



BREAKING THE TABOO

Empowering health and social service professionals to
combat violence against older women within families

RECOMMENDATIONS

GENERAL BACKGROUND

The project "Breaking the Taboo" was carried out from 2007-2009 within the European Commissions' Daphne II programme. It was coordinated by the Austrian Red Cross and implemented by partners from Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal. The following recommendations are based on literature overviews, interviews with health and social service staff in four countries, a survey with health and social service organisations, an international expert meeting and several workshops with professionals in the field.

The "Breaking the Taboo" project focused particularly on women for several reasons. Due to their higher life expectancy, women are more likely to be in the need of help and care. Also they represent the majority of carers. Another aspect is that women are more often victims of domestic violence in earlier stages of life as well as in old age.

While violence against older people can be one expression of ageism, it also needs to be considered that not only age and gender but also the ethnic and cultural backgrounds play an important role in the forms and perceptions of violent behaviour. These aspects should be taken into account when planning and implementing organisational and policy measures.





RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES AT ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL

- **Developing clear organisational policies**

Many health and social service organisations which responded to the survey do not dispose of clear organisational procedures to deal with abuse against older women. Clear standards and guidelines help staff to cope with situations of stress and to act in an adequate way. Thus the organisation as a whole can provide adequate and efficient assistance to victims. Generally, organisations working with older people should develop such standards and procedures in writing and designate staff members who are specifically trained to deal with these issues as responsible contact persons.

- **Offering training and education for staff**

Organisations delivering help and care to older women should provide access to training and education for staff with regard to violence related challenges they might meet in their work with families. Understanding the extent of the problem and finding ways to reduce the risk of abuse for older people requires ongoing education to guarantee expertise and holistic thinking. Since the perspectives of staff and managers tend to be different it is necessary to consider these differences in training and awareness raising activities. Peer education (older staff trains younger colleagues) is an excellent instrument in this context. It is also important to include volunteers and different types of paid staff members, and to facilitate inter-disciplinary exchange in awareness raising and training.

- **Securing appropriate working conditions**

In order to recognize and to prevent abuse against older women at an early stage it is indispensable that staff has enough time and adequate framework conditions to notice and act accordingly. It is therefore necessary to create working conditions for staff which allow them to deal sensitively with delicate situations, for example by providing regular team meetings or non-directive counselling.

- **Enabling multi-disciplinary cooperation and communication**

There is a need for improvements concerning cooperation and exchange between organisations and professionals working in health and social care, and their counterparts working in victim protection and/or with perpetrators. The development and support of multi-disciplinary teams including volunteers, specialised professionals like social workers, psychiatrists, general practitioners, nurses and representatives of different organisations is important in all participating countries.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES AT POLICY LEVEL

- **Raising awareness**

The project has shown that to "break the taboo" and to initiate a public discussion on this issue is one of the most important steps to improve the situation of the hidden victims and abusive family carers. This can be implemented through general awareness raising activities and campaigns concerning discrimination against older people. Specific information about violence against older people in the family and older women in particular can be provided by training, brochures, websites etc. It is also necessary to improve the awareness of older people concerning the prevention of abuse. This can be done through mass media, internet, senior clubs and associations, Third Age Universities, self-help groups and by encouraging the active participation of older people through community educational programmes.

- **Enforcing prevention and early detection**

Visiting services, day care centres, psychological and therapeutical support and systematic training of family care givers are crucial initiatives to prevent abuse in care situations. Such proactive preventative services should be further developed and implemented. Systematic early detection through professionals of health and social services working in the homes of older people should include adequate assessment tools and routine inquiry at hospitals or by the general practitioner. Preventive home visits by specialised nurses or social workers are a useful tool, especially for targeting people living in isolation. The general approach of these activities should be to create an atmosphere of trust and cooperation rather than control.

- **Supporting networking initiatives**

Exchange of experience and cooperation, in particular within and between the areas of health and care, victim protection organisations and those working with perpetrators should be supported. Public authorities – especially on local level – can contribute by facilitating joint platforms and cooperation projects.

- **Creating adequate structures**

Existing facilities and intervention systems to combat domestic violence are not always adequate for older women. For instance, women's shelters are usually not equipped for older women or women with disabilities. Thus victims often have to seek shelter somewhere else, mainly in nursing homes which, for their part, are not sufficiently prepared to deal with victims of abuse. A debate on flexible and innovative solutions to this dilemma should be initiated to explore possibilities of adapting women's shelters to the needs of older women, of creating specialised services in nursing homes or of finding new types of housing facilities for older victims. Considerations to develop and implement adequate interventions for older women in informal care contexts need to be integrated urgently into the National Action Plans to fight violence against women.

- **Improving the legal framework**

Although legal measures regarding violence against women do exist in all EU member states they are hardly tailored to the specific needs of older victims of abuse. It is therefore necessary to change the legal framework in order to provide better support for older victims of violence. This should go hand in hand with the development of responsive and adequate service structures.

- **Encouraging further research**

The project activities revealed a lack of information on abuse against older women within the family and the coping mechanisms of health and social service professionals in this area. Furthermore, there is a shortage of detailed information about the accessibility of existing intervention services for older people and whether they cater adequately to the needs of older women. Qualitative and quantitative research on these issues is required for improving policies in this area.

- **Securing sustainable funding**

Violence against older women threatens social cohesion and inclusion in European member states. In order to develop adequate strategies, political and financial commitment is necessary to implement the above mentioned activities and to counteract substantial costs that domestic violence generates for European societies.



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