

P-05-895 882 Transforming the response for older people experiencing domestic abuse – a call for action, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 30.10.19

Petition P-05-882 Transforming the response for older people experiencing domestic abuse – a call for action: Response by Dewis Choice, Aberystwyth University

Dewis Choice is a research-based Welsh initiative that has been co-produced by older people in community settings, to develop a locally responsive and needs-based service for older victim-survivors of domestic abuse. It is the first dedicated service for men and women aged 60 years and over, who have experienced domestic abuse in the UK. The initiative is also the first global longitudinal study that explores older people's justice-seeking and help-seeking journey in the context of domestic abuse and coercive and controlling behaviours.

Domestic abuse is a human rights violation and a major social issue that affects one in four women and one in six men. Prevalence studies for those aged 60 years and over state that between 25 and 30% of women report experiencing domestic abuse, suggesting a potentially higher rate of violence in later life (Fisher, 2006; Bonomi, 2007). The data on prevalence rates for people aged 60 years and over, is inadequate which prevents resource allocation, and policy and practice developments. This lack of data further reinforces ageist assumptions centred around the notion that domestic abuse ends at 60 years of age, despite domestic homicide in later life being the fastest rising rate of homicide across all age groups.

With the exception of the Dewis Choice Initiative (2015-2020), there is insufficient service provision that is dedicated to a range of complex needs such as the co-existence of dementia and domestic abuse, older male and female victims, LGBTQ+ victims and victims of adult family violence and intimate partner violence. Given Wales is perceived as a pioneer in the field of domestic abuse and has the advantage of having an Older People's Commissioner in office, it is disappointing that currently three generations of older victims do not have access to appropriate services. This serious issue creates a significant well-being and human rights deficit involving protection, private life and justice.

The petition raised by Dewis Choice calls for the following actions:

- Raise awareness among the public, third sector organisations and statutory agencies of the number of older women and men in Wales who experience domestic abuse by family members, and;
- Ensure that essential levels of support and protection are available to older people experiencing such abuse.

The petition calls for the National Assembly to urge the Welsh Government to provide a consistent coordinated response to older women and men in Wales who are victims of domestic abuse, ensuring a commitment to funding to support meeting the objectives of the *National Strategy on Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Cross-Government Delivery Framework 2018-2021*, specifically:

Objective 1: Increase awareness and challenge attitudes of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence across the Welsh Population.

Objective 5: Relevant professionals are trained to provide effective, appropriate responses to victims and survivors.

Objective 6: Provide victims with equal access to appropriately resourced, high quality, needs-led, strength-based, gender-responsive services across Wales.

Jane Hutt AM highlights the work in Wales to combat abuse, ageism and inequality and to protect older people, particularly in relation to the *Making Rights Real* working group, the *Strategy for an Ageing Society* and work to increase engagement opportunities for older people. Dewis Choice welcomes the important work in promoting rights and equality for older people in Wales; however, the legislative framework does not provide a coordinated community response to older people experiencing abuse. Our research in Wales shows there is a significant gap in policy development and service provision (Wydall et al., 2018).

We will now address the three objectives (1, 5 & 6) of the VAWDASV delivery framework in relation to a range of older victim-survivors.

Objective 1: Increase awareness and challenge attitudes of violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence across the Welsh Population.

Campaigns to increase awareness of domestic abuse have historically been linked to services, primarily for the support of younger victim-survivors and the reporting of crime. Domestic abuse services are based on a model that relies on people being able to self-identify as victims of abuse and to seek help from specialist services. A large part of older people recognising themselves as potential victims is attributed to the effectiveness of public awareness campaigns. Our research shows that campaigns, including the *Live Fear Free* campaign, are exclusionary and hetero-normative; typically, they represent younger, white, middle-class, heterosexual females who experience abuse from an intimate partner. People aged 60 years and over are absent from the ‘public story’ of domestic abuse (Donovan and Hester, 2014) and therefore, are invisible, ignored and overlooked in campaigns. This is a violation of their human rights.

Although we welcomed the campaign *This is not love. This is control*, the advert did not include a person over the age of 70 years. The campaign gained momentum across social media and the internet. This may restrict access for some older people, particularly those aged 85 years and over, who may not use social media and the internet.

Within the VAWDASV strategy, there is a strong focus on educating younger people on the issues that fall within VAWDASV in Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education. Abuse does not stop when a person reaches a certain age and abuse can begin at any point during the life course; therefore, we call for health and wellbeing work on healthy relationships to extend beyond younger people and include healthy relationships in later stages of the life course.

Objective 5: Relevant professionals are trained to provide effective, timely and appropriate responses to victims and survivors.

Specialist domestic abuse training programmes for practitioners working with standard, medium and high-risk victims of domestic abuse, focus on those aged 16 to 59, experiencing abuse from an intimate partner or ex-partner (not a family member). In core training provision, there is limited inclusion of those aged 60 years or over, addressing how their additional needs can be met. Practitioners across all statutory and third sector services, frequently report feeling ill-equipped, lacking skills and confidence to respond to older victims of domestic abuse.

Core training for professionals working across all risk levels needs to reflect victims across the lifespan. Our research demonstrates that older people are more likely to present in health and social care settings and the option of safe disclosure should be made available with a routine enquiry that extends beyond the focus of pregnancy. We call for mandatory training for health and social care staff, including GP's and community nurses.

Specialist domestic abuse services and risk assessment tools are not designed to encompass the needs of older victims nor the specific risks to safety older people experience. In later life, there are specific factors including; care-givers stress, increased contact with family members following retirement, financial dependency and potential isolation from social networks that may increase the risk of domestic abuse (Wydall et al., 2018). Given that older people are more likely to experience abuse from an adult family member than a current intimate partner (SafeLives, 2015-2016), most services and domestic abuse risk assessments are catered towards a model designed for younger victims of intimate partner violence.

