

Comic Relief funded seven organisations ('funded partners') across England and Wales from 2019-2020 (Phase 1) and again from 2020-2021 (Phase 2) to pilot and scale-up case work with older women survivors of violence and abuse, train professionals, increase referrals through community initiatives, and raise awareness of violence and abuse against older women, and to better understand needs in this area to develop dedicated services. The seven funded partners, listed below, are referred to in this guide by their acronyms:

- [Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid \(BSWA\)](#)
- [Dewis Choice \(DC\)](#)
- [Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland \(RCTN\)](#)
- [Solace Women's Aid \(SWA\)](#)
- [Somerset and Avon Rape and Sexual Assault Support \(SARSAS\)](#)
- [Staffordshire Women's Aid \(SDWA\)](#)
- [West Wales Domestic Abuse Service \(WWDAS\)](#)

In this guide, we highlight the funded partners' findings around 'what works' and identify some of the key challenges when working to address violence and abuse of older women. This guide is intended to help practitioners provide effective services that respond to violence and abuse against older women. It is a starting point and we hope that, as our knowledge and understanding of this complex issue develops, it will help to strengthen our collective response.

“One of the things we have learned is how much we don't know. We need more evidence before we design new services and we need evidence to build a case for funding.”
(SARSAS)

Comic Relief is grateful to the Learning Coordinator and author of this guide, Dr. Hannah Bows, and to the funded partners, for their hard work and input to this guide. We are also grateful to [Narrative Design](#) for leading on production.

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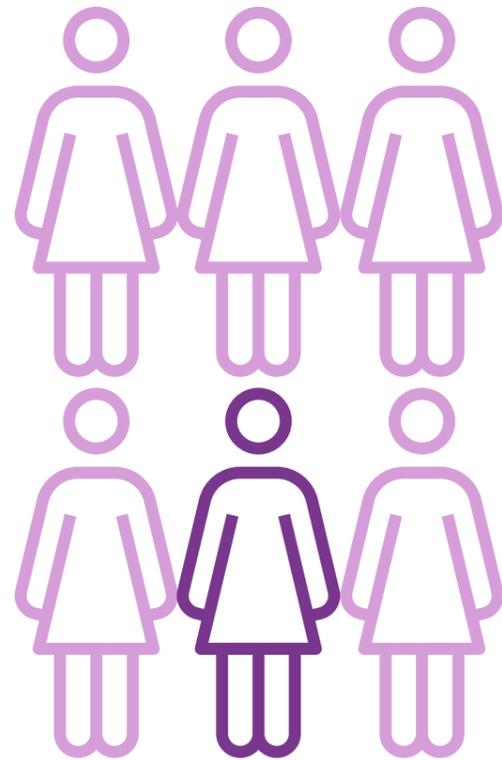
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Background

Violence and abuse against older women¹ has steadily gained recognition as an issue in the UK over the last decade, but research, policy and interventions to prevent perpetration and support older survivors are still very limited.

