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Violent Crime Stats Raise Alarm ***Elderly Women Most Vulnerable***

By Barbara West

An epidemic of violence has broken out globally against older women, especially those who live alone. Not even Brooke Astor, a grande dame of New York high society, was safe because of (or despite?) her money.

Mrs. Astor died at the age of 104, but not before her grandsons alleged that their father had swindled their grandmother and abused her by forcing her to live in cold, dirty rooms dressed in tattered, urine-soaked nightgowns. Anthony “Tony” Marshall, Mrs. Astor’s only child, has been indicted on charges including grand larceny, possession of stolen property, forgery and conspiracy, and is now on trial in New York City.

One need not be famous or even fabulously wealthy, however, to make the news. Daily news digests of elder abuse show that crimes against the most senior and most vulnerable members of our society — little old ladies — take place every day in every country of the world. Old men are hardly safe, but the disproportionate impact of abuse on women — globally — is nothing short of scandalous.

Statistically, women are the poorest members of every country. But they also live longer and those who have assets most often become victims. As a result, women comprise the majority of the older population in virtually all nations of the world¹ and are the victims of nearly 92% of all financial crimes directed at seniors.²

Women also are statistically more likely to be poorer and to

live alone more often than their male counterparts. This leads to a greater dependency on others for personal care and assistance, but older women also tend to have a limited ability to pay for necessary services.³

According to the federal Administration on Aging (AOA), the population of U.S. citizens age 65 and older will increase from 35 million in 2000 to 40 million in 2010 (a 15% increase) and then will leap to 55 million in 2020 (an increase of 36% for that decade alone). Those who live to age 65 have an average life expectancy of an additional 18.7 years — 20 years for women and 17.1 years for men.

Half of the women age 75 and older live alone. The AOA's statistics also reveal that older men are much more likely to be married than older women — 72% of men over 65 were married while only 42% of their female counterparts were married.⁴

Dependency, poverty, mental illness, loneliness and isolation are among the key factors that increase the risk for abuse and exploitation.⁵ As women become widowed, they may transfer some aspects of the partner relationship to an adult child, who then becomes increasingly intertwined in the parent's life.

Other factors, such as a history of domestic abuse in her "family of origin" or in the woman's later domestic life, may allow patterns of abusive behavior to be transferred to the relationship between the senior and the caretaker/child.⁶ Additional risk factors for fraud and exploitation include a general perception that women are weak and malleable, and that they have less financial acumen because their husbands managed the money. By some estimates, victims are familiar with their abusers in more than 90% of reported cases.⁷

These risk factors blend with the reality of the lives of senior women to create a "perfect storm" for battery. Reports in the national press in 2009 vary widely, but estimate that in the U.S. alone there are likely to be between 1-to-2 million reports of elder abuse annually (some reports suggest that there may be as many as 5

million abuse incidents annually).

The numbers on under-reporting of these crimes are even more staggering: No more than 1 in 15 (7%) or as few as 1 in 25 (4%) crimes are actually reported.⁸ Clearly, the senior's ability to report a crime may be hampered by various factors: the cognitive and physical inability to access help; fear of isolation and fear of the loss of the caretaker/abuser's help; language barriers; lack of money; cultural norms; pride; and shame.

Some studies also suggest that different cultures may view some behaviors differently owing to a range of expectations of adult children and their responsibility for the care of their elderly parents.⁹ Ethnic and cultural differences also fed into reporting issues, however, with some seniors more disposed to a level of privacy about "family matters" that works to shield abusers from detection.¹⁰

Recent legislative efforts in Washington to heighten sentences for crimes against vulnerable citizens and to increase the opportunities for mandatory reporting of suspected abuse failed to pass out of committee in the Senate (SB 5639) and House (HB 1788). This kind of legislation seems to be only the tip of the iceberg of the changes and improvements that are needed.

Given the impact of ethnicity and cultural interpretation on behavior, efforts at community education and awareness also are needed to address communities in ways that are culturally relevant. Patterns of domestic violence that are inculcated in youth seem to rear up again in later life. Statistically, older women report fewer incidents of domestic violence at the hands of spouses as they age.

Data should be collected that answers the question of whether or not these learned patterns of behavior re-emerge when the children/caretakers appear on the scene and assume a role of dominance when their parents become older and less capable. Community education efforts need to address the underlying and common causes and predictors of abuse, such as the loneliness, shame, fear, dependence and isolation of the frail and vulnerable.

It is clear that the plight of vulnerable senior citizens, in particular women, needs heightened public awareness. Perhaps it takes a village not only to raise a child, but also to grow old in comfort and security.

In addition to seeking to increase awareness and concern at the community level, Washington must enact laws that define with clarity the legal responsibilities caregivers owe their charges. These laws should recognize the dependency and vulnerability of seniors and carry the same force and clarity as laws that impose a duty between parents and children.

The State also must be more aggressive in laying out remedies available to seniors who suffer abuse at the hands of caregivers. Not only should our Legislature work to impose aggravated penalties for caregivers who abuse their power toward vulnerable citizens in their care, the State also should cooperate with other jurisdictions to develop a database of exploiters and abusers to identify criminals who move between states and in and out of private care situations where abuse and exploitation flourish.

Those citizens who are granted the gift of long years should not have to look forward to their “golden years” with trepidation and a finger on the speed dial for 911. Rather, they should know — and we should all hope — that our society will learn to treat our aging citizens with the dignity and respect their years should afford them.

1 “Elder Mistreatment; Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation in Aging America,” healthinaging.org, Feb. 27, 2009.

2 “Background Paper for Institute for Research and Training for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) Electronic Discussion Forum/Gender Aspects of Violence and Abuse of Women,” April 15-16, 2002, citing statistics from World Health Organization, by Jill Hightower.

3 U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, Administration on Aging Statistics, 2007.

4 Id.

5 “INSTRAW Background Paper,” supra, note 2, op. cit.

6 “Domestic Abuse in Later Life; Cultural Considerations and Domestic Abuse in Later Life: Causation Theories,” by Bonnie Brandl, National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, and Loree Cook-Daniels, Consultant, National Center on Elder Abuse.

7 Elder Mistreatment: Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation in Aging America (National Academies Press; www.nap.edu/openbook).

8 “Elder Abuse and Neglect; King County Advisory Council on Aging and Disability Services,” by Page Ulrey (July 2008).

9 “Domestic Abuse in Later Life,” supra, note 6, op. cit.

10 Id.

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