

# **MIND** THE GAP!

**IMPROVING  
INTERVENTION IN  
INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE  
AGAINST OLDER WOMEN**

## **Guidelines for social services**

**Heloísa Perista and Alexandra Silva**

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Lastly, we would like leave a word of encouragement to all older women who have been victims of intimate partner violence – you have the right to live your lives free from intimate partner violence! It is up to all of us, each and every one of us, to help ensure that this right is actively upheld and that the dignity due them will be respected.



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## 1. The Project: Mind the Gap! Improving intervention in intimate partner violence against older women

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The Mind the Gap! Project has the aim of enhancing the capacity of law enforcement and social support agencies to tackle intimate partner violence against older women, in addition to increasing public awareness of the issue and reaching out to victims.

In the outcomes of our previous research (IPVoW<sup>1</sup>), we noted that only a small minority of older women victims seek help; it is evident that they are less aware of existing support systems and less able to access support than younger women. It was also apparent that law enforcement and social support agencies, as well as the general public had little awareness of the complexities of the issue.

Many practitioners and professionals throughout the law enforcement and social support environments acknowledge that there is a serious lack of information about how to deal with these cases, that their actual options for handling these cases are limited and that examples of good practice are not widely available. Furthermore, on frequent occasions cases of IPV against older women cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the parties involved.

Our project focuses explicitly on developing the capacity of law enforcement and social support agencies to deal with these issues.

In order to better understand how law enforcement agencies currently deal with cases of intimate partner violence against older women, our research comprised the quantitative and qualitative analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> *IPVoW – Intimate Partner Violence against Older Women* was a research Project developed with the same partners as for the Project Mind the Gap!. Information about the Project and its respective reports are available at: [www.ipvow.org](http://www.ipvow.org)

police and Public Prosecutor case files, reinforced by national workshops and consultation with experts, professionals and practitioners. This research resulted in the following outcomes:

- more insight gained about factual interventions and support by law enforcement agencies;
- awareness raised within law enforcement and social support agencies about older women as victims of intimate partner violence (IPV);
- agencies encouraged to tackle the problem and to improve outreach to this subgroup of victims;
- assistance in building the capacity of law enforcement and social support agencies so that they are able to respond to and intervene successfully in these cases.

The project is coordinated by the "Zoom – Society for Prospective Developments" and is developed in partnership with seven organisations in six different European countries.

## 2. Introduction

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Intimate partner violence against older women is a socially relevant question and it shows a tendency to increase in the way that society is growing older. Despite the progress registered in the effort made to combat intimate partner violence against women, our research has indicated that such incidents are frequently aggravated by the dynamics of aging, such as retirement, chronic illnesses and dependency on care providers.

All too often, these situations have not been acknowledged or understood by professionals working in social support agencies and by law enforcement officers particularly when abusive behaviour does not include physical or sexual violence, but rather, manipulating control, financial exploitation and negligence. Such situations do not often find their way into the reports and few cases are filed. Furthermore, the frailty and vulnerability of some of the victims and/or some of the perpetrators give rise to special challenges that have to be tackled by intervening institutions.

One thing is certain and that is domestic violence has gained a lot more visibility in Portugal. The path that has been followed in the sphere of defining policies and making support measures in conformity with such policies has been remarkable particularly during the last ten years. In 1999, Portugal adopted the National Plans for Domestic Violence. At the moment, the 4th National Plan against Domestic Violence (2011-2013) is being implemented. The Plan is structured around five strategic areas of intervention: Inform, raise awareness and educate; Protect victims and promote their integration in society; Prevent recurrence – measure taken as regards the perpetrators; Train Professional; Investigate and monitor. It is within



the domain of informing, raising awareness and educating that we find the guidelines for the support offered by the social services.

Moreover, within the sphere of some research recently carried out by the project Daphne IPVoW – Intimate Partner Violence against older Women (referred to above), it was noted that training modules that would specially deal with the problem of intimate partner violence against older women needed to be developed and adopted. The present Guidelines are therefore a concrete contribution in this domain.



It is important to mention that these guidelines are only concerned with intimate partner violence. This means that violence against older women that occurs in an institution or in an incident where the family is not involved (e.g. swindling older women) will not be addressed in this Manual.

The goal of these guidelines is therefore to act as tools helping the Social Services' intervention work, mainly in their efforts to:

- ✦ Enhance their knowledge about intimate partner violence against older women;
- ✦ (Re)Qualify action, by helping to identify / recognise situations / victims, address possible victims and offer support to older women who are victims of intimate partner violence.



