

Older Feminist Network (Est 1982) [https:// older-feminist.org.uk](https://older-feminist.org.uk)

Introduction

On 10th November 2022 the UK underwent scrutiny of its human rights record as part of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

This report by the Older Feminist Network (OFN) is in response to the UK GREVIO report published in July 2023. This is our first report since the European Union Istanbul Convention on Violence Against Women and Girls & Domestic Violence was inaugurated in 2011 and ratified by a majority of EU members.

We base our responses on the Istanbul Convention, its Articles and the Four pillars of Prevention Protection, Prosecution and co-ordinated Policies.

While OFN is a well-established UK organisation, we are a small collective of mainly retired older women volunteers without paid workers or researchers. We reach our members and the wider public through newsletter, website, blogs, face to face and hybrid zoom meetings, meeting twice a month. With this in mind OFN would like to state that what is found within our submission is not a fully comprehensive submission that would cover all bases but rather to highlight and amplify the voices of older women whose voices from our years of experience are excluded from state policies, often not heard, dismissed, laden with cruel stereotypes or simply erased.

Older women have grown up in a culture of misogyny and sexism in which women have been denigrated and objectified, the government having been hitherto complaisant about a culture of sexist and misogynistic behaviour. We are limited in our comments on the practical implications of the UK Governments responses to GREVIO questions because they are mainly in the form of intentions and plans, the implementation of which we anticipate with hope.

In the Istanbul convention under the Paragraph 'Safety and Empowerment for all Women and Girls in all their Diversity', OFN are pleased to note that 'age', is mentioned as a principle within the European Convention on Human Rights and that further down the paragraph, it talks about women who face 'specific barriers and experience multiple discrimination in their access to protection and assistance, within those specific listings older women', are noted. UKs own Equality Act 2010 has Age as one of the 9 protected characteristics, though it does not speak specifically or refer to VAWG/DV as discrimination against women or men, but rather uses the collective term people that outlines in general terms that ageism in most cases is illegal under the Act.

OFN also are pleased to note that the convention defines sex and gender as follows: 'the use of the term 'gender aims to acknowledge how harmful attitudes and perceptions about roles and behaviour expected of women in society play a role in perpetuating Violence Against Women (Girls)' such terminology does not replace the biological definition " sex nor of "women and men", but aims to stress how much stereotypes and violence do not originate from biological differences but from harmful preconceptions about women (girls)'

We examine the UK Governments GREVIO submission to identify where in particular it refers to 'older women's specific needs', rather than those of women/girls not in the category

of older women. OFN wanted to identify positive policy where it existed and urge greater linkage and inclusion in strategic plans where it could be argued that the unique needs of older women have been overlooked or yet to materialise.

Our aim is for UK parties to ensure women that older women are treated as viable human beings, with lifetime experience/skills and to acknowledge the massive valuable contributions made by older women as volunteers/family carers in the retirement as well as unique contributions to society, the arts, media, politics, adventurers, record breakers, literature so much more.

## Prevention

One of the significant areas that OFN signals that creates multiple barriers and discrimination which lead to the specific and generalised abuse of older women is ageist stereotypes. Older women experience social isolation, denigration and casual sexist abuse on a daily basis.

It is also of concern that older women experience and can be vulnerable to psychological abuse in the form of coercive control, economic control (frequently fuelled by historic inequalities in pay and Pensions), violence from spouses, adult children, grandchildren, live in, visiting and residential caregivers.

The recent Age UK study (Dec 2022)

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/discover/2022/december/new-data-on-domestic-abuse-in-older-people/> quotes newly released statistics from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) that, for the first time, identified victims of Domestic Abuse by age.

This data revealed that a shocking 400,000 older people over 60 have experienced Domestic Abuse in 2021. sexual violence was gendered; females were overwhelmingly victims of sexual violence, whilst the vast majority of perpetrators were male. The elder abuse literature has found carers and family members to be the main perpetrators of sexual violence, with some studies suggesting adult children or grandchildren to be the most common perpetrators ( [Lundy and Grossman 2005](#) ; [Naughton et al. 2010](#) ), whereas this study on sexual violence found the most common perpetrators were acquaintances or partners/husbands.

