

A black and white photograph of an elderly person sitting in a chair, silhouetted against a bright window with sheer curtains. The person is looking out the window. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the window.

# No Age Limit: The Hidden Face of Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse has no age limit. Age UK is calling on the Government to ensure the voices of older people are heard, their rights are protected, and their needs included in new legislation addressing domestic abuse.

# Foreword

Older people and their circumstances are often overlooked. We know that any woman, of any age, can be experiencing domestic abuse.

Whilst there is evidence to suggest that older women experience domestic abuse at similar rates to younger women<sup>1</sup>, as Age UK rightly highlight in this report the Crime Survey England and Wales does not collect data on adults over 74. We don't know the true prevalence of domestic abuse amongst older people but worryingly, we know they are not being seen by specialist support services in the numbers that we would expect.<sup>2</sup>

Older survivors of domestic abuse can face significant barriers when asking for help or when trying to leave an abusive relationship. These barriers can be severe for survivors who have been subject to years of prolonged abuse, are isolated within a particular community through language or culture, are experiencing long term health impacts or disabilities, or those who are reliant on their abuser for their care or money.

It is crucial that older survivors can get the support they need. With the Bill, we have a real opportunity for the government to transform the lives of older survivors, and to ensure that domestic abuse becomes a priority for health and social care at both a national and local level.

We also need to increase awareness and recognition of the abuse experienced by older survivors and to ensure that they know that organisations like Women's Aid and Age UK are here to help, at any time in their life. With our population ageing, we need urgent action to ensure society responds to the plight of older people experiencing domestic abuse.

**Nicki Norman**  
**Chief Executive**  
**Women's Aid**

# Introduction

Domestic abuse can happen at any age. In 2019 over 280,000 people aged 60 to 74 (3.1%) experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales<sup>3</sup> and one in five (22%) victims of domestic homicides were over the age of 60.<sup>4</sup> Reluctance or inability to report abuse, caused by a variety of reasons explored in this report, means that this estimate is in fact likely to be much higher making older people particularly vulnerable. There are no reliable figures for people older than 74 as the data is not gathered – so in many cases they are suffering in silence.

## **The statistics on older victims of domestic abuse are stark:**

- According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, about 189,350 older women and 91,137 older men experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2019.
- The majority of victims are female (68%); whereas perpetrators are predominantly male (85%).<sup>3</sup>

- Older people are almost equally as likely to be killed by a partner/spouse (46%) as they are by their (adult) children or grandchildren (44%).<sup>5</sup>
- The majority of older people killed in their own home die as a result of stabbings (41%).<sup>6</sup>

The Criminal Justice System's response to domestic abuse must not be the sole focus of legislation. This is one aspect of tackling domestic abuse, but a new law should go further in recognising the role of public health bodies in tackling domestic abuse and enabling victims and survivors to escape abusive relationships.

**The Government should ensure that any new law to change the way that domestic abuse is recognised and managed takes into account the needs of older victims and survivors.**

## A gendered crime

Older people, both men and women, are suffering domestic abuse. They are likely to be dependent on the person abusing them and very few older victims of domestic abuse are accessing any kind of professional support. This is illustrated by the fact that one in four victims of domestic homicides are over the age of 60.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018/19 alone, the Age UK Advice Line received 655 enquiries relating to domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse remains a highly gendered crime and research shows that women are more likely to suffer more serious injury or be killed than male victims of domestic abuse.<sup>8</sup> Women are also more likely to experience higher levels of fear, and to be subjected to coercive and controlling behaviours.<sup>9</sup>

However, men can experience domestic abuse from their female partner, grown-up child or carer.<sup>10</sup>

Domestic abuse also occurs in same-sex relationships.<sup>11</sup>



## Key points to address

This report does not call for vital services and resources to be diverted from younger to older victims and survivors, but instead asks legislators to consider how to make the best use of resources that already exist to tackle domestic abuse among older people. New legislation would be an excellent opportunity to achieve this. Below we explore what this legislation could look like and how it could be progressed.