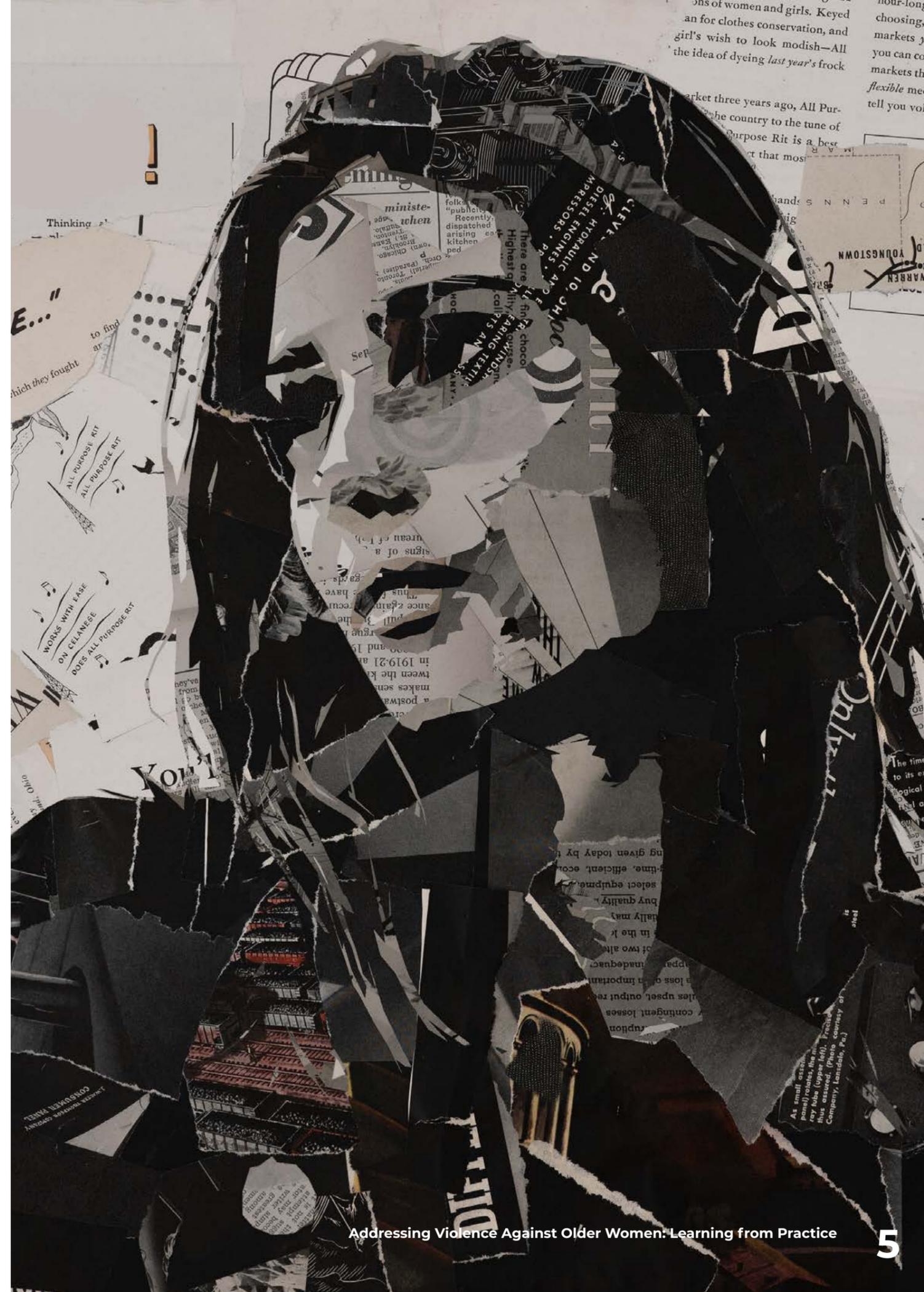
For a long time, we have assumed (older) age is a protective factor against domestic abuse, sexual violence and other forms of violence against women – this is partly because very little evidence exists on the prevalence and nature of violence and abuse against older women and this in turn has led us to believe that the issue does not exist. In other words, absence of data has been taken as absence of existence. This is compounded by generational norms and attitudes, which valued traditional heteronormative gender roles and positioned violence and abuse by men towards women as private family matters.

Women aged 60 and over were socialised before the major advancements in women’s rights that have included the recognition of violence and abuse as ‘domestic abuse’, accompanied by a suite of legislation and policy to prevent and address the phenomenon and a more general improvement in equality protections. Yet, we know older women do experience violence and abuse, with the best available data indicating that at least one in six UK adults aged 60 and over (equating to around 2 million older people) experience some form of violence and abuse each year. Women are disproportionately the victims, and men the perpetrators, particularly in the case of domestic abuse, sexual violence and domestic homicide.



At least
1 in 6
UK adults aged 60 and over experience some form of violence and abuse each year.

¹ There is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes old age – much of the research in this area in the UK adopts 60 as the starting point for defining older people but Comic Relief’s funded partners used different starting ages from 50 upwards.





1

Services need to be aware that older women have similar but also different needs to younger women

Many older survivors have the same needs as younger survivors – access to advice and support, counselling, therapy, help with finances, housing etc. However, their age can create some specific barriers or issues that require different responses:

- The abuser may not always be a partner – Research shows that adult family members (e.g. children, grandchildren) are the perpetrators of domestic abuse in 44% of cases involving older victims. In at least half the cases of domestic homicides where the victim is aged 60 or older, the perpetrator is an adult son or grandson. Several funded partners found that where the abuser is an (adult) child or grandchild the victim feels a sense of responsibility to them and is reluctant to report or engage services. They may also want different outcomes compared with women in relationships with abusive partners – for example, they may be seeking support for the abuser rather than for themselves.
- Leaving the relationship might not always be the desired outcome – Some older women may not want to leave the abuser and may refuse support or disengage if there is an expectation of this or if the service is designed for this outcome. Research by SafeLives found that in at least 32% of cases older victims were still living with the abuser after getting support (compared with just 9% of victims aged 60 or under). Thus, professionals need to be aware of this and take care with the language used and support offered. This will help to ensure older victims do not disengage because they feel they are being pushed towards leaving the relationship.

