

A reflection on gender in elder abuse research from a human rights perspective

Brazil is among the world's leading countries in promoting an international human rights agenda for older people. From Brazil's perspective, as presented in a statement issued by the Permanent Mission of Brazil to the United Nations, 2014, older people are not an inherently vulnerable group but are subject to vulnerabilities due to situations of abuse and violence, and harmful stereotypes based on a negative social construction of old age. This is a progressive statement in that it recognizes older people as inherently active and productive contributors to the wellbeing of their families, communities and societies, not objects of charity or pity.

Currently, over 26 million people age 60 years and older live in Brazil, about 13 percent of its population. To address this growing population of older adults, Brazil has modernized its legislation and national plans to incorporate provisions of the Madrid 2002 International Plan of Action on Ageing and has ensured that its institutional framework addresses the needs of elderly citizens from a rights-based perspective.

Brazil was also one of the first countries to sign the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons in 2015. In both these documents, older people's right to be protected from violence is highlighted, and in particular, the responsibility of governments to promote the elimination of all practices that generate violence and affect the dignity and integrity of older women. The vulnerability of older women to violence and discrimination is emphasized in both the International Plan of Action on Ageing and the Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons.

In November 2013, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) convened an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on neglect, abuse and violence against older women; with a commissioned discussion paper that reviewed published scholarship on this topic to date and 15 experts from around the world invited to attend and make recommendations for follow up. The discussion paper identified three primary frameworks for studying neglect, abuse and violence against older women: the intimate partner violence (IPV) frame, the active ageing frame and the vulnerable older adult frame. Each includes specific definitions, assumptions and profiles of older women, representing three different understandings of and responses to abuse of older women.

The siloed conceptualizations of violence against older women present a fragmented picture of older women and abuse, challenging efforts to develop comprehensive policies and programs to prevent this social problem. An emergent human rights framework has the potential to develop integrative strategies to prevent and intervene effectively in abusive situations when they occur.

Consider the life course of a single older woman as she moves from marriage or intimate partner relationship to widowhood where intergenerational relationships with adult children and grandchildren become salient, to compromised health that may necessitate in-home or institutional care. These stages may not even be linear, but may co-occur or occur in different sequences. New research methodologies are needed that collect and analyze longitudinal data, and research studies that capture form and prevalence of violence regardless of settings, providing new ways of understanding and addressing neglect, abuse and violence against older women regardless of fluctuating life circumstances. These are examples of challenges for the future in understanding and addressing neglect, abuse and violence against older women from a holistic human rights perspective.

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