### The role of law

A law to address domestic abuse cannot prevent or stop instances of it – but it can make a real and lasting difference to what is understood as domestic abuse. It can also make it easier for people to recognise or report domestic abuse, as well as improving the resources available to help victims and survivors. A Bill was introduced to Parliament in July 2019, but the prorogation of Parliament meant that the Bill was not carried on into the new session and is now defunct. This is disappointing, but the Government committed to re-introducing the Domestic Abuse Bill in the 2019 Queen's Speech. This new Bill

presents an opportunity to truly recognise domestic abuse among older people.

We're calling for an ambitious piece of legislation to be brought forward that includes the views and needs of older people. To do this, legislation must reflect the following recommendations:

- 1. Data on domestic abuse must be gathered for all ages, not just people aged 74 and under.**
- 2. There should be training for health care practitioners, including GPs and practice nurses, who work with older people, particularly during hospital admission and discharge.**

We would also like to see legislation that builds better links between the NHS and the police to ensure older victims of abuse are properly protected and supported. We also believe that a wider definition of domestic abuse should be considered to include abuse perpetrated by those who are in trusted positions and provide unpaid care, including friends and neighbours, as well as family members.

# Resourcing

Support provided within statutory agencies is critical, it can help older people recognise that what they are experiencing is domestic abuse, help them to take back control and feel safer.

Dedicated and sufficient resources are needed to provide training for key staff in relevant agencies, such as those on the front line in hospitals or GP surgeries. As the population ages, more resources are needed to ensure older people have a chance of living free from all forms of abuse.

Once a victim of domestic abuse has been identified or made themselves known to the support structures in statutory agencies, specialist services can then provide trauma-informed support that meets the needs of survivors of domestic abuse and works towards their recovery, independence and long-term safety.

However, as it stands, we are missing the first part of this equation, and older victims of domestic abuse are not being identified. In combination with the underfunding of services, this may go some way to

## The hidden figures

The Crime Survey of England and Wales gathers data on people's experiences of crime. Including those which are not reported to the police. However, the self-completion module of the survey only gathers data on domestic abuse from people up to the age of 74. The upper age limit for respondents was only changed in April 2017 - before, it was just 59 years old.

We're left with no reliable figures for the numbers of people aged 75 and over who might be experiencing domestic abuse. This lack of representation of older people could seriously undermine the way resources are allocated to help older victims and survivors of abuse.

explaining why older women are largely absent from domestic abuse services, with only 3.1% of services users in 2017 being 61 or over.<sup>12</sup>

Age UK has been working with organisations such as SafeLives, Women's Aid Federation of England and NHS England to deliver training and raise awareness, but more needs to be done to identify and reach all victims and survivors.

## The role of public health bodies, the police and carers

Many older people suffering domestic abuse may be too frightened to go to the police or simply unable to reach out for help. Some may be concerned that they won't be believed or feel that services are just for younger women.

Domestic abuse may have been going on for so long it may just feel unresolvable. Others may be dependent on their abuser financially or for their care. This makes the role of GPs, hospital and medical staff even more crucial.

YouGov research shows that half of healthcare professionals in GP surgeries and NHS hospitals do not feel adequately trained to identify a domestic abuse victim. A considerable proportion of patient-facing staff do not see it as their duty to identify a victim of domestic abuse.<sup>13</sup> Research also shows that statutory agencies that may come into contact with older survivors and perpetrators do not always identify domestic abuse or provide the right response.<sup>14</sup>

Mandatory, ongoing training for healthcare practitioners, including GPs and practice nurses, in how to recognise and support an older person who may be experiencing domestic abuse should be considered. This is particularly crucial

for those who interact with older people during admissions and discharges from hospital.

In addition, there needs to be more investment in Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) in hospitals. IDVAs have specialist knowledge and play a vital role in supporting people of all ages who experience domestic abuse. However, only 5% of people accessing an IDVA's services in 2017/18 were over the age of 60.<sup>15</sup>

Better links between the police and other bodies involved in older peoples' care, should be established to reflect the legal duties under the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Domestic abuse must be fully considered in all adult safeguarding enquiries involving intimate partners, family members and carers.

Abuse committed by any carer (paid or unpaid) family member or otherwise, towards older and disabled people must be included in the definition of who can be a perpetrator of domestic abuse. The relationship between older and disabled people and their abusive 'carers' often mirrors that seen in other abusive relationships, and must be treated similarly in a court of law.

