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Violence Against Older Women, Volume I

Nature and Extent

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Hannah Bows
Editor

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Preface

Despite over four decades of scholarly and activist commitments to examining and responding to violence against women, there remain significant gaps in knowledge in relation to specific groups of women who experience violence by men. In particular, despite the increase of intersectionality as a guiding principle in feminist research, taking sensitivity to the importance of gender, class and ethnicity in women's risk of victimisation and lived experiences of violence, age has been all but ignored in the majority of these efforts. However, there has been a slow and steady increase in research examining abuse of older people, though this is spread across a range of disciplines and fields, including elder abuse, domestic and intimate partner violence, eldercide and sexual violence. The lack of an easily identifiable body of work has not gone unnoticed, and there have been calls to bring together the existing, cross-disciplinary research into one place. This edited collection aims to address this gap by drawing the empirical work of a range of researchers and activists working broadly in the areas of violence against older women.

This collection is an important starting point for future research, theory and practice. I am grateful to the contributors who have shared their research findings, conceptual and theoretical ideas and case study

examples in the pages of this book. I would like to thank my colleagues at Durham University; in the Law School, the Department of Sociology and in the Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse for advice, guidance and support. A special thanks to my husband (David), dog (Rufus) and my lovely parents for their continuing support (and patience!).

Durham, UK

Hannah Bows

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Introduction

Hannah Bows

Introduction

This is the first volume of a two-volume edited collection examining violence against older women. In this first collection, scholars concerned with conceptualising, understanding and examining the prevalence and nature of the violence experienced by older women have authored chapters which provide an important starting point for developing meaningful discourses and future research which explores these issues in more detail. To date, there has been limited attention paid to older women and there have been no previous collections which focus on this issue. This is despite a growing awareness that older people can experience violence and abuse. There is barely a day that passes without a headline documenting a case of 'elder abuse' or an older victim of crime. However, such reporting is piecemeal and often sensationalised,

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and the lack of academic research in this area has allowed media reports to dominate understandings of violence against older people. This introductory chapter provides the contextual backdrop to this first collection by outlining the broader issues of violence against women and how violence against *older* women has been defined and conceptualised. An overview of the following eight chapters which constitute this collection is provided, highlighting the key contributions.

What Do We Know About Violence Against Women?

Despite four decades of research, legal and policy reform and activism, violence against women remains a global epidemic. The World Health Organisation (2013) reports that at least one in three women will experience intimate partner physical or sexual violence or non-intimate sexual violence in her lifetime. In the UK, it is estimated that at least 1.3 million women and 600,000 men experienced some form of domestic violence in the last year (ONS 2018a). Furthermore, homicide of women by a partner or other family members (domestic homicide) is the most frequent cause of death of women (see Bows 2018; Durose et al. 2005; ONS 2018b; Ruuskanen and Kauko 2008). Yet, many women who experience male violence will not report to the police; in the UK, it is estimated only 15% of women report sexual violence and 24% report domestic violence to the police (ONS 2018a).

Many women do disclose to other formal and informal sources; around 75% of intimate partner violence victims disclose their abuse to an informal support source, whilst 40–84% disclose to formal sources (Sylaska and Edwards 2014). However, when women do report or disclose their experiences, responses are often inadequate; a report by Safe Lives (UK) reports 85% of those experiencing domestic violence sought help from professionals an average of five times before they received effective help to stop the abuse. Similarly, criminal justice responses and outcomes are poor; in England and Wales, fewer than 10% of reported domestic violence incidents end in conviction (ONS 2016). The latest data from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) reveal referrals of

reported violence against women and girls from the police fell by 0.7% and the number of suspects charged fell by 3.1%. Efforts to improve the headline conviction rates have led to prosecutors being told to drop weak cases (Topping 2018).

This is despite an increase in reporting to the police. These data are mirrored internationally; a recent review of IPV prosecutions and convictions across five countries reports that rates vary but the best estimate is that a third of IPV offences report to the police result in a prosecution (Garner and Maxwell 2009). This attrition problem, of cases falling (or being dropped) out of the criminal justice system, is a global problem. In a recent analysis of attrition in domestic violence cases reported in Switzerland, the overall attrition rate was 80% (meaning 20% of reported offences led to a conviction) (Chopin and Aebi 2018). A larger, five-country (Australia, Canada, England and Wales, Scotland and the USA) analysis of attrition in rape and sexual assault cases reports a 87.5% attrition rate, meaning 12.5% of offences reported to the police result in a conviction (Daly and Bouhours 2010).