“Older women probably won’t leave the abusive relationship and it is critical to get this message across to organisations, and also to survivors, that they won’t be forced to leave the relationship” (BSWA)

However, some funded partners such as DC found that increased knowledge around rights and entitlements, for example housing support, benefits and joint assets, as well as long-term intensive support motivated many women to leave or make significant changes to the relationship with the abuser.

- Suitable, accessible housing is a key factor – An older victim’s housing situation can be a key barrier for them in leaving an abusive relationship, even though the majority of violence occurs in the home. For older victims, many refuges are not suitable and there is a shortage of alternative spaces to house older women on a temporary basis. Providing safe accommodation for victims leaving abusive relationships and long-term suitable accommodation for victims and/or their families is often an important factor in successfully responding to domestic abuse. Housing providers can also play a key role in identifying abuse and signposting or referring victims to other agencies. Services could benefit from working with housing providers to raise awareness of domestic abuse so they can identify potential victims and refer to other agencies, as well as find suitable long-term accommodation for older survivors.

“Housing is one of the biggest challenges for older women. Refuges are often not appropriate. We faced significant obstacles finding a suitable place for an older client which was a trigger for us sourcing external funding for a dedicated unit for older women. We also now have a housing Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA)” (WWDAS)

The lack of suitable housing, not wanting to go to a refuge, not wanting to leave the family home and/or not wanting to make the abuser homeless were all issues discovered by the funded partners when supporting older women. Where possible, services should identify premises suitable for housing older women on a temporary (and ideally, long term) basis where existing refuge spaces are not suitable. Two funded partners – WWDAS and SWA – have worked to address some of the issues with (un)suitable housing.

“Housing is a big issue – many survivors do not want to make the abuser homeless” (SWA)

Staffordshire Women’s Aid – Building relationships with care providers to solve housing problems

SDWA identified housing for older women – or the lack of it – as an issue preventing them leaving abusive relationships. In response, SDWA secured an agreement with a local care home, to use their rooms as temporary crisis refuge accommodation for older women. As care homes are designed to be accessible, are on the ground floor etc. this can address many of the issues with standard accommodation offered in refuges.

- It is important to set realistic aims and objectives – The lack of research and available evidence on violence against older women means that the development of services and policies must be done cautiously. For example, aiming to increase the number of referrals of women into a support service is inappropriate if the service is not currently designed inclusively, or if the policies, tools and practices have not been tested to check they are suitable for, and meet the needs of, older survivors. Key things to consider are:
 - a. Suitable housing – if you provide a refuge, is it suitable for older survivors? Have you assessed the suitability with older survivors?
 - b. Suitable support – do your current services match the needs of older women? Have you asked older women about their needs, and/or designed services based on the existing research and evidence on violence and abuse against older people?

- Offer outreach services and a variety of methods for engaging older women – Traditional methods such as outreach work, delivering presentations at community groups or providing leaflets and using posters in community settings may be less effective when reaching older women. Working with groups and organisations which run services for older people and using these as an opportunity to speak informally to women was more effective. Incorporating awareness of violence and abuse into broader activities – for example holding events which celebrate older age and promote the experiences of older people – may be a better way of reaching and engaging older people.

“One of the main challenges for us was the visibility of our service – both to professionals and older women. Often they didn’t know we had a specialist [stream] for older women” (SWA)

- Awareness raising materials need to ‘speak’ to older women – Several funded partners found that standard leaflets and materials used for raising awareness or promoting the service to victim-survivors were less effective. The design and messaging are important as well as the location. They also designed a campaign featuring posters on public transport as well as leaflets and found that using images of older people was actually a barrier to older people engaging with the material.

“After speaking to older women, we realised that using images of older people was actually a barrier to engagement and turned off a lot of older people from our campaigns and messaging. We changed this and used the backs of heads instead, so no ‘age’ was visible, but used a variety of people to be inclusive and found that this was received far better. This was all based on the feedback from older women themselves”
(RCTN)

“Generational messaging is really important – the norms and values of this generation affects the mindset and this needs to be understood and reflected in our materials. For example – many older women grew up with the advice of agony aunts who reminded women their place was in the home to serve their husbands, and that control and discipline was the norm”
(BSWA)

The location of any materials is also important – Doctor’s surgeries, health and social care settings and community groups (such as knit and natter, Women’s Institute, older people’s social and activity groups) are important locations where women are more likely to be able to access outreach materials.

“We designed a leaflet for older women which has been sent to GPs and other locations where older women might see and pick it up”
(SARSAS)

- Older women may prefer peer-support or buddy systems – Several funded partners ran peer support, buddy or similar group initiatives for older survivors and found these to be successful methods of engaging with and supporting older women. In fact, in some cases older women had requested this service when given the option. This highlights the importance of designing services in consultation with survivors and ensuring that group sessions are appropriate for the age group, demographic and/or culture of the survivors.