# Housing

When it comes to housing, we know that older victims of domestic abuse, particularly those with problems with physical and cognitive capacity and physical isolation find it difficult to leave perpetrators of abuse and their homes. A lack of specialised services for victims with disabilities and for older women forces them to stay in abusive relationships, with the only alternative option to specially adapted housing being adapted mainstream and residential care which is also in shortage.

For these reasons, Age UK welcomes the proposed abolition of ‘no fault evictions’ under Section 21 (s21) of the Housing Act.

The abolition of s21 will also make it easier to secure adaptations and repairs to protect the health and wellbeing of older and disabled private tenants and allow them to live independently. Under these reforms all older and disabled tenants will automatically be able to apply to their local authority for help with adaptations through the Disabled Facilities Grant.

The Government argues that landlords’ reliance on s21 reflects a failure in their ability to gain possession for justifiable reasons under existing legislation, which the consultation proposals seek to rectify. We agree that only the tenant who has perpetrated the domestic abuse should be evicted and that the victim and other household members should be given protection from the abuser.

Long-term resettlement support designed to help older victims of domestic abuse to sustain their tenancies should be extended and developed. This should include access to social care and health services, schemes to address domestic abuse and an increase in the overall supply of genuinely affordable social housing.

## Case study:

# Change That Lasts

## Trusted Professional - a partnership between Women's Aid and Age UK

Change That Lasts is a model developed in partnership between Women's Aid Federation of England and Welsh Women's Aid. It aims to focus on the needs of survivors and help them reach safety and freedom.<sup>16</sup> The strand of Change That Lasts that supports professionals to better recognise abuse is the Trusted Professional programme.

The Trusted Professional programme was piloted by Age UK Surrey and Age UK Sunderland. It provides training to recognise coercive control supported by a systemic review of policy and practice frameworks led by survivors' lived experience.

Sarah, a social worker in Surrey, used the tools and resources gained through the programme to support a woman with dementia. Sarah was the first professional to take the time to form a relationship with this woman, a domestic abuse survivor, working with her over time to help identify and map how the behaviour of the perpetrator was impacting her mental health and behaviour.

With time and lots of support Sarah was able to ensure that the woman could move into a residential unit, away from the perpetrator for the first time. Sarah said:

*"I feel the role of Trusted Professional has helped me when working with this case. It has made me understand the importance of asking questions, and giving people space and the ability to talk if they wish. It also made me realise that although we want to help the situation, sometimes other things can help significantly (ie. arranging day centre support). It has also given me reassurance and support as cases like this can be difficult and take a lot of time."*

In just 10 months, 46 professionals encouraged and supported 260 disclosures of abuse and this was the first time many of the women had talked to anyone about their experiences.<sup>17</sup>

*Funding for this initial pilot was made possible from Comic Relief, Public Health England and The Tampon Tax, and Women's Aid are seeking additional funding to extend this pilot.*



## Definition of abuse

Currently the legal definition of domestic abuse is:

“Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.”  
(Home Office, 2013)

In practice, domestic abuse is the abuse of power and control over one person by another and can take many different forms including: physical, sexual, emotional, coercive, verbal and economic abuse.

Thousands of older people depend on carers to help meet their daily needs.<sup>18</sup> This can be an intimate relationship which leaves older people vulnerable to being abused by the person on whom they rely. The definition as intended makes no provision for inclusion of carers.

We want to see the definition of domestic abuse widened to consider abuse by those who are in trusted positions and provide unpaid care, including friends and neighbours, as well as family members.

# The voices of victims and survivors of domestic abuse

Age UK works with older people who have experienced domestic abuse. We receive calls to our advice line from frightened older people in need of help, and from family members or friends worried about a loved one. We also see domestic abuse in our daily work with older people.

Domestic abuse can take different forms and older people can experience them all. There are also some forms of domestic abuse to which older people are particularly vulnerable, such as abuse by a carer and financial abuse.

The stories included in this report are not easy to read but they represent the reality for thousands of older people in England and Wales. They are all based on genuine, lived experience – some names and details have been changed to protect the people involved. Some of the stories are also an amalgamation of one or more personal stories shared with us by older people.

