

Violence against women 60 years and older

Data availability, methodological issues and recommendations for good practice

This briefing note, which focuses on the measurement of violence against women 60 years and older, is one in a series of methodological briefing notes for strengthening the measurement and data collection of violence against particular groups of women or specific aspects of violence against women. These briefing notes are meant for researchers, national statistics offices and others involved in data collection on violence against women.

They have been developed as part of the UN Women–World Health Organization Joint Programme on strengthening methodologies and measurement of and building national capacities for violence against women data (Joint Programme on Violence against Women Data). These briefing notes seek to contribute to strengthening the quality and availability of data on violence against women and hence enhance global, regional and national level monitoring of progress towards its elimination, including for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.2 on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.

This briefing note summarizes work undertaken by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹ as part of the Joint Programme on Violence against Women data to inform the development of a module on violence against women 60 years and older that can be included in dedicated surveys on violence against women. It provides an overview of the challenges in the availability, measuring and collecting of data on violence against older women. It also makes recommendations to address some of the issues identified, with the aim of strengthening ongoing and future data collection efforts on violence against older women and increasing its availability.

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Background

Violence against women is a global public health problem, a major violation of women's human rights, and a gender inequality and development issue. The 2018 violence against women prevalence estimates show that globally, nearly 1 in 3 (30%) women 15 years and older have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (1). This violence has detrimental and long-lasting consequences for women's lives and their physical, mental and sexual and reproductive health (2). Much of this violence is perpetrated by male intimate partners – globally intimate partner violence affects 26% of ever partnered women 15 years and older (1). For women aged 50–59 years the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or intimate partner violence is 24% (95% uncertainty intervals (UI): 20–30%) and for women 60 years and older it is 23% (UI 18–31%) (3).

While women of reproductive age (15–49 years) are at higher risk of all forms of intimate partner violence, women 50 years and older continue to experience such violence, however the types and dynamics of violence from an intimate partner may change as women (and their partners) get older. Similarly, while younger women are at higher risk of sexual violence, whether by partners or other perpetrators, older women are also subjected to sexual violence. In addition, women 60 years and older may be more likely to be subjected to neglect and to other types of abuse compared with younger women. For example, specific forms of economic abuse, or specific acts of physical or psychological violence or controlling behaviours (e.g. physical or chemical restraint), including by perpetrators other than partners. These types of violence specific to older women are generally not captured in existing surveys that measure the prevalence of violence against women (1,4,5). As a result of the limited data available for older women, especially in low- and middle-income countries where the surveys mainly focus on women of reproductive age (15-49 years), and the gaps in current survey instruments, the prevalence and magnitude of violence against older women are most likely underestimated (4,5,6).

However, globally evidence is lacking on the prevalence, patterns and types of violence against women aged 50 years and older, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. We also need more evidence on the risk factors and effects of this violence, and barriers to reporting it and seeking help among older women who are subjected

to violence. Recognition of this need for data is growing and an increasing number of population-based violence against women surveys are extending the upper age limit to include older women. However, to obtain more valid data for this age group, a higher age limit must be accompanied with better survey measures on violence against older women.

Target 5.2 of the SDGs, agreed in 2015 by all countries at the United Nations General Assembly, focuses on the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls. SDG indicators 5.2.1 on the prevalence of intimate partner violence and 5.2.2 on the prevalence of non-partner sexual violence apply to women and girls aged 15 years and older. These indicators provide further impetus to strengthen data collection on violence against older women.

Prevalence data on violence against older women currently comes from either studies or surveys on the abuse of older people (60 years and older) that present data disaggregated by sex, or from dedicated violence against women surveys that have a sample age range older than 49 years. For most of the latter studies, the upper age limit varies from 60 to 75 years, or there is no upper age limit. As of 2018, of the 161 countries and areas with at least one population-based prevalence survey on violence against women or survey which includes a module on violence against women, 104 measured the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women aged 50 years and older. Most of the data came from high-income settings (for example, the European survey on violence against women conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights(7)), and/or from dedicated surveys on violence against women in low- and middle-income countries that used the WHO multi-country survey instruments, for example, the Women's Health and Life Expectancy Surveys conducted in Asia Pacific and the Caribbean (8,9). Only one country – Mexico – included in their survey an additional set of questions specific to women 60 years and older (10). Even when data are collected on women 50 years and older, only 74 countries reported age-disaggregated data for this age group of women. In the 2018 estimates, only 11.5% of eligible data points on the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women were for women aged 50 years and older (1).

Box 1 gives the definitions of some key terms related to violence against older women.

Box 1. Key terms related to violence against older women

Older persons. The United Nations defines older persons as those aged 60 years and older, while recognizing that ageing and age are social phenomena and definitions vary across organizations, cultures, communities and countries (71).

