

Assaulted Women's Helpline / Seniors Safety Line

<http://www.awhl.org/>

Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women



## **Challenges Faced by Senior Women**

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Submitted to The House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women  
(FEWO)

Brief submitted by Assaulted Women's Helpline and Seniors Safety Line

## **Background**

Assaulted Women's Helpline answered its first call on November 4, 1985, becoming the first telephone crisis service of its kind in Ontario. At that time, shelters and other community agencies were struggling to keep up with the demand; calls went unanswered; support was unavailable. We answered 5,000 calls that first year in Toronto alone.

Today, our trained counsellors provide services in over 200 languages, including First Nations and aboriginal languages and offer support to women experiencing abuse everywhere in Ontario. Last year, we answered over 49,000 calls.

In 2009, we partnered with Elder Abuse Ontario, and through Trillium funding, launched Seniors Safety Line, a dedicated line, just for seniors. In 2018, we received 7,190 calls, mainly from Seniors in Ontario. Below is a breakdown of our callers:

- 41% older abused women
- 32% older abused men
- 27% callers identified as relatives, neighbours, friends and professionals seeks help for an older person

## **Elder Abuse**

Elder Abuse is complex; In 80% of cases, the abuse is recurring or ongoing, and the abuser is typically a relative or someone known to the senior. Seniors often feel ashamed or do not view what is happening as abuse.

The reasons for calls made to Seniors Safety Line have been remarkably consistent over the years and give a snapshot of the challenges facing older women.

- 45% emotional abuse/being isolated/being controlled
- 30% financial abuse
- 18% neglect
- 2% physical abuse
- 5% other (including everything from past trauma, mental health to locating dentures)

## **Barriers to Getting Help**

Older women experiencing violence face many additional barriers to getting help, and often they face multiple barriers simultaneously: 43% of callers report a lack of affordable senior specific services, 38% report experiencing isolation, 28% report a fear of reprisal from caregivers, 16% cite disability, 12% cite cultural or language barriers, 5% cite racism and 2% cite

heterosexism, homophobia or transphobia as contributing factors to lack of access to getting help.

### **Access to Transportation**

A lack of accessible, affordable public transportation is a key contributing factor to the 38% of our callers who experience isolation. For older women in Northern and rural communities, this is even more prevalent.

Many small towns do not have a public bus, or the hours are very limited; which means that if an older woman does not drive herself, she must rely on friends or family, adding additional barriers to the basics of living a healthy life: groceries, health, legal and social services appointments and community events.

Isolation and loneliness are very real for many older women and are even more acute for older women who have experienced violence. Assaulted Women's Helpline and Seniors Safety Line receive calls every day from older women who would not otherwise speak to another person had we not answered her call.

### **Access to health services and medication**

In rural areas, healthcare and specialist appointments may be long distances away. Long distance bus services no longer exist in many communities or are extremely limited and could mean overnight trips to meet connections and appointments. The Northern Travel grant only covers a portion of the expense, leaving many older women to pay out of pocket for health-related trips.

This reality leaves many older women strictly dependent on their caregivers for regular healthcare, which increases isolation and significantly jeopardizes the healthcare of older women who are experiencing violence.

### **Access to Affordable Housing**

Affordable housing Canada is in crisis; and poverty is a key factor. Statistics Canada cites that 16% of senior women, 23% of women with disabilities, 21% of racialized women and 34% of First Nations women live in poverty. Older women who are also racialized, First Nations and/or live with disability are even more likely to live in poverty.

### **Access to justice**

Because older women most often experience violence by a relative or someone known to them, (a person in a relationship/position of trust), abused seniors are often ashamed or afraid to ask for help. Often they do not think of what is happening to them as "abuse".

Having access to a confidential telephone service where they can describe what's happening to them and discuss it with someone who can help them look at their options and plan for their safety is critical. It is important to note, that easy access through a telephone call, despite other forms of information sharing (i.e. internet) is the method a majority of seniors possess and prefer.

Seniors Safety Line is the only service of its kind in Canada, providing live telephone counselling and support by professionals twenty-four hours per day.

### **Widowhood**

For some women, widowhood increases their risk of abuse, control and neglect. Widows are especially at risk of financial abuse from family members who may see an opportunity to control or access her finances. 30% of Seniors Safety Line callers experience financial abuse and are calling to find out their rights, to learn how to protect themselves; this is a complex issue as many of our callers are also concerned not to alienate their family members who may be the most present people in their lives.

### **Our Recommendations:**

1. Creating a national network for all phone counselling services for older women who have experienced abuse or isolation so that service providers may share resources and ensure that every call is answered anywhere in Canada;
2. Increase investment in community social events and community-based approaches to build connection with women who are older in Northern and rural areas;
3. Increase investment in outreach programs for older women and women with disabilities who are experiencing violence;
4. Expansion of Seniors Safety Line services across Canada to give access to all older women in Canada and the family, friends and neighbours who support and care for them;
5. Increase access to affordable and accessible transportation;
6. Increase access to income and benefits to meet the rising cost of basic needs of older women including housing, food and healthcare;
7. Integration of transportation for the purpose of healthcare as part of healthcare services;
8. Resources and training to support caregivers navigating the healthcare system.