“Older women want group work with other older women”
(RCTN)

Several funded partners found that social isolation and loneliness are issues for a significant proportion of older women who have suffered abuse. Consequently, long-term support to address this is required – either by working with existing services (e.g. local befriending initiatives run by charities such as Age UK) or establishing befriending or peer-support groups.

“By having a befriending service internally, it creates a safety net, as we can refer a woman back into [case work] if issues around domestic violence resurface. Were we to simply refer her to an external befriending service, we could not guarantee that the domestic violence would be identified”
(BSWA)

- Funding needs to be long-term to provide the duration of support many older survivors need – Most of the funded partners found that, when working with older survivors, some of the traditional timeframes for support were too short and the complexity of older survivors’ lifestyles, experiences and needs often mean they require support for much longer than younger women. It can take time to build a relationship of trust with survivors, and may take longer than with some younger women to identify what support is needed. This must be reflected in the funding provided for undertaking this kind of work.



2

Take an intersectional approach to working with older women

Violence against women is widely recognised as a form of sex and gender discrimination which intersects with other inequalities and oppressions such as sexuality, ethnicity, class, disability and immigration status.

- Women with disabilities and/or chronic health conditions are more than twice as likely to experience domestic abuse from a partner
- Bisexual women are almost twice as likely to have experienced abuse by a partner compared with heterosexual women
- Women from mixed or multiple ethnic groups are more likely to have experienced partner abuse than any other ethnic group
- Unemployed women and/or those from lower-income households are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse

Source: Office for National Statistics

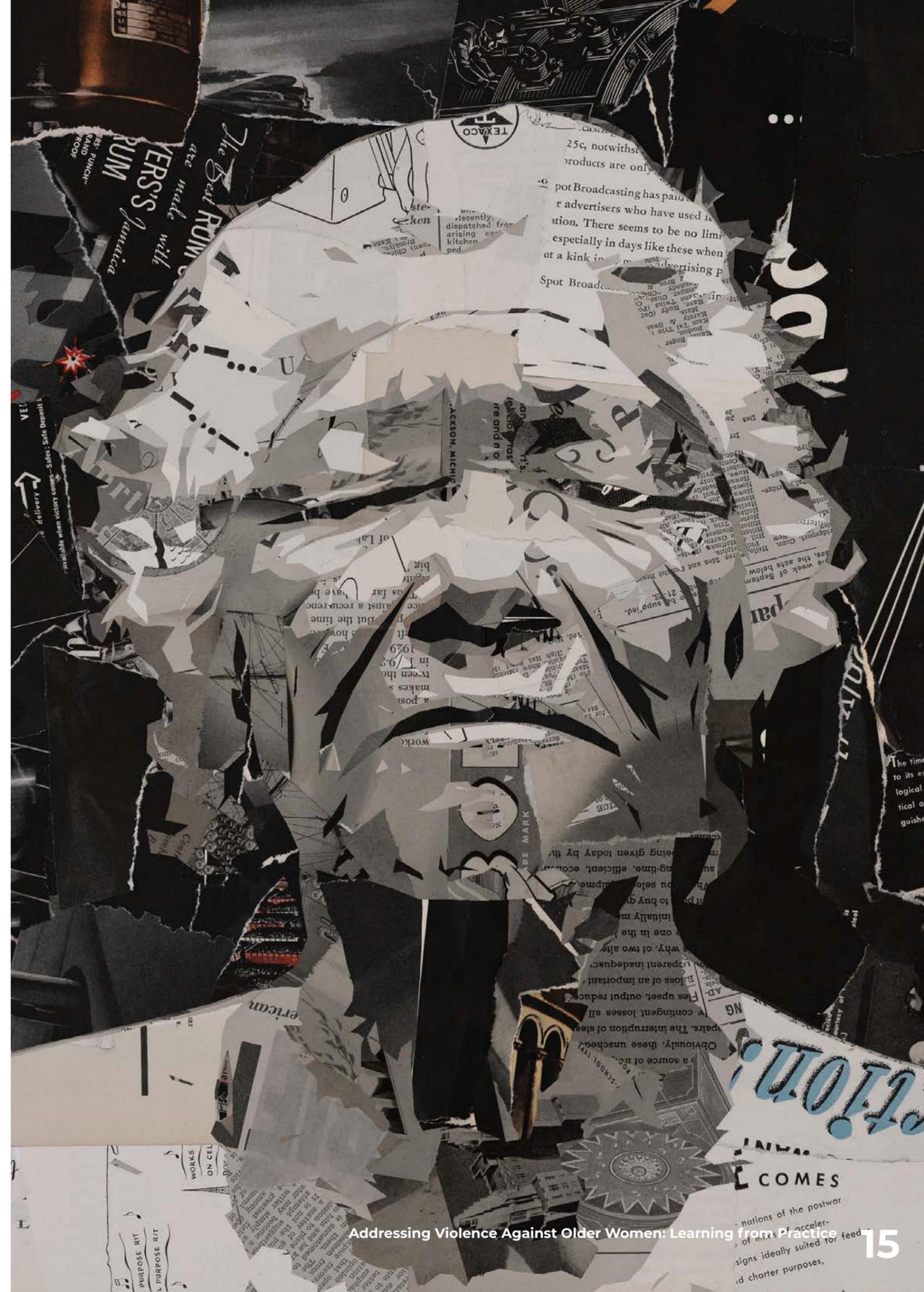
The importance of ensuring that research, policy and practice on violence against women is intersectional (recognising the way different inequalities intersect to create specific causes, consequences and support needs) is broadly acknowledged. However, age has often not been considered as an inequality in previous violence against women work, and many of the policies on intersectionality do not consider the impact of age.