Abuse of older people (previously referred to as **elder abuse**). A single, or repeated, act, or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person. Abuse of older people can occur in the home, community and institutional settings. It can take various forms, such as financial, physical, psychological and sexual (72).

Violence against older women. This term usually refers to abuse or exploitation (physical, sexual, psychological or financial), neglect, or abandonment of women aged 60 years and older. This recognizes that, while a chronological cut-off is arbitrary, the older you get, the more likely it is that the patterns and dynamics of violence may change given contextual and biological changes – hence the focus on violence against women 60 years and older.

Technical basis for recommendations

The recommendations for strengthening the measurement of violence against older women were informed by a systematic review of quantitative studies (5) and a scoping review of qualitative studies on abuse of older women (4), as well as a meeting and consultations with national, regional and global experts on violence against women, abuse of older people and survey measurement of violence against women or abuse of older people. To improve the understanding of similarities and differences in the dynamics, patterns and experiences of violence against older women, and to address existing gaps in the evidence and data, the reviews examined: 1) existing measures and instruments on violence against older women used in quantitative surveys conducted globally (5); and 2) the qualitative evidence on different types and patterns of violence against older women and the nature of such violence (4). While recognizing that ageing and age are social phenomena and definitions vary across organizations, cultures, and communities, the two reviews focused on women aged 50 years and older as most surveys in low- and middle-income countries that measure violence against women only include women up to 49 years of age (6).

Review of instruments used to measure violence against older women in quantitative surveys

A seven-step systematic search was performed to identify population-based studies and surveys that provided estimates of the prevalence of abuse of older people (60 years and older) or violence against women 50 years and older at national or subnational levels. The review had four objectives: 1) to identify and obtain relevant instruments used to measure violence against women 60 years and older; 2) to provide an overview of selected characteristics of the studies in which the instruments were used; 3) to review the characteristics of the instruments, including the constructs measured and the items used to measure them; and 4) to review if the instruments had been tested for reliability and validity. Information on the studies and instruments was extracted, synthesized and analysed. The characteristics of the studies, instruments, constructs, items and measurement properties (validity and reliability reported), and the degree to which different items were being used to measure constructs that were purportedly the same (i.e. which were labelled similarly or the same, such as physical abuse) were examined across instruments. In total, 60 different instruments were used to measure abuse of older people in 89 population-based prevalence studies in more than 40 countries and 13 different instruments were used to measure violence against women 50 years and older in 26 population-based studies in 47 countries (4).

Review of qualitative studies on violence against older women

A scoping review of qualitative literature on violence against older women was conducted with searches of 11 electronic databases (4). A quality assessment and a thematic synthesis of data were conducted from the 52 manuscripts that met the inclusion criteria. Most studies (42) were conducted in high-income countries, six articles were from upper middle-income countries – Brazil (3 studies), Mexico (2 studies) and Islamic Republic of Iran (1 study) – and three articles were from low-income countries – Uganda (1 study) and Ethiopia (2 studies). One article came from India, a lower middle-income country.² Older women described intimate partner violence, family violence and elder abuse of various types, committed by a range of perpetrators. Physical violence was most frequently reported, followed by emotional/psychological

violence, economic/financial violence, sexual violence, verbal abuse, controlling behaviour and neglect. Intimate partner violence was the form of violence most frequently reported by older women. The review also highlighted the intersections between experience of ageing, and the dynamics, impacts, experiences and perceptions of violence. Older women also reported feeling that ageing diminished their physical and emotional capabilities to cope with experiences of violence. Despite the failing health and old age of intimate partner perpetrators, these men continued to exercise control, power and violence, although there was sometimes a shift from predominantly physical and/or sexual violence to psychological violence and controlling behaviour. There was also some evidence of first or new experiences of intimate partner violence in older age, for example where older women provided care for spouses with dementia and reported aggressive behaviour, physical violence and verbal abuse.

Shortcomings identified in the data and instruments

Findings from the two reviews and expert consultations identified the following shortcomings in the available data and the instruments measuring violence against older women.

Data

- Data are generally lacking on violence against older women, particularly from low- and middle-income countries. Most data on prevalence and qualitative evidence on violence against older women come from high-income countries and regions.
- Existing qualitative evidence on violence against women aged 50 years and older (age range 50–93 years) largely focuses on intimate partner violence. It is uncertain whether this adequately captures the relative burden of intimate partner violence compared with other forms of violence against older women as other perpetrators who may be more significant for older women are often omitted.
- Even in surveys that measure intimate partner violence against older women, there is limited understanding of the changes in the patterns and dynamics of intimate partner violence as women (and their partners) transition to older age.
- Available qualitative and quantitative data on violence against older women do not explain the associations between types of violence, the cumulative burden of different forms of violence experienced throughout life, the physical and mental health outcomes for older women, or help-seeking behaviour from formal or informal support systems.
- Terminology and definitions of economic and financial abuse are often ambiguous and varied across studies. For instance, some survey instruments on violence against older people focus on theft of money and possessions, while others consider coercion or impersonation resulting in surrendering rights or property or signing/changing a legal document to obtain property or services (13).