They are the voices of people who can and should be helped by new legislation. But unless the needs of older people and the circumstances in which they experience domestic abuse are reflected in law, we are concerned that they will remain trapped in these abusive circumstances.



## Abused by her husband

**Grace is 81. She had an abusive childhood during which she was beaten and punished by her father. She has endured 57 years of physical and sexual abuse and financial and emotional coercive control by her husband, George.**

### Grace says

I was born in 1938 - the eldest of four children. When father returned from the war he would have rages. We were regularly beaten and made to go to bed without food. It wasn't a happy home.

I put my energy into my studies and started my nurse training. I loved my job and it meant I could leave home.

When I was 22 I met George. He was handsome and charming. He showered me with compliments and made me feel wonderful. We had a small wedding and went on to have three children. Although I enjoyed my job I was thrilled to be at home. I never returned to nursing.

George provided for us financially. However he controlled every penny and decided what I wore and how I arranged my hair. I lost contact with my friends from work, but he allowed me to chat with the other mothers at the school gates.

George liked routine: evening meal at 5pm, children in bed by 7pm. He had high expectations of what a wife should be and there was no discussion about what I may or may not want.

The only change was on a Thursday. George would go to the races and the children and I would watch Tops of the Pops. For years I lived for those Thursdays – laughing and dancing together in the front room.

George would return smelling of whiskey. If he'd won at the races we'd dance and he'd treat me to a bottle of port. If he'd lost, he'd treat me to a beating. The bruises carefully administered to areas on my body that wouldn't be seen.

When the children left home, George allowed me to have a part-time job. I started to gain confidence and spoke to a friend at work. She helped me realise this wasn't like all marriages, as I'd been told by George. I could stand up to George and say no to his demands.

I began putting money aside for a rainy day. George noticed the change in me and began treating me differently - paying me compliments and taking me out for meals.

## Case studies

He even bought me a cat. I adored Misty and she followed me everywhere. I began to believe George had changed and was the man I had met all those years ago.

But one evening, after too much whiskey and a loss at the races, George whispered in my ear what he would do to Misty if I ever left him. He repeated that threat hundreds of times over the coming years.

His memory has started to fail now. He gets frustrated and angry. Thankfully, problems with his hip mean he can't manage the stairs any more so he sleeps downstairs and allows me to sleep upstairs.

Night time is my favourite part of the day. I can rest knowing he can't get to me and feel safe for the first time in years. I lie in bed and my thoughts are completely my own.

And here we are - 57 years of marriage.

"Congratulations, what an achievement!" people say.

If only they knew.

**Grace has experienced a lifetime of abuse and control perpetrated by her father and then her husband. She is likely to be isolated and have low self-esteem. By raising awareness of domestic abuse, Age UK hopes to enable people in later life to recognise when they are experiencing domestic abuse and seek specialist support to feel safer.**

**We should not make assumptions that people experiencing abuse who have in a relationship for decades have 'chosen' to stay. For Grace, leaving is unlikely to have ever been an option. We must provide a range of opportunities for people to speak out and understand the impact domestic abuse and controlling behaviour can have on decision making.**

**Increasing the number of hospital-based IDVAs, and adopting a systems change approach such as Women's Aid's Change That Lasts programme, would give people the skills and knowledge an opportunity to reach out to people such as Grace and ensure that she gets the right response.**

## Abused by their adult daughter

**Sylvia, 80, and Arthur, 88, are being physically, verbally, financially and emotionally abused by their adult daughter. They called Age UK's advice line desperate for help.**

### **Sylvia says**

Our daughter was diagnosed with an illness nine years ago which meant she was struggling to cope and had built up lots of debt. She's our youngest daughter so even though it was difficult for us we wanted to help and care for her. She sold her home to pay off her debts and moved in with us.

We're relieved Paula's health is better now but our lives have become unbearable.

Paula tells us she can't cope with living alone. She's demanded money from us – almost £30,000. She's stopped us seeing our friends and other relatives so we've gradually lost all support and feel so alone.

She shouts terrible things at Arthur and I can see his health deteriorating under the pressure. He has diabetes and breathing problems and all this stress is making him so much worse. I wish I could take it all away for him.

