and friends often assume domestic violence lessens as people age and stops before 60 so rarely ask about it and misconstrue injuries and mental health issues as simply part of the aging process. Many assume that older men are not a serious threat;
- ⇒ Language barriers – Older women from ethnic minority communities are less likely to speak or understand English.

- It is essential that this Strategy recognises that domestic violence inhibits the continuing participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs for the many older people who experience it. By including domestic violence in this document, the Strategy would send a clear public message to older victims of

domestic violence and abuse that government knows such abuse happens to older people and that they will be believed and supported if they come forward. The Strategy should also include concrete measures to overcome the barriers to seeking help and living in safety and dignity, free from abuse.

## Section 2 – Tailoring the Strategy to the needs of all Older People

- Women’s Aid endorses AgeNI’s comments on clarifying the government’s obligations to older people with multiple identities in line with its human rights and equality obligations. In particular, we would highlight the need to address the gendered needs of older people, to look at the gender pension gap, and to address the specific needs, challenges and disadvantages faced by older women. This would include the fact that older women, by virtue of their gender, are disproportionately affected by domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

## Section 3 – Making the Strategy more effective

- Women’s Aid echoes the recommendation of AgeNI, that “the strategic priorities set out in the Active Ageing Strategy should give direction to all government departments’ strategies, policies and action plans etc. which impact on older people”, including the Stopping Domestic & Sexual Violence and Abuse in NI strategy once it is finalised. We would also like to see more concrete measures within the document to address isolation among older people.
- We would also note that support services should empower older woman and not make choices for them. A characteristic of domestic violence is being controlled and told what to do, and this can be exacerbated if a victim is older and is denied the right to make her own choices due to her age. Women’s Aid endeavour to empower the older women who use our services, and we would urge that empowering older people is added as a priority action to the Strategy for all agencies engaged in service provision for older people.

## Section 4 – Contact Details

For further information about this response please contact:

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