2 World Bank country classifications by income level: 2019-2020.

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While some evidence suggests that these acts/forms of abuse may be correlated with older women's experiences of physical, sexual and/or psychological violence and with barriers to leaving abusive relationships, the lack of a clear operational definition and robust measures of economic and financial abuse limits the ability to examine how these co-occur and/or exacerbate other forms of abuse (1,13,14).

Instruments and measures

- Many surveys and studies on violence against women that include women aged 60 years and older use instruments and measures originally designed to capture violence against women of reproductive age. Thus, on one hand, these instruments often omit age-specific questions or forms of violence that are specifically relevant to the older women in a survey (for example, questions on restraint either physical or with medicines). On the other hand, these instruments may include other forms of violence that are not pertinent to older women (for example, those related to violence in recent pregnancies or post-partum violence). Therefore, adopting these instruments without relevant adaptation to the older age cohort usually results in a failure to capture types of violence related to the process of ageing, such as changes in economic and social roles and in power dynamics with children, partners, other family members or carers.
- Instruments to measure the violence and abuse against older people, including women, do not cover some relevant forms of violence that are included in instruments measuring violence against women, such as physical and sexual violence or threats by current or previous intimate partners.
- While violence against women surveys are increasingly using upper age limits of 60 years or older, they do not consistently report age-disaggregated data for the higher age group (e.g. 60-64 years, 65-69 and so on), which makes it difficult to explore differences (or similarities) in the patterns, forms and types of violence between these sub groups of older women.
- Instruments designed to measure the abuse of older people do not generally include sex-specific questions or do not systematically analyse or report their findings disaggregated by sex. When used to measure violence against older women, this may lead to the omission of important information on sex and gender differences in population-based studies and on the persistence of intimate partner violence in older age.
- In general, items used to measure the same forms of violence often vary significantly across surveys and studies. For example, some instruments used to measure physical violence against older people ask about whether the respondent has been physically attacked (e.g. hit or slapped), while others focus on injuries (e.g. bruises or broken bones), and others also consider physical restraint (e.g. being given drugs or too much medicine to make an older woman docile).
- Most of the existing surveys on violence against women that measure violence against women aged 50 years and older often do not consider the range of potential perpetrators who are relevant to this age group, including those where there is an expectation of trust, such as those in caregiving roles.
- In general, survey instruments used to measure violence against older women lack documented psychometric testing, including on their reliability and validity. Rigorous cross-cultural validation of instruments used in high- and low-income settings is also lacking. Given that the largest proportion of research and data to date come from high-income countries and regions, many culture-specific forms of violence in low- and lower middle-income settings may not be adequately captured by the items in current survey instruments. In addition, so-called standardized items or a core set of items might not function in the same or similar way in different contexts which therefore limits comparisons of the prevalence of violence against older women across countries.

Recommendations for good practice

The following recommendations mirror the data and measurement challenges identified in the previous section. These recommendations aim to strengthen data collection on violence against older women and accurately capture the prevalence, magnitude and experiences of women in this age group.

There is a need to address the substantial lack of data on the prevalence of violence experienced by older women in low- and middle-income countries. In high-income contexts more research is also needed on the violence older women are subjected to within specific

populations who may have different risk profiles for violence in older age and the factors associated with such violence. This information will allow a more accurate estimation of the prevalence of violence against older women by partners and other perpetrators, and a better understanding of the patterns, risk factors and effects of violence against older women.

Table 1 suggests ways in which survey instruments measuring violence against women and instruments measuring the abuse of older people could be strengthened.

Table 1. Recommendations for strengthening instruments measuring violence against women and abuse of older people

Topic	Recommendations	
	Violence against women instruments	Abuse of older people instruments
Data disaggregation	Surveys on violence against women should consider including women aged 50 years and older in their samples. Reporting should include disaggregation of prevalence rates by 5- or 10-year age groups, including for women 60 years and older (e.g. 60–64, 65–69 years, and so on) This information would allow a better understanding of associations between certain types and dynamics of violence and age.	Surveys measuring the abuse of older people should always provide prevalence rates disaggregated by the sex of respondents. This information will enable sex and gender differences in prevalence to be considered and allow the dynamics of intimate partner violence against women in older age to be more fully explored.
Age- and sex-specific questions	Survey instruments on violence against women should incorporate questions specific to forms of violence more likely to be experienced by women 60 years and older – for example, items that consider neglect or deliberate lack of access to required medication or appliances and consider perpetrators other than partners, such as children or caregivers.	Instruments measuring the abuse of older people should always include sex-specific questions, such as items relating to specific forms of sexual abuse, or violence by intimate partners.