### **Arthur says**

The atmosphere at home now is a living hell. Sylvia's been diagnosed with depression because of the daily strain and trauma. Paula's thrown things at Sylvia which leaves her terrified. If we try to refuse to do as Paula demands, she threatens us. We're both so frightened.

We've told the GP about our situation but he doesn't seem to take it seriously. We've had the police round several times but they see Paula as a vulnerable adult so are reluctant to do anything. We don't know where to turn.

**Adult social services have a duty to make enquiries where they have 'reasonable cause to suspect' that a person is experiencing, or is at risk of, abuse or neglect, has care and support needs and, because of those care and support needs, cannot protect themselves from the abuse or neglect, or the risk of it.**

**Arthur and Sylvia had contacted social services for advice, but had been told they didn't meet the threshold for safeguarding enquiries. Age UK supported them to challenge this decision and social services agreed to make enquiries under section 42 of The Care Act.**



## Abused by a carer

**Vihaan is 92 and lives with his carer Sean, 31. Vihaan is very isolated and living with dementia. He relies on Sean for daily care since his wife died and has given Sean power of attorney over his affairs. Sean has slowly and systematically used coercive control to manipulate Vihaan and gain access to his home and his money. Vihaan is entirely dependent on his abuser.**

### **Vihaan says**

When my wife Mary died, my world fell apart. I had no idea how to do anything around the house and had no family or friends to help. That's when I called Sean. He was like a grandson to Mary and she always said he was a good lad.

Sean was a great support. When he moved in, he took over all the things Mary did - washing, shopping, paying the bills. In return I gave him a home.

He helped me draw up a list of work that needed to be done around the house and got his friends to help him. I'd lost my driving licence due to poor eyesight so Sean persuaded me he could become my chauffeur if he learnt to drive. I paid for his lessons and bought him a car. He took me to appointments and out for pub lunches. I missed Mary terribly, but Sean became a good friend.

I knew he was helping himself to my bank account, but I needed him more than I needed my money. I noticed a few years back that my memory was starting to fade, so I signed a lasting power of attorney giving Sean authority to manage my finances. Sean said he would make sure I'll never have to go into a home.

My GP tells me how fortunate I am to have a live-in carer like Sean. He's not perfect, he does have a temper on him and he doesn't like us having visitors, so I've learned to keep quiet, not cause any fuss and do as I'm told.

I spend most of my days in my bedroom reading, sleeping and watching TV. Sean likes it that way.

**Vihaan's GP, bank staff and solicitor could have seen the signs that Sean was coercing and financially abusing Vihaan, had they had the skills and time to speak with him and question his decisions more thoroughly.**

**If a new law included abuse perpetrated by carer, there would also be an opportunity for professionals to seek advice from specialist domestic abuse services.**

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**If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this report or are worried about a friend or loved one, here are some sources of support;**

**Age UK Advice Line 0800 678 1602 8am-7pm  
365 days a year, free and confidential**

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**National Domestic Violence Helpline**

(Run in partnership between Women's Aid & Refuge)

**0808 2000 247**

(24 hours 7 days a week)

**[www.nationaldomestichelpline.org.uk](http://www.nationaldomestichelpline.org.uk)**

This helpline is for women and children who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

**Mankind**

**01823 334244**

(weekdays 10am -4pm)

**[www.mankind.org.uk](http://www.mankind.org.uk)**

This helpline is for men who are experiencing or who have experienced domestic abuse.

**Galop**

**0800 999 5428**

National LGBT Domestic Abuse Helpline

**[www.galop.org.uk](http://www.galop.org.uk)**

Galop is the LGBT anti-violence charity. They have a helpline dedicated to domestic abuse, but can also advise on other issues such as hate crime and sexual violence.

**Respect**

**0808 802 4040**

**[www.respect.uk.net](http://www.respect.uk.net)**

Helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse.

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**You can also download the Brightsky app onto a smartphone.**

Brightsky helps people experiencing domestic violence to record evidence of their abusive relationships and seek professional help by encouraging people to log private journal entries in the form of text, photos and videos, which are then sent to a designated email address. This information can be sent to the authorities at a later date.

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**If you are in immediate danger, please call 999.**