In the most recent femicide report 22 women over 70 years old were murdered:- 19 by partners, 1 by a stranger and 2 by sons

The second most common location of the assaults was care homes, which shows a significant proportion of offences are being committed in these institutions

## Protection

The stereotypical image of an older woman often casts her as frail, dependent, vulnerable, inactive and in extreme cases surplus to requirements.

OFN and other Age charities work to reverse and eschew these stereotypes and give voice to older people in general and women in particular who statistically are the larger demographic.

Under the Convention the role of Protection is for state parties to provide where necessary protection for those vulnerable to VAWG/DV which includes older women in all their diverse categories.

It is understood that vast numbers of women/girls do not report abuse for a variety of reasons that include, shame, economic dependency, social attitudes, victim blaming, reluctance for fear of reprisal from the perpetrator.

Appropriate Support services that respect and validate older women's concerns and reports of VAWG/DV which include reporting to all statutory services and providing trauma-based help are essential. In a similar vein to the Forced Marriage Unit older women should have access to well promoted and free help lines and sexual abuse services and safe single sex shelters that address older women's needs.

### **Prosecution**

OFN welcomes the recent passing of the UK Domestic Abuse Act 2021, for the first time defines domestic abuse which also includes those who witness abuse are also victims. This should encompass domestic abuse of older women by relatives living with them. These victims also need consideration and support given the upheaval that such prosecutable violence could invoke.

State parties are required to ensure laws that fully investigate allegations of VAWG /DV are investigated and that law enforcement must respond positively to calls for help, collect evidence and assess risks of further violence. Data from the FMU (Forced Marriage Unit) that older women from diverse communities often participate in or are coerced into encouraging forced marriage, assaults, murder of female family members or perform FGM. Given their status as older women they may not be aware, that what to them is a cultural practice, is actually a serious breach of the law. The FMU has raised awareness of these issues so that women know that such practices are illegal

In the case of older women much abuse takes place behind closed doors both in the home and public facilities that can often be closed institutions where residents who are isolated or experience mental health needs, dementia and fragility are at risk. This can be due to a range of factors, including a lack of awareness among health and social care professionals. Tools used by professionals to assess risk of domestic abuse often don't consider the specific risk factors affecting older people. The cost-of-living crisis may leave older women more susceptible to economic abuse and make it more difficult to leave where they rely financially on their abuser.

In UK the Crown Prosecution service will now have to undertake judicial proceedings that avoid secondary victimisation of female victims of sexual crimes including rape. The current rape and sexual crimes prosecution rates in UK are critically low, with few if any complaints by women of rape being prosecuted. In the case of older women often there is denial that such sexual crimes take place.

### **Integrated Policies**

Violence against Women and Girls is encouraged by sexism and misogyny. Older women are unsurprised by State services recent reports from the NHS <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/4488/sexism-in-medicine-bma-report-august-2021.pdf> the armed forces <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/856/women-in-the-armed-forces-from-recruitment-to-civilian-life/> the police <https://www.college.police.uk/article/tackling-sexism-and-misogyny-policing> and London Fire brigade (Nov 22 Report inaccessible) reveal shocking levels of Sexist and misogynistic behaviour among staff. When the latter report was published the Transport secretary responded with a loose statement about what organisations should do. He rejected the proposal to hold a National Racist and Misogynist Inquiry. He seemed unaware of the APPG/UN report (2021) on misogyny in the UK. The

APPG UN recommendations /strategies from the report [https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report\\_Updated.pdf](https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf)

In the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, The first phase of the campaign launched in March 2022 aims to target and challenge the harmful behaviours, such as misogyny documented in above reports. The APPG UN recommendations /strategies from the report [https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report\\_Updated.pdf](https://www.unwomenuk.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/APPG-UN-Women-Sexual-Harassment-Report_Updated.pdf) to improve mechanisms to provide women and girls with greater confidence that reporting incidents of abuse would have a preventative effect, and would pave the way to create safer spaces for all.

