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March 24, 2022

Via email to: FEWO@parl.gc.ca

**To: House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women**

**Re: Study on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada**

We are pleased to submit this brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women regarding intimate partner and domestic violence in Canada. We presented to the committee previously regarding challenges faced by senior women (2019) and abuse of older women (2012).

The Canadian Centre for Elder Law conducts research and develops reports and educational resources on legal and policy issues related to aging. Our work is informed by research, input from expert advisory committees, and broad consultation with seniors, their families, and professionals from all sectors who work with older people. We are part of a non-profit agency called the British Columbia Law Institute, which has been a leader in law reform for over 24 years. We offer the following comments to support the committee to consider the unique challenges facing older women survivors of violence.

### Older Women Face Unique Barriers

In 2014 we were retained by Atira Women's Resources Society to work with the violence against women sector to identify promising practices in assisting older women fleeing violence. This work was funded by the Government of Canada.

As part of this work we surveyed transition houses and shelters across Canada, and interviewed their staff. 90% of the shelters indicated they had assisted women over the age of 65 in recent years. They identified significant financial and institutional obstacles to supporting older women which restricted their ability to meet older women's full needs. In particular, 67% said they lacked "the capacity to provide support to women with health and disability issues" (page 8).<sup>1</sup>

The resulting report, [Promising Practices across Canada for Housing Women who are Older and Fleeing Abuse](#) identified 13 barriers that older women face (at pages 5-6), including the following:

- 1. Older women often face intergenerational or long-term violence.** Their physical and mental health issues resulting from abuse are more likely to be brushed off as signs of aging.
- 2. Older women are often receiving or providing care.** Women experiencing violence are often reluctant to leave an abusive environment if someone is relying on them for care, including their abuser. They may also be unwilling or unable to leave their home if this would interrupt or compromise their own health care.
- 3. The myth of caregiver stress dominates elder abuse response.** This myth suggests that older women are harmed by exhausted but well-being caregivers.

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Women who encounter this rationalization for family violence are not supported in accessing support. Instead support tends to go to the abusive caregiver.

4. **Older women fear loss of home.** Leaving an unsafe home can be very challenging. Transition houses are often inadequately resourced to support the needs of older women needs and so they face the prospect of long-term care or institutional living, which may be an untenable alternative to violence.
5. **Older women often have limited financial security.** Older women often live on low, fixed pensions or are financially dependent on a partner. They have limited capacity to support themselves or pay for alternative housing because they cannot get paid work.
6. **Loss of community can be devastating for older women.** Particularly for immigrant older women, leaving an abusive home may mean severing ties with community and family. Lifelong attachment to a community can make it difficult to start a new life in a safer place.
7. **Generational values limit access to support.** An older woman may have more traditional attitudes regarding marriage and family—even discussing the violence may be challenging.
8. **The abuser is sometimes the older woman’s child.** Older women are often hurt by their children or grandchildren. They may feel guilt, or the shame of being a “bad mother”. They may fear loss of contact with family and want to protect their abusive child from harm.

### Older Women have Complex Support Needs

Older women often have complex health needs, mobility issues, and frailty. They may seem mentally incapable due to untreated health issues and long-standing trauma. They require support from people and systems who understand both aging and intimate partner violence. Currently neither adult protection systems—designed to respond to elder abuse—nor transition house systems—set up to address the needs of younger women—do a good job supporting older women. Older woman survivors of violence are everyone’s policy and practice blind spot.

Transition houses and safe houses must be set up and funded to serve the needs of older women. This includes:

1. **Address accessibility issues.** Housing providers must be funded to build new houses and renovate current houses to enhance accessibility for women who have physical disabilities;
2. **Deliver age-friendly services and support.** Organizations that run the transition houses must be funded to provide the services older women need, such as:
  - a. Support accessing health care, including transportation and patient navigation, for both themselves and the people they care for. Helping older women access the health care they need takes time and skill.
  - b. Enhanced outreach. Often older women are unwilling or unable to leave home. Outreach can be the most effective way to provide counselling, support, and safety planning assistance.
  - c. Staff trained to support older women. Older women may need help with pensions, property division, and financial and health care planning—not help with child support and custody issues.
3. **Extend maximum stay rules.** Older women often need more time than younger women to find suitable long-term housing and prepare to live independently outside the transition house.

The above policy and funding improvements are critical to enhancing Canada’s capacity to support older women who have experienced intimate partner or family violence.

Yours respectfully,

Krista James  
National Director



<sup>1</sup> Atira Women’s Resource Society, “Promising Practices Across Canada for Housing Women Who are Older and Fleeing Abuse” (2015), online (pdf): <[www.bcli.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Promising-Practices-for-Housing-Women-who-are-Older.pdf](http://www.bcli.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Promising-Practices-for-Housing-Women-who-are-Older.pdf)>.