### 3. What is meant by intimate partner violence against older women. What kind of violence is involved?

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There are various **definitions** that have been put forward about (domestic) violence levelled against (older) women. We shall give only some of them below in conformity with a political perspective (1 and 2), a legal perspective (3) and a sociological perspective (4 and 5).

- 1. Domestic violence** covers all physically, psychologically and sexually violent acts against people, regardless of their sex and age, such as stipulated in the Penal Code, Article 152 which deals with Domestic Violence and now includes ex-spouses and ex-partners whether of another sex or same sex with whom the agent/victim either cohabits or cohabited, or not, in a stable relationship (2011-2013 *4th National Plan against Domestic Violence*).
- 2. Domestic violence** means all the acts that happen within the family or the domestic aggregate such as incidents that occur between ex- or present spouses/partners regardless of whether or not the victim and the perpetrator are cohabiting in the same abode (*Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence*). The Convention defines **violence against women** to mean "all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (Article 3(a));

**3. Domestic violence:** means inflicting physical or psychological damage whether or not committed repeatedly, and includes corporal punishment, deprivation of freedom and sexual offences committed by:

- a) A spouse or ex-spouse;
- b) A person of another sex or same sex with whom the victim either cohabits or cohabited, or not, in a stable relationship;
- c) A progenitor who is a common descendent related in first degree;
- d) A person with whom the victim cohabits whereby the victim is particularly defenceless due to age, incapacity, illness, pregnancy or economic dependence.

The perpetrator is punished with a prison sentence of between one to five years provided that a more serious punishment is not meted out by virtue of another legal provision (Penal Code, Article 152).

**4. Violence against the elderly:** Isolated or repeated acts, or the lack of appropriate action that occurs in any relationship that is based on the expectation of trust, thus giving rise to damage or anguish in the elderly person (World Health Organisation).

**5. Intimate partner violence:** an intimate relationship between any kind of couple, whether homosexual or heterosexual, married, cohabiting or courting in the present or in the past. Deliberate, unlawful tacit violence causing physical and/or psychological damage; including the use of physical strength and inflicting injury, as well as sexual and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, financial harm, and intentional negligence (in the event that the victim is dependent upon care provided by the husband/partner or the ex-husband/ex-partner).

It is important to mention that the perspective adopted when drawing up these guidelines has to do with intimate partner violence against older women, aged 60 or more years old.

According to Law 112/2009 of 16 September 2009 (which established the legal system applicable to domestic-violence prevention and victim protection and assistance), older victims are included in the especially vulnerable category. That is, being a “victim whose particular frailty is mainly a result of tender or advanced age, of a [delicate] state of health or of the type of incidence, degree and duration of victimisation causing injuries that seriously affects the victim’s psychological well-being or her conditions of social integration”.

Intimate partner violence is often of a varied complex nature, and covers more than one **kind of violence** at the same time. This may be:



- a. Psychological violence:** offensive words or deeds that deliberately condemn the woman’s opinions, values and behaviour and which attack her mental soundness. It includes all the actions carried out with the intention of causing emotional pain, anguish or despair. It includes verbal violence, shouting, using a disparaging tone of voice, being authoritarian in the way that he commands something or gives an order; it means constantly interrupting or taking over the conversation, blaming the other person for everything; giving her the silent treatment or ignoring her; incessantly criticising her, blackmailing, threatening and belittling her among other actions.
  
- b. Physical violence:** refers to actions carried out with the intention of causing physical pain or wounding her. Physical violence is centred on inflicting or trying to inflict pain or cause injury to a vulnerable older person by depriving her of a

basic necessity. It includes beating, hitting, tying her up, kicking or punching, slapping, hitting her with an object, pulling her hair, burning her, pinching, applying electric shocks, spitting, throwing her out of the window or pushing her down the stairs, forcing or restraining her against her will by use of drugs, overdosing with too many tranquilisers or neuroleptic drugs, kidnapping, preventing escape, banging her head against a wall, tearing her under garments, stifling her, holding her head under water, choking her, shooting her with firearm, stabbing her or killing her.

- c. Financial exploitation / harm:** is very often used as a way of permanently dominating the woman and is frequently associated with other kinds of violent behaviour. Where older women are concerned (or women who do not have paid employment), financial exploitation may be connected with: preventing her from having access to her own money or to the couple's money; stopping her from getting her own cheque-book or credit card; giving her an insufficient house-keeping allowance and inspecting all the household expenses; illegally taking charge of or illicitly using or hiding the older woman's savings, or her properties or her goods.
  