Taken together, these data point towards a number of issues: prevalence of violence against women remains high; however, these aggregated figures and data tell us little about the experiences of particular groups of women. Most of the data on the prevalence, nature, characteristics and responses to violence against women are based on victimisation surveys, national police-recorded data and academic research. There are several limitations on each of these sources. First, across the different sources of data, various definitions for different forms of violence against women are operationalised. Second, national victimisation surveys often impose lower and upper age caps on the surveys; for example, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) collects previous year and lifetime prevalence data on domestic violence, sexual violence and stalking from respondents aged 16–74 in a dedicated self-completion module. Until 2017, the upper age limit of this CSEW module was 59. Similarly, scholarly studies have overwhelmingly focused on violence against women of childbearing age and younger. Very few have specifically included, or focused on, women aged 50 and over. Moreover, both victimisation surveys and academic research are usually restricted to community-dwelling participants; those living

in institutions or temporary accommodation are usually excluded. This means women in care homes, hospitals, prisons, refugee and asylum camps and centres and other institutions are excluded from these studies and statistics. Finally, data provided by the victimisation surveys, police and academic research are rarely disaggregated. In fact, disaggregation by particular demographics or characteristics is usually not possible. Consequently, it is not possible to examine whether particular age groups of victims experience VAW in the same, similar or different ways to younger groups. Similarly, we know very little about the impacts and consequences of sexual violence for the very young, and those aged 60 and over, due to a lack of national data and academic research. We also know women report/disclose their experiences but it is not clear whether this is true of all women and whether the source of disclosure changes depending on the victim's age, characteristics, circumstances or other factors. Finally, we know the criminal justice system often fails victims of domestic and sexual violence but it is not clear if particular groups of women face additional challenges.

Collectively, these limitations of the different sources of data on violence against women restrict our knowledge and understanding of violence against *all* women. Instead, we rely on data that only capture violence on particular types of women and therefore present a partial picture. Yet, these data are used to justify and inform resource allocation, policy and practice developments, and on which we build knowledge and theory.

A small pool of research examining violence against older people has emerged, but it currently spans multiple fields of inquiry leading to a fragmented and disparate body of work that lacks conceptual, theoretical and methodological cohesion. There is no single place where research on violence against older women can be located, and searching for relevant literature requires a range of keyword searches and trawling through policy documents. Moreover, most of the research cannot be compared due to the disciplinary differences. The aim of this edited collection is to begin to address the gaps in evidence in relation to age and develop a better understanding of violence against older women, providing a compendium of research on violence against older people. The remainder of this chapter will contextualise the collection by setting out

the terms and definitions underpinning this area of scholarly research, the broader legal and political landscape within which violence against older women is situated, and a detailed overview of the contributions to this collection. The focus of this collection is on domestic violence, sexual violence and homicide. Women can, and do, experience other forms of violence in significant numbers: financial abuse, stalking/harassment, honour-based violence, but there is very little research in these areas. There is an urgent need for violence against women research to include older women to develop an evidence base in these areas.

Terms and Definitions

Before considering the broader conceptual basis of this edited collection, it is important to briefly unpack some of the terms and definitions adopted in the chapters of this book. The collection brings together scholars and practitioners who are researching different forms of violence against 'older' women. There remains much debate about the variety of terms and concepts that currently span the research examining different forms of violence and abuse against older women. There are no agreed definitions of the terms 'older' or 'elderly'. In the existing literature, the term 'older women' has been applied in different studies to variously mean women aged 50 and over, 55 and over, 60 and over and 65 and over (Mann et al. 2014). As Lea et al. (2011) have pointed out, the terms 'old', 'older' and 'elderly' are inconsistently applied with all of these terms being variously applied to people aged anything from 50 years and over by different researchers, policymakers and practitioners. Furthermore, 'old age' is defined in various public policies as anywhere between 50 and 70.

It is important to acknowledge that one of the difficulties in establishing a single definition of the terms old/older/elderly or indeed 'old age' is the variation in life expectancy across the globe. The 'average' global life expectancy is 70 for men and 74 for women in 2018, but across Africa the average is almost ten years less, standing at 61 for men and 64 for women (Statista 2018), whereas in the UK it is 79 for men and 83 for women (ONS 2018c). Consequently, when we say the world is rapidly ageing, we actually mean the Western world.