All funded partners recognised the importance of broadening their reach to include women from minority groups but experienced challenges achieving this.

- Several funded partners attempted to build relationships with local organisations working with minority communities but found it difficult to do so. It is important that organisations develop these relationships independently of specific streams of work, and then include organisations in the development of new initiatives.
- In the early stages of development services must consult with agencies and organisations working with minority communities to ensure services are collaborative and consider the needs of diverse communities.
- Language, cultural factors and legal status can all impact on older women's ability and willingness to engage with services and these should be considered at the point of design.

- Organisations working with minority communities are often poorly funded and asking them to assist for free is unethical – funding bids should be collaboratively designed to ensure funding is distributed fairly and includes organisations conducting work with minority groups.
- Older women from diverse backgrounds – particularly older women survivors – should be consulted at multiple stages of service design and development to ensure the suitability of campaigns, training, policies and case work. Funding should be sought to compensate women for their time and expertise.

“Getting engagement from older women to pilot the training was achieved. This enabled the voice of older women and the voice of the professionals to feed in their thoughts and ideas about the training so it was fit for purpose. The existing service user group was able to test the pilot programme meaning service users remained at the heart of the programme” (RCTN)





Dewis Choice – Working with older LGBTQ+ survivors

Based in Wales, the Dewis Choice Initiative at Aberystwyth University has been conscious of the need to ensure their services are inclusive and all materials are designed for both Welsh and English speaking audiences. Dewis Choice has also been very aware of the need to reach hidden or hard-to-reach communities including those from minority communities and LGBTQ+ survivors.

“We visibly promote LGBTQ+ and adopt inclusive and gender-neutral language throughout our website, service materials, email signature strips (my pronouns are) and daily communications. We also started to record gender and sexuality on our referral forms. Part of the reason for this was to model good data collection to other agencies in this area.”

Additionally, they examined internal policies and practices, including reviewing subconscious bias and how to provide a safe environment and appropriate support, and explored the use of inclusive language and confidence building techniques. With regards to victim-survivors from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, they had ongoing conversations with key stakeholders to help them recognise and respond to the diversity of older victims.

They co-produced a short film exploring older LGBTQ+ people’s ‘lived experiences’ of domestic abuse. They hoped that, by raising awareness in this way, they would help challenge pervasive narratives about who victims are, and to highlight the realities of invisible and overlooked victim-survivors.

- In-house experience and knowledge – several organisations including BSWA already have experience working with older women from diverse backgrounds which can be utilised to develop knowledge and internal training.
- Older women should be visible within the organisations seeking to engage this group – recruiting women of this age group as staff and/or volunteers is integral. We need to diversify staff and volunteers within organisations in order to build meaningful relationships and engagement with other organisations and with survivors themselves. This also ensures sustainability of the commitment to working with older women beyond the life cycle of any individual initiative.

**“By having involved volunteers over 55 in the group work project, they now have increased confidence and will be able to help us to assist even more group work going forwards”
(BSWA)**



3

Services need to ensure they are developing specific knowledge on the issue of violence against older women both internally and externally

All seven funded partners incorporated some training (internal and/or external) and/or awareness raising of violence against older women.

Many of these focused on training external professionals, agencies and groups but subsequently realised the need to ensure internal training, policies and procedures were inclusive and suitable for older women. This is critical to improve internal awareness and ensure sustainability in relation to violence against older women.