- d. Sexual violence:** all kinds of non-consensual sexual contact and non-consensual sexual acts. Sexually touching someone who is unable to give her consent is also considered to be sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often occurs under circumstances that disguise the violent abusive nature of the act. It includes: being forcibly denied sexual satisfaction or denying her a sexual life: being forced to engage in acts against her will; being the victim of sexually aggressive acts; being insulted, humiliated or brutalised during the sexual act; being raped after having been beaten or verbally abused among other

acts. It is a common fallacy to think that older women cannot be sexually abused; sexual violence may happen in old age (very often after a life time of having been sexually abused).

- e. **Negligence:** reflects the failure of a care-provider to comply with the needs of an older dependent woman. Negligence is defined as a failure to comply on the part of those responsible for providing a vulnerable older person with food, shelter, health care or protection as well as emotional support. It is not always easy to describe the transition to different degrees of neglect. Neglect may or may not involve a conscious attempt and intention to inflict emotional suffering on the older woman. It may include abandonment which is understood as someone who is responsible for providing care or looking after an older dependent person in need of the services of a carer, deserting her.

## 4. How much intimate partner violence against older women is there in Portugal?

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Violence against women and domestic violence are the most serious and persistent forms of violating human rights. It affects women of all ages, nationalities, ethno-cultural groups, religions and beliefs, and cultures, etc. It is perpetrated in various ways – psychologically, verbally and/or emotionally, physically, sexually, financially and exerting manipulative control among others.

In 2007 in Portugal, 38% women said that they had been the victims of domestic violence, in particular psychological violence (54%), physical violence (23%) and sexual violence (19%) (Lisboa, 2010: 38). In 2011, 23,742 complaints involving domestic violence were lodged with the police, making domestic violence the fourth most reported crime (*Direção-Geral de Política de Justiça* (Directorate-General of Justice Policy), 2012a: 29). There were 27 murders of spouses (*Sistema de Segurança Interna (Home Security System)* 2012: 8) and 30 men were convicted of murdering their wives (*Direção-Geral de Política de Justiça*, 2012b).



Out of the complaints lodged with the Police in 2011, 6.6% of the cases concerned victims aged 65 or over (*DGAI* (Directorate-General of Internal Administration), 2011: 16). If intimate partner violence is more frequent among working women, the fact that intimate partner violence against older women happens and will continue to happen. A recent study (Perista, Silva and Neves, 2010) reveals that between 2006 and 2009, 803 women aged 60 and over who were victims of intimate partner violence, contacted 142 organisations /agencies in search of help (among the organisations surveyed); 220 of these

women were followed-up by technicians who were interviewed within the scope of the above-mentioned study. And in 2008, 330 legal investigations were launched merely in the districts of Lisbon and the Évora involving women aged 60 or over who had been victims of intimate partner violence. Statistics from another study showed that during a one-year period, 39.4% women aged 60 and over were the victims of one kind of violence or another involving intimate partner relationships: emotional violence (55%), financial violence (38.7%), sexual violence (79.2%) and violation of rights (65%) (Ferreira-Alves and Santos, 2011:3).

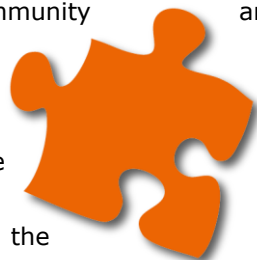
Older women (aged 55 and over) are victims of intimate partner violence in Portugal, particularly physical and sexual violence, to the same extent that younger women (under the age of 25) are. Although they are not the age group with the highest rate, they nevertheless represent a significant rate of incidence particularly in the Azores (Lisboa, 2010).

Elderly victims of violent crimes or abuse are predominantly women, such as what happens in the rest of the age groups. Older women get in touch with victim-support agencies to the same extent that younger victims do. However, there are fewer older women who go to shelters just as there are fewer older women who call the social hot-line (Perista, Silva and Neves, 2010). Furthermore, extreme/serious violence occurs between older couples. If we look at the data provided by the Observatory on Murdered Women, we see that more older women were killed by their current cohabiting husband/partner than by any other member of the family (UMAR / OMA - Union of Women: Alternative and Answer / Observatory on Murdered Women).

## 5. What are the risk factors?

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Violence against the elderly / older women is the result of a complex interaction of individual, relational, local community and social factors. In the Report issued by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2011), a set of risk factors is indicated which concentrate on a (potential) victim on the one hand, and on the other, predict a (potential) perpetrator. Therefore, we shall be looking at the structural or generic risk factors that are differentiated according to gender as well as factors related to age. Both gender and age-related risk factors may be considered in an individual, relational, community or social dimension<sup>2</sup>.