Although the Older People's Commissioner for Wales, produced an adapted DASH RIC for older people, once more it caters to heterosexual model of intimate partner violence and does not cover family members and the additional complexities of dementia and ill health. The assumption that the risk of physical abuse decreases with age is not substantiated with research, in fact some studies have shown the risk may increase with the onset of dementia where domestic abuse has been a feature in the relationship (Knight, 2012). Practitioners have reported feeling uncomfortable, and in some cases avoiding asking older people about abusive experiences, particularly those of a sexual nature. Thus, high-risk victims are not being identified by practitioners through current assessment methods, and are denied access to timely and appropriate resources (Clarke et al., 2012). It is concerning that resources are largely based on risk assessments that do not sufficiently identify the risks and needs of older victim-survivors. The lack of suitability is reflected in the poor uptake of specialist services by older people and the number of people supported by an IDVA or the MARAC model. This raises questions regarding equality of access to service provision.

Objective 6: Provide victims with equal access to appropriately resourced, high quality, needs-led, strength-based, gender-responsive services across Wales

Equality of access for older victims of domestic abuse

The percentage of people aged 65 years and over, makes up over 25% of the adult population in Wales (aged 16 and over). In line with objective 6, it would be reasonable to expect the allocation of resources for a gender-responsive service to take account of the demographic.

The 2018 regional VAWDASV guidance- *Welsh Government Guidance for local strategies*, contains a section, "Older People," stating that:

older people can fall between the systems which are designed to offer them protection and as a consequence do not receive appropriate support to help them to stop the abuse or make them safe...

Whilst it is wrong to depict three generations of older people as 'the same', there are significant differences within and across these generations in terms of general health and morbidity. It is important that public sector and third sector providers are prepared and able to link safeguarding systems to offer a suite of support which addresses all of the issues which may be faced by an older person experiencing violence and abuse.

The 2018 regional guidance made no specific reference to provision for older people, including them as marginalised groups (BAME, LGBTQ+, disability), which is a cause for concern, and reflected in Jane Hutt Am's response:

In relation to the VAWDASV strategy, the guidance for the regional commissioning of services deliberately makes "limited reference to particular communities of interest," to ensure regions have "flexibility to meet local needs."

Due to of the lack of dedicated services, older victim-survivors are falling between the gaps in current legislation; the VAWDASV Act 2015 and the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014. The two pieces of legislation promote a collaborative response from adult safeguarding and domestic abuse services, however, greater strategic alignment between the two acts is needed to create an environment within which older victim-survivors of VAWDASV have equal access to both justice options and support services as their younger counterparts. Our research across Wales suggests when a person is aged 60 years and over, they are diverted away from the criminal justice system towards an adult safeguarding 'welfarised response' (Wydall and Zerk, 2017; Clarke et al., 2012). For victim-survivors who are not deemed to have care and support needs, they do not qualify for safeguarding nor are they given access to specialist domestic abuse services.

Additional gaps in service provision within Wales:

- There is a dire shortage of Welsh speaking specialist trained professionals;
- For older people who may have additional needs there is a shortage of trained domestic abuse professionals, particularly where there are intersections between disability, dementia, mental health and sexuality;
- Social justice options and well-being services are limited to short-time initial disclosure and safety planning. More resources should be made available for support after sentencing.

Because of inappropriate service provision, older people are not receiving sufficient protection and support. We feel that there is a significant well-being and human rights deficit concerning protection, private life, and justice.

Provision of gender-based services for older men

As with young men, older men rarely identify as victims of domestic abuse. Third sector domestic abuse services are marketed to respond to women and children. Services are limited in what they can offer male victims especially older men who may have more complex needs. The research findings suggest that third sector services are designed using empirical evidence based on women-only studies. The Dyn project is currently the only dedicated specialist

service in Wales providing dedicated support for male victims, however, the service is limited to: support to males who are heterosexual, gay, bisexual, and trans, who experience abuse from an intimate partner; telephone support limited to 2.5 days per week; face to face support for males in the Cardiff area only.

Our evaluation of the Access to Justice Pilot identified higher rates of male victimisation in older age groups when compared to younger age groups (those less than 60 years of age). In addition, older males are as likely to experience abuse from a family member as they are from an intimate partner.

In Wales and across the UK, Dewis Choice is the only dedicated service supporting older men who have experienced abuse from an intimate partner and/or a family member. Older males engaging with Dewis Choice have highlighted the benefits of face-to-face support to address their needs, for example, safety planning and support to access housing. Greater consideration is needed to how service providers can better respond to the needs of older male victim-survivors living in Wales.

Older people's experiences of domestic abuse and accessing justice and welfare services are influenced by both gender and age, plus additional identities including; ethnicity, sexual orientation, culture, immigration status. We call for the intentional inclusion of older people in research, policy, practice and awareness campaigns that recognises abuse features across the life course.

31 October 2019

Links to research referenced in response:

Clarke, A., Williams, J., Wydall, S. and Boaler, R (2012) 'An Evaluation of the Access to Justice Pilot Project', Welsh Government: <https://gov.wales/evaluation-access-justice-pilot-project-0>

Wydall, S. Clarke, A. Williams, J. Zerk, R. (2018) Domestic Abuse and Elder Abuse in Wales: A Tale of Two Initiatives, *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 48, Issue 4, 1 June 2018, Pages 962–981 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy056>

Wydall, S. and Zerk, R. (2017) 'Domestic abuse and older people: Factors influencing help-seeking' *The Journal of Adult Protection* <https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/JAP-03-2017-0010>