Topic	Recommendations	
	Violence against women instruments	Abuse of older people instruments
Expanded forms of violence and adding items to existing measures	<p>New or adapted violence against women surveys and modules that aim to measure violence against women aged 60 years and older should add questions on specific forms of violence which are currently included in instruments assessing abuse of older people and not in violence against women surveys. For example, neglect, some forms of financial and economic abuse and threats of abandonment.</p> <p>Instruments that measure violence against women could also incorporate additional items specific to older women within existing questions. For example, items on the use of physical and chemical restraint could be added to the existing measures of physical abuse, and items on being ignored or excluded, threats of being sent to a long-term care institution, being ostracized, and being deprived of roles could be included to existing measures of psychological abuse.</p>	<p>Several types of violence that are part of instruments measuring violence against women are not considered in current survey instruments measuring the abuse of older people should be included in instruments assessing abuse of older people. For example, controlling behaviours, including financial/economic controlling behaviour; physical, sexual and psychological intimate partner violence; sexual harassment; and threats, stalking, physical and sexual violence by a former intimate partner since divorce or separation.</p>
Perpetrators	<p>Instruments/questions used to measure violence against older women should always enquire about perpetrators from whom there is an expectation of trust, such as adult children, grandchildren, and informal or paid caregivers.</p>	
Testing of psychometric properties	<p>More testing of the psychometric properties of the instruments used to measure violence against older women, including reliability and validity, is needed.</p> <p>A more rigorous analysis of the items that are used to capture types of violence against women that are supposed to be the same across instruments would help clarify the extent to which types of violence carrying the same label are indeed comparable.</p> <p>Access to original and full datasets is crucial in this regard as it allows a better assessment of psychometric properties of the instruments.</p>	
Cross-cultural validation	<p>While prioritizing the standardization and comparability of surveys across countries/contexts through the use of a core set of items, some additional culture-specific forms of abuse could be included. Cross-cultural validation of instruments used to measure violence against older women is urgently needed.</p>	

WHO module for measuring violence against older women

To strengthen data quality and measurement of violence against older women and address some of the gaps and the limitations identified in current studies, WHO has developed a module for measuring violence against women 60 years and older. This is meant to be incorporated in the WHO women's health and life experiences questionnaire (75); or other surveys measuring violence against women³.

Although definitions of older women generally include women older than reproductive age (older than 49 years), the module is designed for women aged 60 years and older, in line with the UN definition of older people. While the module focuses on violence against women aged 60 years and older, we recognize that the questions might not adequately target certain particularities or

conditions relevant to certain narrower age ranges, such as cognitive decline in women older than 80 years. The module was developed following the recommendations in Table 1 and in consultation with national, regional and global specialists in violence against women and/or abuse of older people from different countries and regions.

This module is being cognitively tested and piloted in different geographical areas. It is available for piloting and use by survey and research teams looking to incorporate this set of questions in their violence against women surveys or modules. An accompanying question-by-question guide explaining the rationale for each of the questions in the module is also available for survey teams and enumerators looking to implement the module.⁴

Future research

To improve our understanding of the magnitude and nature of violence against older women, we need future research on violence against older women to consider the following:

- extending age limits in violence against women surveys or having no age limit to ensure they capture data on older women – in settings where the population is skewed towards younger age groups, it may be necessary to oversample women 60 years and older);
- including forms of violence specific to this population age group and more types of perpetrators in violence against women surveys;
- exploring the associations between types of violence, history of violence, and physical and mental health outcomes for older women;
- developing standardized measures of economic and financial abuse against older women to understand the association of such abuse with physical and mental health outcomes;
- doing more psychometric testing of violence against older women measures, including on reliability and validity, and validation of the measures in different contexts.

3 For further information on the module and accompanying materials please contact us at: srhavp@who.int

4 For further information please contact us at: srhavp@who.int

Conclusion and next steps

This briefing note summarizes several limitations of the existing body of evidence on violence against older women and the survey instruments used to measure this violence. First, the availability of prevalence data on violence against older women is sparse, and this is particularly so in low- and middle-income countries. Second, many survey instruments used to measure violence against older women were originally designed for women of reproductive age. As a result, they do not effectively capture the particularities of violence experienced by older women. They often omit relevant types of violence, fail to include the wide range of potential perpetrators, including those in positions

of trust, and have not been sufficiently supported by psychometric testing and analysis.

To address some of the limitations identified, WHO developed the module described above for inclusion in violence against women surveys. This module assumes that women of all ages would be asked about all forms of violence currently included in the available surveys and, in addition, women 60 years or older would receive the questions in the module. As with many instruments, the module will evolve as it is used in different countries and contexts.

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Hoa, 68, in portrait in her home in Doi Son village, Ha Nam Province, Viet Nam.

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