

Intimate Partner Violence & Rural Older Women

*I just walked on tiptoes
all the time
trying to keep everything
perfect...
But, there was no perfect
for him.
Elaine, age 63*

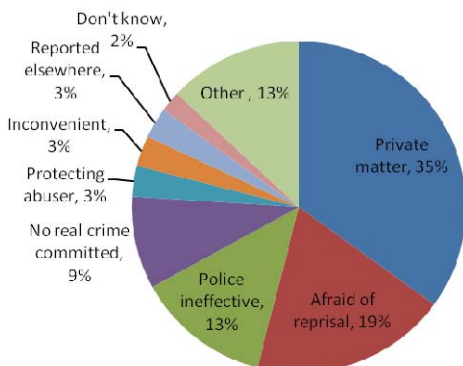
IPV Statistics

Current data on IPV in late life represent only the most overt cases coming to the attention of community providers.

Among women ages 50+:

- 2-5% were physically abused by their partners during the past year^{1,2}
- 22-32% were psychologically abused by their partners during the past year^{1,2}
- 65% of IPV acts included simple assault³
- 69% of IPV is by a spouse⁴

Why Victims of IPV Do Not Contact Police³



Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as physical, sexual, or psychological abuse by a spouse, boyfriend, or intimate partner. It is a hidden public health problem, touching nearly one third of all women aged 50+ each year. IPV occurs regardless of income, education, residence, or social status. Older women experiencing IPV are adept at keeping their abuse hidden at the expense of their health, well-being, and quality of life. This shroud of silence surrounding IPV in late life is largely attributed to traditional and cultural ideology that prevents them from seeking help or seeing themselves as victims.

Community Awareness

Community awareness of IPV is limited. When victims reach out for help, they discreetly turn to individuals providing silos of support (i.e., clergy, physicians, or counselors) rather than through a coordinated community service system. Moreover, efforts to increase community and professional awareness are challenged because:

- Laws protecting client confidentiality prohibit disclosure among providers
- Screening is not mandated by professional groups or workplaces
- Few statistics are available to suggest IPV is a problem in late life
- Limited information is provided in professional curriculums and trainings

Rural Challenges

Personal ties and a culture of self-sufficiency help conceal and facilitate IPV in rural areas.⁵ In small, close-knit communities, victims and abusers lack anonymity. They often have personal relationships with healthcare providers, police, and emergency personnel who might respond to a call for help. Geographic isolation also makes victim identification, case investigation, intervention, and prosecution of offenders very difficult.

Needs of Rural Older Women Seeking Help

Older women wanting to leave abusive relationships and live their lives without violence have many diverse needs, some of which are specific to rural life:

Income and Work: Older women need financial resources to re-establish their lives without violence. Many tend to rely on the retirement income of their partners and have limited financial resources of their own. For some women, their limited work experience outside of their homes or farms has left them without the skills necessary to secure paid employment. Other women experience health problems that preclude them from seeking employment.

Legal Support: Many older women who become involved in the criminal justice system need a legal advocate to help them navigate legal proceedings. But more importantly, they need access to information about their rights, laws, and legal processes presented in everyday language that is easily understood.

Emergency Shelter: Older women wanting to leave their relationships need a safe place in their community that is responsive to their needs. Local shelters are needed so victims can capitalize on available support from friends and family and utilize familiar resources. Older women also need shelter that is ADA accessible and staffed with persons who can provide assistance with personal care, medication management, and the monitoring of chronic health conditions. Private and quiet areas, seldom found in family shelter life, are also very important for older women.

Emergency Care for Animals: Abusers often control their victims by threatening to harm or kill the victim's animals. When farm animals are targeted, older women often remain in their abusive relationships to protect them. Emergency livestock and domesticated animal placement needs to be made available in order for older women to leave their abusive relationships and move forward in their lives.

Transportation: Older women need transportation to obtain help and to leave their relationships. Many older women rely on their partners for transportation and subsequently are limited in the days and times they can leave the home as well as the places they are able to go. Rural areas notoriously lack public transportation options so the onus of getting women to service providers on days and times that they can discreetly travel may rest with community providers.

Flexible Service Delivery: Due to the sensitive nature of IPV, many women do not want it publically known that they are seeking help. But for those women who want to seek help, they need to be able to talk with providers at times and locations that will not arouse suspicions and will not place themselves or others at risk.

References

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