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<sup>2</sup> In agreement with the ecological model based on the four levels of intervention against abusing elderly people, as described in WHO, 2011.



## Risk factors

Dimension	Victim	Perpetrator
<b>Individual</b>	Feminine sex	Masculine sex
	Age	Age
	Physical frailty	Abusive consumption of alcohol or other substances
	State of mental health (e.g. dementia, depressive disturbances)	State of mental health (e.g. dementia, depressive disturbances)
	Growing need for care-provision – care transfer	Growing need for care-provision – possible overburden
	Financial dependence	Financial problems
	Socio-economic situation and financial ability to pay for support services needed	
<b>Relational</b>	Long-standing intimate partner violence – state of incapacity	Long-standing intimate partner violence – the power is in his hands
	Forms of organisation and family dynamics rooted in gender roles – wife/woman	Forms of organisation and family dynamics rooted in gender roles – man/boss of the household
	Isolation from the (rest of the) family	Isolation from the (rest of the) family
<b>Communitary / local</b>	Social isolation – little contact with the neighbours and women friends	
	Unaware of the existence of local agencies offering support to victims of domestic violence	
<b>Societal</b>	Social practices biased against gender – linking women to dependence, female identity	Social practices biased against gender – linking men to power, male identity
	Unaware of older women's rights mainly to do with cases of domestic violence	
	Economic factors (female life course characterised by material inequality, becoming more apparent in old age.	

## 6. What are the signs?

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It is fundamental that the professionals working in the social support agencies are on the lookout for signs of violence in older women. Reading the signs efficiently is important so as to identify and earmark cases of intimate partner violence against older women. In terms of the various kinds of violence, some examples are:

**Psychological violence:** emotional disturbances, apparent isolation, inexplicable signs that she does not wish to take part in normal everyday activities, insomnia, fear of other people, sudden change in her state of alertness and/or appetite, unusual depression, lack of appreciation and/or threats made by members of the family.

**Physical violence:** Bruising, marks on her skin, fractures, scratches, grazes, pulled hair, burn marks, refusal to undress, constant accidental injuries, gets upset when someone comes up to her.

**Exploitation / financial harm:** Sudden changes in her bank account or in banking procedures including inexplicable withdrawals of large sums of money; sudden inexplicable transfers of goods; inexplicable disappearance of money and valuable goods; sudden inability to pay the bills; lack of food at home; lack of prescription medicines.



**Sexual violence:** Bruising around the breasts or the genitals; venereal disease or inexplicable genital infections; inexplicable vaginal or anal bleeding; torn or bloodied underwear; anxious behaviour when she is being undressed or touched.

**Negligence:** Unusual loss of weight, dehydration, malnutrition, untreated wounds, lacking personal hygiene, living in unhygienic or unsanitary conditions, untreated and undiagnosed health problems, lack of a social contract. Abandonment as an extreme form of negligence: leaving the older person alone in hospital (or elsewhere) for long periods or leaving them alone at home with anyone to look after them.

## 7. How to address violence with elderly victims of intimate partner violence?

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Knowing how to address an older woman who has fallen victim intimate partner violence is particularly relevant in the activity undertaken by the social services. In many situations, the social services are the ones to ensure more frequent regular contacts with older women.

There are a certain number of **difficulties** attached to older women who are victims of intimate partner violence and which need to be taken into account, mainly as regards:

- ✦ Acknowledging the situation and informing other people about it: an older woman may understand intimate violence in a different way – because she cannot see herself as a victim of domestic violence; because of the generation gap; because she has been brought up at a time when girls were educated to "serve" and "grit their teeth"; because very often the images of domestic violence projected in the media do not match older women's profiles. It is also because she is afraid - of her husband/partner, of being alone, of not having enough money to live on, of the fact that if she tells her story, it will be even worse. Moreover it is because of the shame she feels – of being beaten up and /or abused yet again, of having endured up to now, or if she is in a new relationship, of being involved with someone aggressive, and sacrificing her independence. And it is also because of private issues – until very recently the common saying was "don't interfere between husband and wife". She may also be afraid



because of the social and geographical isolation in which she lives.

- ✿ Taking the initiative: because she does not know about her rights and the opportunities / answers that now present themselves with respect to help and support; because of her circumstances in life where she has to take care of grandchildren or her partner; because she has been subjected to manipulative control that infringes upon her freedom and independence. She may also be restricted due to illness and reduced mobility; financial difficulties; fear of being evicted from her home; being forced to abandon her pets or her vegetable patch or her possessions.
- ✿ Seeking support: where the professional support service providers lack sensitivity or training to recognise her difficulties; because the support agencies or the specific responses demanded by older women are inadequate; or because adult children simply are not there for her or do not encourage her to solve the situation between herself and their father.

