

To: House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

Re: Challenges Faced by Senior Women and Factors Contributing to Poverty and Vulnerability

From: Benedicte Schoepflin (Coordinator) & Kathy Majowski (Board Chair), Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse

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CANADIAN NETWORK for
the PREVENTION of ELDER ABUSE
RÉSEAU CANADIEN pour la PRÉVENTION
du MAUVAIS TRAITEMENT des AÎNÉS

CNPEA is pleased to have the opportunity to bring to light the specific challenges faced by older women and to make recommendations on how to better support these women in order to enhance their well-being and safety.

Older women's lives are often impacted by the dual effects of sexism and ageism. Belonging to a minority (linguistic, sexual, ethno-cultural), being an Indigenous older woman or an immigrant, can increase the barriers one encounters. These factors compound older women's vulnerability to poverty, homelessness, poor health, social isolation and to various forms of abuse.

These overlapping and interconnected issues can only be addressed with multipronged policies and approaches that override the usual silos between sectors. They will also require understanding and considering the diversity of backgrounds and life experiences of the most vulnerable older women. CNPEA's work focuses on gathering and disseminating adaptable resources, best practices, current research and policy, developed by Canadian expert stakeholders, to increase our collective capacity to address and prevent the abuse of older men and women. We have based some of the following comments and recommendations on some of these organizations' recent work.

Intimate partner violence and abuse of older women

Safety and abuse are key concerns for girls and women of all ages and these issues do not improve or go away as women enter the later stage of their lives. Some have experienced violence and abuse throughout their lives, whether systemic or within the framework of their family or relationships. Others are victims of elder abuse late in life, at home or in an institutionalized health care setting. While older women are not a homogenous group and their life experiences vary wildly, most of them encounter the following barriers to safety¹:

- Health issues (limit their mobility and independence)
- Financial dependence on the abuser
- Financial insecurity
- Fear of losing their home and/or independent living situation if they report abuse from a family member or primary caregiver
- Fear of losing their immigration status (if the abuser is also their sponsor)
- Language barrier
- Discredited or ignored for being old and perceived as "unreliable", "not with it" or simply less important (ageism)

¹ See Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses' [Aging Without Violence Project – Word to the Wise project factsheets](#) and CCEL's [We Are Not all the Same: Key Law, Policy and Practice Strategies for Improving the Lives of Older Women in the Lower Mainland](#) (2017)

- Discredited/Ignored due to sexist, racist, ableist or other bias
- Perception of the violence/abuse as a private matter and/or a “fact of life”
- Lack of awareness of existing services
- Lack of transportation to access existing services
- Lack of (and/or lack of awareness of) support services specifically for older women

Recommendations:

- 1- Support awareness campaigns to help people understand the different forms of elder abuse and the nature of aging domestic abuse, and to dispel the long-standing idea that they are “private matters” and that they are alone.
- 2- Support the development of bystander intervention training programs and train-the-trainer programs within senior-serving organizations and senior centres
- 3- Support the development of culturally safe and appropriate, multilingual, support services specifically for older women (from health care to legal aid or transition houses across the country²)
- 4- Support the development of orientation programs to help older women and their loved ones navigate the complexities of the justice system, the immigration system and the healthcare system to improve access to justice and to the right care and information.
- 5- Encourage the development of support programs that are accessible from home
- 6- Improve access to regular and affordable transportation in rural areas to prevent social isolation and to facilitate access to necessary resources
- 7- Provide access to benefits for full-time family caregivers and provide greater financial support for senior women who are caregivers for their grandchildren

Social isolation of older women

Older women can become more vulnerable due to the narrowing of their social networks over time. Loneliness and disconnection from community due to mobility or health issues, for instance, can affect service access and utilization, and increase vulnerability to abuse and neglect situations, which negatively impacts their mental and physical health and creates a vicious circle of poor health, alienation and vulnerability to victimization.

Recommendations:

- 1- Support and strengthen community-based groups and programs. Senior clubs, senior-serving organizations, faith-based groups etc. play an important role in empowering older women to engage in positive help-seeking behaviours.
- 2- Encourage intergenerational programs and approaches, such as intergenerational housing options that can help curb housing shortage concerns, safety concerns and loneliness concerns.

About CNPEA

CNPEA is a pan Canadian network supported by leaders in aging, research, health care, and elder abuse prevention and response, among others. CNPEA connects people and organizations, fosters the exchange of reliable information, and advances program and policy development on issues related to preventing the abuse of older adults. We do this work at the local, regional, provincial/territorial, and national levels through our knowledge-sharing hub: www.cnpea.ca

² The 2015 joint report by CCEL and Atira Women’s Society [Promising Practices across Canada for Housing Women who are Older and Fleeing Abuse](#) contains numerous detailed recommendations on this topic