“It was important that we upskilled our own workers and raised awareness internally in order to embed knowledge within our own organisation as well as raise awareness with other organisation to improve signposting and referrals” (BSWA)

- Existing data and knowledge held by an organisation should be captured and utilised to inform the development of internal policies, training and awareness raising as well as external work. Most organisations have some experience of working with one or more older women and this can be used alongside staff knowledge to inform broader organisational knowledge and identify gaps.
- A needs assessment of existing internal policies and procedures should be conducted to assess whether these are inclusive of older women and amended where required. Ideally these assessments should include older women's voices. This also helps ensure the sustainability of older women survivors as a priority group.

“We have developed internal training to enhance our staff's knowledge and skills to better enable them to work with women over 55, which will have an ongoing impact across [our work] in terms of the knowledge and sensitivity that staff have in relation to the needs of women over 55” (BSWA)

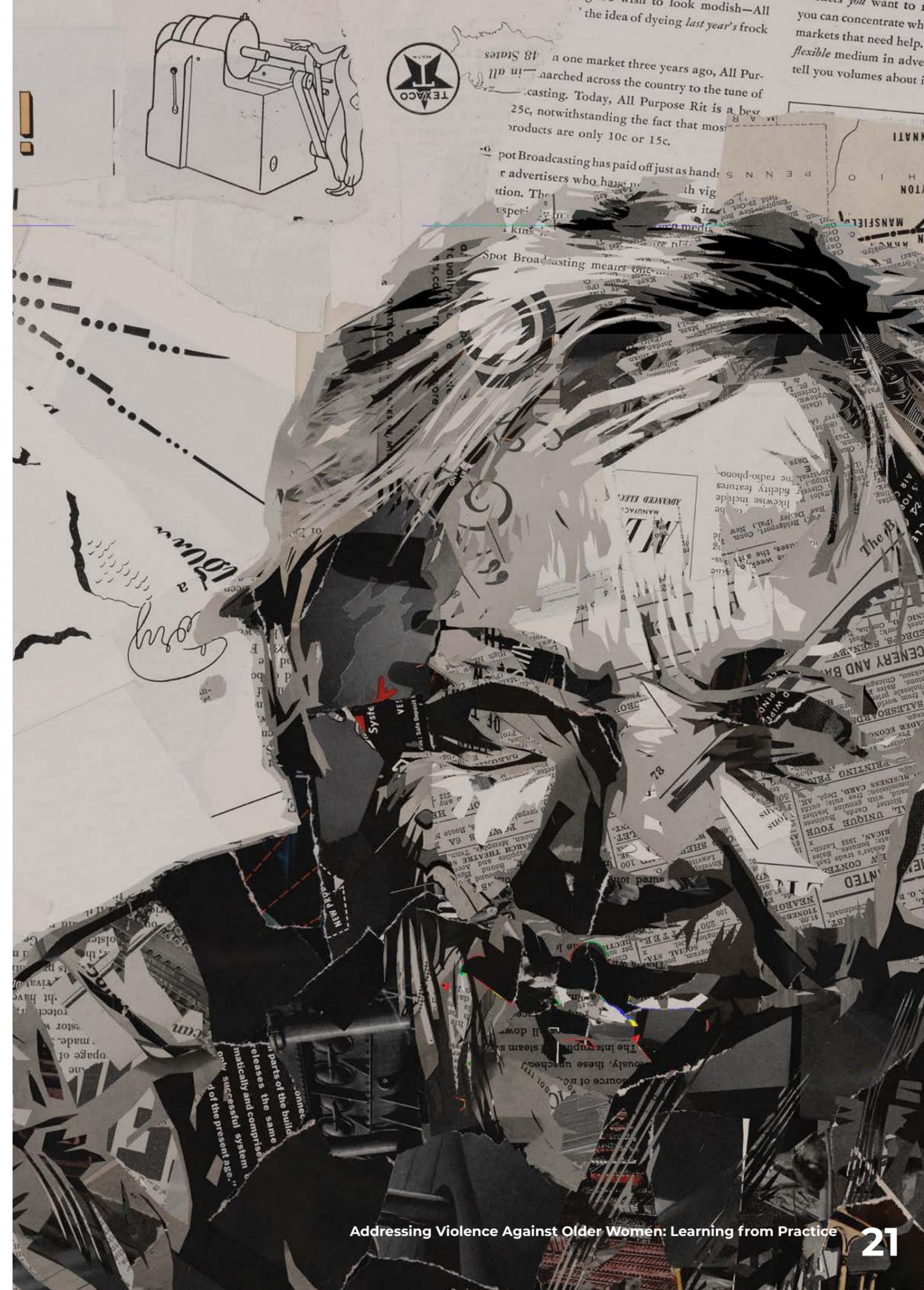
- Basic induction training for staff and volunteers should include references to, and case studies of, older women to ensure all current and future staff and volunteers receive training that is inclusive of older women as standard.
- The current lack of evidence and data on violence against older women and limited experience of engagement with this group of victim-survivors means that training, policies and procedures must be flexible so they can adapt as evidence emerges.
- Existing training packages, policies and tools can be shared or adapted to reduce resource burden. (A list of resources is provided at the end of this guide.)
- Some organisations have dedicated budgets for learning and development but many do not. Several of the funded partners offered free training and found the uptake was high but, when they introduced a small charge for the training, enrolment often decreased.

