

A Feminist Perspective on Gender and Elder Abuse: A Review of the Literature

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This literature review describes a body of work that applies a “gender-based analysis” to elder abuse. Associated with feminism, this approach assumes that gender determines women’s role and status in society and shapes their social relationships. It further assumes that it is impossible to apply theory, practice or policy to social issues without taking gender into account. Several of the authors whose work is highlighted contend that elder abuse has traditionally been viewed as “gender neutral,” leading to inadequate responses that focus exclusively on personal or interpersonal problems. Some call for new analyses that consider the dual forces of ageism and sexism in elder abuse.

Introduction

For over two decades, researchers, policymakers and service providers have applied various models and conceptual frameworks to elder abuse. Most explanations of abuse have focused on the attributes of abusers and victims, or on the relationship between the two. Factors associated with perpetrators that have been looked at include stress, psychosis, burnout, personality disorders or addictions to alcohol, drugs or gambling; factors associated with victims include physical disability, cognitive impairment and dependency. In recent years, a growing number of theorists and researchers have pointed out that these traditional explanations are inadequate because they fail to acknowledge the significance of gender. In response, they have called for a gender-based analysis.

The “Gender Lens”

Feminist ideology holds that gender determines women’s role and status in society and shapes their social relationships; consequently, it is impossible to apply theory, practice or policy to social issues without taking gender into consideration (Neysmith, 1995; Whittaker, 1995). Feminist theorists Kate Millet (1971) and Susan Brownmiller (1975) were among the first to suggest that women were vulnerable to violence because of their unequal social, economic and political status in society. These gender-based inequalities further limit the resources that women have available to them to stop the violence (for many women, leaving abusive partners results in poverty). The assertion that violence stems from women’s subordinate status in society has been widely accepted; an epidemiological report from the School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University (1999) acknowledged the growing consensus that abuse of women and girls is best understood within a gender framework.

Feminist theory further holds that when gender-based inequalities and discrimination are the underlying causes of violence, traditional approaches to prevention such as arbitration, mediation, therapy or counseling are ineffective. Instead, the underlying causes of gender-based violence must be addressed through such means as legislation to place more resources at the disposal of women, ensure equal rights and equal access to resources, end discrimination and criminalize abuse. “Feminist practice” at the individual level includes consciousness-raising about violence and its causes, and providing opportunities and support for women to disclose abuse, assert their rights, learn skills to live violence-free, and acquire resources to gain control over their lives (Vinton, 1999).

Gender and Elder Abuse

Several explanations are offered for why there have been no systematic attempts to develop a feminist analysis of elder abuse to date. Terri Whittaker (1995) suggests that elder abuse has been “screened out of the (gender) debate on the grounds that women have been found to abuse their elders too.” Neysmith (1995) concurs, adding that female-perpetrated elder abuse “seems to contradict an understanding of violence, which sees it stemming from gender-based power inequities” (Neysmith, 1995).

The authors who have looked to the research to achieve a better understanding of gender differences in elder abuse point out that the findings are inconclusive, ambiguous, misleading and, in some cases, contradictory (Crichton et al, 1999). They attribute these problems to widespread inconsistencies in defining abuse and methodological shortcomings, which include the fact that most studies have failed to employ representative samples or taken victims’ subjective experiences into account. Others cite researchers’ failure to control for such intervening or mediating factors as the preponderate number of older women, the severity of the abuse, or living arrangement (Neysmith, 1995; Whittaker, 1995, Penhale, 1999; Crichton et al, 1999, Vinton, 1999).

While acknowledging the shortcomings of the research, the authors have drawn conclusions about victims and abusers. Crichton et al (1999) conclude that men are more likely to perpetrate abuse and women are more likely to be victims, but caution that larger, random sample surveys are needed. Neysmith (1995) points out that the extent and impact of force used by women is much less than that inflicted by men. Griffin and Aitken (1996) call for new, broader analyses to account for abuse by female perpetrators; in particular they suggest the need for further research into the gendered nature of

abuse in institutional settings, where both perpetrators and victims are likely to be female (and, therefore, socially and economical disempowered). Whittaker (1995) suggests that this debate is counterproductive, concluding that “hairsplitting discussions about what is abuse and how common it is obscures the evidence that a significant number of women are exposed to unacceptable forms of violence.”

Failure to develop a gender-based analysis of elder abuse is also attributed to ageist attitudes within the women’s movement (Hightower, 2002) and the failure of feminists to take an interest in older women (Whittaker, 1995). Aitken and Griffin (1996) agree, adding that, “On the whole, feminism has distanced itself from older women.”

Regardless of the reasons why feminists and others have failed to consider the role of gender-based inequalities in elder abuse, their failure to do so has led to inadequate responses, according to some. Whitaker (1996) sums it up best by concluding that traditional responses to elder abuse “individualize or privatize what are essentially political problems.” She further calls on feminists to “develop analyses of elder abuse which acknowledge the social and cultural construction of abuse and locate causation outside of the personality traits and characteristics of either abuser or abused.”

An International Perspective

The socio-political and economic factors that contribute to elder abuse are increasingly being discussed in international forums. This trend may reflect both the growing interest by global development organizations in gender issues, as well as the framing of elder abuse as a human rights concern. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, for example, challenged all population, health and development organizations to take gender into account in all their activities. In a report prepared for the World Assembly on Aging, the U.N. Secretary General acknowledged the role of both sexism and ageism as contributing factors in elder abuse (United Nations, 2002). The report cites “patrilineal inheritance laws and land rights that affect the political economy of relationships and the distribution of power” among the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of older persons in some settings. It further casts the mistreatment of older persons within the broader landscape of “poverty, structural inequalities and human rights violations,” which disproportionately affect women worldwide.

An electronic discussion forum, “Gender Aspects of Violence and Abuse of Older Persons,” conducted in April 2002 by INSTRAW, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, also explored the role of gender in elder abuse (AgeingNet, 2002). Participants from around the world described the formidable cultural and institutional barriers to stopping abuse against elderly women that exist in some countries. As one participant stated, “Violence is an everyday experience in women’s lives in Pakistani society... The real issue is how do we create respect for women in Pakistani society which still continues to believe that a woman is just a slipper on the feet of a man” (AgeingNet, 2002). Participants observed that blatant abuses against women and girls such as female foeticide (the aborting of female fetuses) and karo kari (“honor killings”) are still practiced in some areas despite sustained efforts to eradicate them. These experiences point to the futility of addressing elder abuse while ignoring the broader context of institutionalized sexism and ageism in which it occurs.

The Need for a Broader Analysis

While the authors featured in this review contend that gender must be taken into account to understand and respond to abuse, most agree that a gender-based analysis alone is insufficient to explain the problem. Rather, they suggest that elder abuse represents a convergence of gender and age-related factors; discrimination and disadvantage associated with both gender and age combine to compromise older women’s ability to achieve or maintain self-sufficiency and render them more likely to be poor and/or dependent. Negative perceptions and damaging stereotypes of old women further contribute to isolation, marginalization and brutality.

Gender-based analysis has been evolving over the past thirty years. It has been accompanied by growing recognition that gender-based inequality is not the only form of inequality operating in women’s lives. For example, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project of Duluth, Minnesota, which developed the model used by many domestic violence programs nationwide, now concedes that “all forms of institutionalized oppression, including racism, classism, heterosexism, and ageism increase the vulnerability of women to both individual acts of violence and to institutionalized acts of violence” (<http://www.duluth-model.org>). More research, debate and analysis are clearly needed to achieve a clearer understanding of how the economic, social and political status of women and the elderly, as well as the cumulative effects of ageism and sexism, contribute to elder abuse.

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