Furthermore, the dynamics of violence need to be taken into account. This means that intimate partner violence is frequently enframed in what is called a **violent cycle** which is characterised by three stages:

- i) The stage showing growing tension – where all the situations coming up in daily life are a pretext for increasing the tension and the quarrelling between the couple; in intimate partner violence, there is no room for bargaining or solving differences;
- ii) The stage of violent incidents – often with a prelude of psychological / verbal violence that soon turns to physical violence or to other kinds of violence; many older women do not know how to react and find themselves “helpless”, which is the state they have been in throughout their lives and which has ensured their survival in a certain way.

- iii) The reconciliation or “honeymoon” stage (when the perpetrator shows he is sorry); during this stage the perpetrator sometimes showers the victim with positive attention although among older couples, this stage hardly exists owing to the fact that violent intimate partner relationships have worn themselves down.

There is no perfect, single solution in addressing the subject of intimate partner violence with older women. Nevertheless, our guiding principle is that we start off with some **guidelines** about setting up empathy and gaining the trust and trust of the older woman so that she feels respected, comforted and that her decisions have been taken into consideration.

- › Try and talk to the victim alone;
- › Establish a climate of empathy and confidence;
- › Listen to her story carefully and try to believe that what she is saying is true;
- › Do not judge her, do not blame her (*‘Your reactions are a normal way of dealing with trauma. You did nothing to deserve or cause the attack’*) and do not give her personal advice;
- › Boost the victim’s feelings (*‘It must have been awful. You’re a very courageous person to have survived such an ordeal’*.)
- › The questions should conform to the occasion and you have to feel comfortable about using certain expressions;
- › Start by asking general questions (e.g. about her health and well-being);
- › Continue by asking more specific questions according to the situation;
- › Ask direct questions when the woman does not consider her experience as involving “violence”.



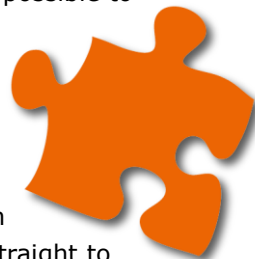
## 8. What to do when dealing with an elderly victim of intimate partner violence?

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When addressing a potential victim, mainly take into account the following aspects:

- ✿ Examine the true significance of the complaints made by the potential victim: What does she really mean when she complains about being treated in such a way?
- ✿ Try to gain an overall appreciation about the older woman's general state. Try and find out about recent important incidents: What happened during the last few days? What important (positive or negative) incidents occurred?
- ✿ Try to get the older woman to speak about the quality of her social relationships (or her isolation): Has she recently received news about the members of her family or from her women friends (e.g. how things are with her husband/ her children, etc.)?
- ✿ Try and see past the "natural" pretexts for physical wounds or injuries. How does the older woman explain the signs of possible violence (e.g. how come she has those scratches)?
- ✿ Try and find out why her psychological state of mind has changed: How to explain her mood changes?
- ✿ Try to learn about the details of the older woman's diet and eating habits. Does she eat enough? Is she able to eat and drink what she likes?

As we have mentioned above, intimate partner violence against older women is a complicated problem. In many cases, older women who are victims of violence need specialised attention and crisis-counselling services. Apart from this – and when it possible to do so – it is useful to have official or unofficial support given by people who can follow-up the older woman’s state after a violent incident.



In many cases, older victims also seek the assistance of the social services or the health department or other institutions instead of going straight to either the agencies that specialise in protecting victims or to the police.

It is therefore important to consider a holistic approach, operating in network, particularly when intimate partner violence against older women happens.

Therefore, it is essential to get to know and work out kinds of cooperation with agencies which specialise in offering protection to victims of violence on a local scale but also nationwide.

Below are the names and the telephone numbers of the services and agencies supporting victims of violence that are operating on a nationwide level:

<p>› <b>Serviço de Informação às Vítimas de Violência Doméstica - 800 202 148</b> (CIG - Comissão para a Cidadania e Igualdade de Género)</p>
<p>› <b>Linha Nacional de Emergência (LNES) - Linha 144</b> (Cruz Vermelha Portuguesa)</p>
<p>› <b>Linha do Cidadão Idoso - 800 20 35 31</b> (Provedor de Justiça)</p>
<p>› <b>Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV) – 707 20 00 77</b></p>
<p>› <b>AMCV - Associação de Mulheres Contra a Violência - 213 802 160</b></p>
<p>› <b>UMAR - União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta - 218 873 005</b></p>



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