“We found lots of organisations want training when it is free but are less likely when a cost is attached – particularly as many small organisations have no training budget. This is a real barrier to delivering training and impacts on our sustainability”
(RCTN)

- Training packages and courses should be designed with a variety of needs in mind – some organisations can spare staff for one or more days, but others will need training that is condensed and/or can be done in stages (such as e-learning).

“Organisations vary in how much time they will give staff to undertake training and also in how much of a budget, if any, they have for training and development of staff”
(BSWA)

- Including case studies of older women is key and these need to be diverse in both the stories conveyed and the way they are communicated. RCTN produced a video which features the stories of two older women who were raped or sexually assaulted and are able to use the video in their staff training, as well as campaigns and wider awareness raising work.





4

Preventing and responding to violence against older women requires multi-agency working

The importance of multi-agency working to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls is widely accepted and is a fundamental principle of national and local strategies to address violence against women and girls.

This is no different for older women, however there may be additional agencies that need to be included in policies and practice.

- Housing: As described earlier in this guide, housing is a key issue for older survivors and a barrier to leaving abusive relationships. Building appropriate relationships with housing providers and ensuring there are suitable refuge places – ideally dedicated refuges or spaces – which are fully accessible and meet the needs of older survivors is key. Similarly, there is a need for long-term housing for survivors leaving abusive relationships.
- Health and social care: Some of the funded partners that attempted to work with social care providers faced difficulties with engagement. Many were not able to establish a relationship at all; others found individual professionals to be receptive and enthusiastic but could not get their company to agree to work with them. One gave an example of having a social care professional on the steering group but they were not willing to formalise a relationship, receive training or display awareness raising materials on violence against older women.

“We found there was quite a bit of resistance from some sectors, including health and social care, who were reluctant to display literature or materials [about domestic or sexual abuse] in their premises for fear that this may impact on their engagement with older people, particularly residential care homes who are often selling their care home to the consumer”
(SARSAS)

Other funded partners, such as DC, were able to build on strong relationships they had developed with the sector over the years and have forged joint working approaches with health and social care agencies for referrals, risk assessment and management, and safeguarding.

Additionally, there are a number of things to consider when building multi-agency partnerships:

- Thinking about the whole life course – Some women experiencing abuse will also be at the end of their life. This may provide opportunities for perpetrators to further the abuse and also make it harder to identify abuse. It also presents opportunities to work with organisations and agencies offering end of life care, including hospices, which may not be routinely included in multi-agency partnerships tackling violence against women.
- Utilising existing initiatives for older adults – Several funded partners found they were able to develop relationships with existing age-related initiatives and work together to raise awareness or improve referrals. For example, BSWA worked with existing Neighbourhood Network Schemes in Birmingham, set up by Adult Social Care, which were established in 2018 to help older adults live healthy happy and independent lives in their homes and communities. BSWA worked with the schemes to raise awareness of domestic abuse both within the schemes and wider professionals, and the older community, and deliver training to organisations who were part of the scheme's networks. Other funded partners, such as SARSAS, SWA, SDWA and WWA developed good relationships with local Age UK branches to co-design awareness events, materials and/or collaborate on initiatives.
- Making links with other domestic abuse and sexual violence organisations working with older women to share knowledge and ideas – Several of the funded partners shared resources, including training materials and guides, which could be repurposed. Other organisations worked together to produce materials; for example DC and SWA collaborated to produce a toolkit that highlights how domestic abuse impacts older survivors (please see the [list of Resources](#) at the end of this guide). Several also kept in touch to share progress, get advice and ideas. DC established a practitioner forum where those working with older survivors could get together, discuss experiences, troubleshoot and share ideas. They found that many practitioners working in this field feel isolated and benefitted from the space to chat with those undertaking similar work.
- Working with adult safeguarding – Adult safeguarding is a key statutory social work area with responsibility for older adults who are considered vulnerable. Many of these will be older adults experiencing domestic abuse but this is often missed by safeguarding tools and procedures which have not been specifically designed to identify and respond to domestic abuse. Currently, specialist domestic abuse pathways are distinct from adult safeguarding despite this overlap. There is a need to work together to raise awareness, improve policies and procedures and establish or support referral pathways. Several funded partners (SDWA, SWA, DC and WWDAS) worked with adult safeguarding to raise awareness of domestic abuse and develop referral pathways and initiatives to improve identification, risk assessment and risk management of older victims. Adult safeguarding boards are important structures for tackling violence and abuse against women. Specialist domestic and sexual violence organisations may seek presence on these boards as an important mechanism for increasing knowledge on violence and abuse against older women and improving interventions in communities.



