Violence against Older Women

Violence against women and girls is a gross human rights violation that is pervasive across countries and affects women of all ages. This violence can have serious and long-lasting impacts on women’s physical and mental health and well-being with significant negative socio-economic and development consequences for society.

The most recent violence against women prevalence estimates led by WHO on behalf of the UN Interagency working Group on Violence against women that draw on the WHO Global Database on the prevalence of VAW suggest that globally, 23% of ever-partnered women aged 60 years and older have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a male partner or ex-partner in their lifetime. These data also found that about 1 in 20 ever-partnered women aged 60 and older experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in the previous 12 months.

Whilst younger women/women of reproductive age are at highest risk of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, these forms of violence often continue into old age, as is recognized by the SDG indicators, which do not include an upper age limit. However, data for women over the age of 50 years and older are scarce and VAW surveys have only recently begun to include women of this age group. Most surveys that collect data on violence against women focus on women aged 15-49 years as they measure reproductive health.

While global awareness of violence against older women is growing, with less than 10% of available prevalence data on intimate partner violence against women for those aged 50 and older, the scale, severity and complexity of such violence is likely being underestimated. Also older women may be vulnerable to specific forms of violence not usually measured in surveys on violence against women (sometimes captured in elder abuse studies/surveys), such as economic exploitation, or being isolated, ostracized or neglected, or having their medicaton or assitive devices witheld. In addition to intimate partners, perpetrators of violence against older women can include adult children and other relatives, strangers, caregivers and neighbours, but may not be captured by surveys focussing only on younger ae cohorts.

WHO’s work as part of n a UN Joint Programme is aimed at strengthening the measurement, data collection and building national capacities for violence against women data, including strengthening the measurement of violence against older women. In order to establish the prevalence and extent of violence against older women, and develop prevention interventions, as well as to effectively monitor SDG targets on eliminating all forms of VAWG there is a need to develop and test measures that better capture the different forms of violence which older women are more likely to experience for inclusion in population-based surveys.

Towards this end WHO is undertaking work to identify existing evidence, gaps and challenges, and in consultation with an Expert Group with global, regional and national experts has developeda module/question set on violence against older women that captures those forms of violence that are specific to older women for inclusion in wider violence against women dedicated surveys (egs). An accompanying question by question manual explaining the rationale for each of the questions in the module is also available. This module is being cognitively tested and piloted in Ghana, and will be also be translated and piloted in a few countries before being finalized and published in the coming months. WHO is also finalizing a set of recommendations for national statistics offices, researchers and policy makers on including measures violence against older women within existing surveys. This will help to better capture experiences of older women’s experience of violence in surveys and thereby inform the development of targeted prevention interventions and policies.