For state parties to achieve their commitments found within the Articles of the convention states actions must be based on the premise that no single agency or institution can deliver a reduction in VAWG/DV to women on their own. UK GREVIO report indicates that a comprehensive strategy is being conceptualised to achieve integrated policies that should in time see a reduction in the incidents of VAWG/DV in UK in all its manifestations.

Governments are required to dedicate sufficient resources to central, devolved and local authorities to ensure effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention. The necessity to provide suitable housing for victims of abuse requires targeted funding, which after years of austerity may be difficult for local authorities to find. 'The right accommodation' aspiration may be unachievable, when local councils in Nottingham and Birmingham have recently issued Section 114 notices of bankruptcy and 1 in 6 Councils are expecting to do the same in 2014-2015. Targeted government funds are needed.

Should older women of all diversities not be specifically mentioned, covered or included in the current strategic plans/policies to tackle the serious issue of VAWG /DV within the community women and their needs specifically highlighted women will, as OFN asserts, at best be patronised as if they are 'children' or worst rendered invisible.

### **Recommendations**

OFN would like to see greater importance given under the Government Monitoring GREVIO duties to ensure that easily accessible data is produced and recommend that 'Plain English' standard Guidance methods are adopted to make it easier for the average older woman, who may have lower levels of literacy, or poor English to understand what she can expect from the Government regarding VAWG/DV strategy that support her needs.

Procedures for tackling risks to women including older women's in the UK VAWG/DV strategy would include the following :

- Specific training of all professionals in both public and private sectors to end denial that surrounds rape as being a crime that impacts only younger women
- Media and Awareness Campaigns
- Promote positive images and celebrate contributions in all aspects of society in which older women participate. Challenging corrosive older women stereotypes and myths
- Enable older women from diverse communities to understand that Forced marriage, assaults/murder of young women along with FGM is actually breaking the law and consequences can include prison sentence for those who collude or are witness to such serious crimes.
- Provide Specialists who understand how coercive control, economic, psychological and physical abuse can render vulnerable women into fear and silence.

- Robust protection orders that remove perpetrators

Older Women detained in prisons, hospital mental health facilities, homeless shelters can be vulnerable in mixed sex settings and should not be forced to share accommodation that includes men. In mental health settings unwell patients have been ignored when they complain about harassment. Older women can be subjected to physical violence from intimidation, fraud, sexual harassment to actual sexual assault and rape. Older women can also face risks of exploitation from employers and voluntary organisation.

OFN urge that greater attention be given to accurate data that specifies the numbers of older women within the ONS statistics subjected to VAWG'DV to assist in identifying where to target appropriate remedies.

In November 2022 after significant delays, UK ratified the Istanbul Convention with the exception of Article 59, that protects non-status refugee women/girls under the umbrella of the Convention. Amnesty International find it hard to understand the justification 'to await evidence from the short-term pilot project Support for Migrant Victims' given that the scheme is about support, rather than resident status.

OFN have found it difficult to find statistics from UK Office of National Statistics, the Home Office, or anywhere else, as to the numbers of older non-status women refugees who are detained for processing. Arguably this category of women face 'specific barriers, and will most likely experience multiple discrimination', warned against by the Istanbul convention.

OFN, along with human rights organisations and several countries (Spain, Italy, Finland, Tunisia, Mexico) recommended that the UK reconsider or lift the reservation to article 59 and provide equal protection to migrant women, including those with no recourse to public funds.

OFN s current reading of the UK report does address some issues which include older women as a category along with other groups who face specific barriers and experience multiple discriminations in their access to preventative and protective services and treatment. However, given the diversity of older women in UK and their growing numbers as an ageing population OFN would have wanted to see specific references as documented within the 4 Pillars of the Convention.

OFN welcome the arrival next year of the GREVIO monitoring group and hope that we can discuss some of OFNs concerns regarding current omissions that we believe need inclusion into the UK report that specifically relate to the needs, status and conditions of older UK women.