

## Elder Abuse - 2009

R. Simeon b. Yohai said, "...the most difficult of all mitzvot is 'Honor your father and your mother....'" (Tanhuma Ekev, 2). Jewish tradition teaches us that to save a life is to save the world. It does not qualify the life by age.

### Issue

Older people, who are targets of elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation, face unique barriers in identifying and protecting themselves against abuse.

### Background

Women of Reform Judaism has a longstanding history of resolutions on the rights and well-being of women and girls. In particular, WRJ has taken strong positions since 1973 against the abuse of women and children.

Elder abuse includes several types of maltreatment that occur among women and men ages sixty and older, most often at the hands of a caregiver, family member, or a person the elder trusts. There are six types of elder abuse as defined by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control:

Physical – bodily injury to an elder as a result of hitting, kicking, pushing, slapping, burning, or other show of force.

Sexual – forcing an elder to take part in a sexual act without consent.

Emotional – behaviors that harm an elder's self-worth or emotional well-being such as scaring, embarrassing, name calling, destroying sentimental property, or isolation.

Neglect – failure to meet basic needs such as food, housing, clothing, and/or medical care.

Abandonment – knowingly leaving an elder without a means to meet basic needs.

Financial – illegally misusing an elder's money, property, or assets.

There are no official national or international statistics that confirm the number of abused older adults. Studies conducted in the late 1990s, however, reveal that four to six percent of older North Americans reported they were in a relationship they considered physically abusive. More recent surveys suggest approximately 500,000 victims of elder abuse a year, while others indicate that it could be closer to one million.<sup>1</sup>

Although older women rarely show up in shelters or domestic violence programs, studies indicate that physical and verbal abuse are occurring at rates similar to or higher than those for younger women. Data on elder abuse in domestic settings suggest that as few as one in fourteen incidents come to the attention of authorities and reports of financial exploitation are only one in twenty-five.<sup>2</sup> Several factors keep older victims from seeking help, thus minimizing their options, and forcing them to silently endure years of physical and/or emotional pain, often ending only when they themselves or their abusers die. The barriers to seeking help include: isolation due to age or disability; shame about not being able to care for themselves; cultural and generational issues relating to marriage and divorce; embarrassment if the abuser is their own child; mixed emotions when either the abuser or the victim is a spouse or loved one acting as a result of a stroke or Alzheimer's/dementia; or a total physical and/or financial dependence on the abuser. Additionally, even when abuse is reported, credibility can be diminished because of assumed or diagnosed dementia. Injuries and bruising are also often incorrectly associated with physical instability or falls.

Traditional resources, like shelters and hot lines, aren't making the critical connection needed to address the issues of abuse with older victims. According to a survey by the US National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later

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Life, few women's shelters promote themselves to older women or are equipped to handle their special needs.

Various bills to protect seniors from elder abuse are currently before the United States Congress and in June 2009 the Canadian federal government launched a national awareness campaign on abuse of older adults.

Elder abuse is a growing issue as the population of the world ages. The United Nations International Plan of Action adopted by all countries in Madrid in April 2002, recognized the importance of preventing elder abuse in an aging world. The Toronto Declaration on the Global Prevention of Elder Abuse, sponsored by the Ontario Government in November 2002, calls for practical action at the local, regional, and national levels and specifically underscores education and dissemination of information as vital components of a multi-approach solution. In the fall of 2008, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women adopted a recommendation on older women and the protection of their human rights.

#### Resolution

In fulfillment of our Jewish mandate to respect and care for our elders and to treat them as we ourselves wish to be treated, WRJ urges its North American affiliates to:

1. Present programs to educate congregations and communities about the signs of elder abuse and the importance of breaking down the barriers that prevent some elders from living safe and healthy lives,
2. Work with community coalitions to develop respite care programs for family caregivers, which would alleviate some of the emotional and physical burdens of eldercare, resulting in better care for the elder and better health for the caregiver,
3. Encourage sisterhoods and congregations to assist in accessing, evaluating, and monitoring the quality of home, community-based, and institutional care,
4. Call for awareness within the medical community to be alert to signs of potential abuse and to intervene when necessary,
5. Assist efforts to make existing women's shelters accessible for abused older women with physical and cognitive disabilities, and
6. Support legislation and campaigns to establish needed definitions, strategies, and programs to protect elders from abuse and provide the means to respond when necessary.

1) AARP, "And Then He Hit Me", David France, January 2006

2) The Gerontologist, "The Prevalence of Elder Abuse: A Random Sample Survey", Pillemer, Karl, and David Finkelhor; Consumer Digest, "The Fleecing of America's Elderly", John Wasik, 2000

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