5

Post-Covid ways of working must be inclusive and sensitive to older women's needs

The Covid-19 pandemic has had wide-reaching impacts in all areas of our daily lives.

The repeated lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021 and the reduced access to services during this period contributed to a significant increase in domestic abuse rates, as many abusers were able to perpetrate abuse and control without detection. For older survivors of violence and abuse, the risk factors and impacts were likely to be exacerbated by these intersections with unique implications:

- Older survivors may be more invisible than before – Social workers, doctors and other health and care services which may have traditionally been well placed to identify those at risk and/or receive disclosures are likely to have less contact with victims. For example, older women who were previously receiving regular care visits and/or were involved in adult social care in some capacity may have seen these interactions reduce significantly, meaning opportunities to identify those at risk of abuse and intervene accordingly have been lost. Isolation, shielding and lockdowns have enabled and in some cases legitimised the control that perpetrators exert against victims and have made it harder for victims to access support and/or leave.

However, some funded partners saw increases in referrals due to more community-based support, food deliveries, medicine deliveries, etc. that was commonplace during the pandemic. This suggests there are opportunities that extend beyond existing agencies to work with different kinds of services and train them in how to identify and respond to domestic abuse.

“As soon as Covid hit and community organisations started springing up to help vulnerable people and those isolating or shielding, we realised there was an opportunity to work with some of these to reach professionals and older people, such as food parcel delivery services. We have raised lots of awareness and involved older people themselves this way”
(SDWA)

“Covid-19 has been our main challenge. It has made it more difficult to undertake case work with our women as they have often been shielding with the perpetrator”
(BSWA)

- Delivering services online may be a barrier for older women – The move to deliver many support services online is likely to have had negative impacts on some older survivors, as older people are less likely than younger people to have internet access and/or be confident using technology (although it is important not to make ageist generalisations about older people’s engagement with technology). Older people may be less able to access help via the internet and the so-called ‘digital divide’ is problematic for some older people. A recent Age UK report found that older people have been left feeling lonely by the accelerated move towards digitising society. Such divides and unequal access to technology crosses age, race and class lines. Some funded partners were concerned that older women were being further marginalised by the shift to remote support and that, moving forward, many funders may wish to see online services continue (e.g. due to cost effectiveness) which may negatively impede the ability of services to reach older women and develop work in this area.

- Some older people may prefer telephone or online contact – Although online support may not be suitable for some older women, several funded partners found that online or telephone support was welcomed by older women as this gave them a sense of anonymity and familiarity with using phones. Another funded partner found women in a face-to-face group mobilised and continued their own peer support group virtually. This highlights the importance of not generalising, as some older women will want to use the phone and other forms of technology, and may even prefer this. In fact, one funded partner found that virtual group work offers multiple benefits which may help engage women who were previously very isolated – including older women – and difficult to reach via the traditional format of face-to-face support.

**“We continued to deliver one-to-one support to women but moved this to telephone (previously it was face-to-face) as a result of Covid. We found this worked really well”
(WWDAS)**

**“It has taken considerable work to get to the point of delivering group work, but as of March 2021 we have delivered our first virtual session. This is a particularly exciting development as it creates another platform from which women who are isolated can engage in group work”
(BSWA)**

- In some cases, the shift to online has brought new opportunities – Delivering trainings online and using platforms such as Teams and Zoom to hold virtual group meetings has opened up new possibilities for connecting with professionals, organisations and agencies that were previously hindered by the need to meet face-to-face. Some funded partners found that their staff were able to participate in relevant boards and committees as a result of the shift to using technology to conduct meetings, making it easier to ‘sit in’ on meetings that previously required travel or significant diary commitments.

**“Covid impacted our [service] significantly and many of those impacts were negative, but one good thing to come out of it was that we pivoted our in-person training to online workshops and training sessions and were able to reach a much larger audience than we otherwise would have done”
(SARSAS)**

**“We addressed our concerns about older women being particularly isolated and vulnerable to violence against women during lockdown by continually raising the issue at a local level via domestic and sexual violence forums and steering groups, as well as via the Adult Safeguarding board”
(SDWA)**

Comic Relief is a major charity based in the UK, with a vision of a just world, free from poverty. We have invested over £1 billion since 1985, supporting vulnerable people and communities in the UK and overseas. Through humour and stories of hope, we've shown that people can make a massive difference.

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