

GRANNY-BASHING:

AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE PROBLEM

Rachel Aber Schlesinger

Les personnes âgées, et tout particulièrement la vieille grand-mère qui vit avec sa famille, sont, malheureusement, souvent maltraitées. L'auteure explique ce qui constitue un abus contre une personne âgée, qui en sont les victimes, et qui en est le responsable; elle essaie de trouver une explication à ce phénomène et suggère certaines mesures d'intervention et de prévention.

We are growing old. We read in the journals, newspapers, and reports from Statistics Canada that we are a graying population. In 1980, for example, there were approximately 3.2 million Canadians aged sixty years or more (Statistics Canada, 1981). If projections are correct, moreover, this figure will increase to 4.5 million by the turn of this century. A striking additional fact is that the 1981 census figures revealed that there are far more women than men in this group of the graying population.

Over half of Canada's women who are over the age of seventy years are widows. The world of the aging contains unique factors. Senior citizens have greater health problems than their younger counterparts, and they are part of a group with an unusually large concentration of people with low incomes. In short, we as women are living longer, sometimes in poor health, and often in a state of poverty. An unusually large number of our older sisters will be dependent on family or on public supports. Social-service programs, as well as both public and private funding, cannot provide sufficient housing for these elderly. More seniors will



be living with family members, and we will see an increase in multigenerational households.

As women, we would dearly love to anticipate an ideal future. We want to imagine living out our older years as creative, alert, healthy individuals, living as we choose; perhaps in family settings, perhaps in our own homes, in co-operative apartment units, or perhaps we look forward to living alone, on our own individual timetable. In actuality, many of us will be living in institutions, in senior-citizen housing units, or with our children in joint households. The facts indicate that as older parents live longer, they may become dependent on their children, and this period of dependency upon their children will be of longer duration than the period during which their children were dependent upon them.

For a variety of factors such as health conditions and poverty of individual and community resources,

"Granny" will be living with her children. What will these multigenerational households have in common? They will contain at least two working adults, since the trend toward more involvement in the workforce on the part of women is increasing. With both husband and wife working, there may be a shortage of care for the elderly, physically dependent person. Another factor of these households will be the pattern of aging. Modern medical care has helped us live longer. One result of this is that the caretaker is often herself over sixty-five and is caring for a mother who is in her eighties.

Growing old can include the joys of living a full life, of activity and participation in new beginnings, and having a warm, supportive family and friends, a life of meeting new challenges. Or . . . the life of the elderly can be bounded by borders of helplessness, fear, poverty, and abuse. Our task in this paper is to bring to light a crime of abuse of the

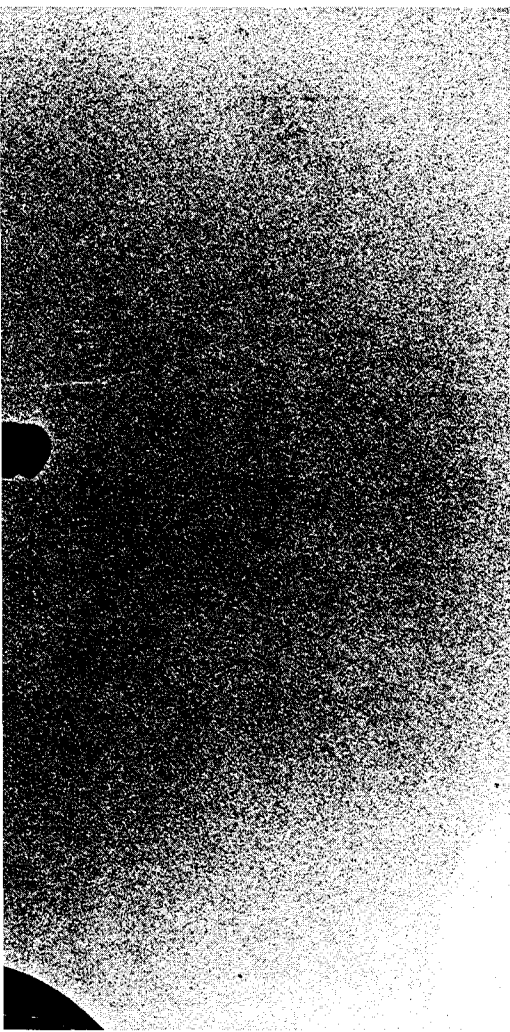


Photo: Rafaela Winterfeld

elderly in family settings.

The 1960s made us aware of the problems of child abuse. The 1970s focussed attention on wife battering. In the 1980s we are becoming aware of still another form of family violence, one that the English have labelled "Granny-bashing" or "Gran-slamming." This problem must be acknowledged and named, for only then can it be confronted, and ways found to prevent this form of abuse. Peggy Eastman cites the following in her article "Elders under Seige":

My husband died ten years ago. The house we lived in became mine. . . . My younger daughter who had two unfortunate marriages was welcomed by us with her children. That was eighteen years ago. The past three years things have gotten steadily worse. My daughter locked me in the garage and left me there. . . . Whenever I tried to cook a meal, she would appear and turn off the gas and remove the grills so that the only way I could cook was to hold the pan over the fire. . . . My

daughter's treatment of me kept getting worse. Always hurting me physically and mentally, kicking me, pushing me, grappling with me. . . . She is a well-educated person. . . .

The abuse of the elderly in the private-family setting is difficult for outsiders to identify. The abused child is often identified by a teacher or doctor. The beaten wife may be seen by a neighbour, or she may seek help from a crisis centre. It is not easy for the elderly, dependent, often physically handicapped woman to seek relief from abuse. She is often invisible. If she is not seen by neighbours and friends, ill health can be given as a plausible reason for her absence.

What constitutes abuse of the elderly?

It is difficult to pinpoint elderly abuse without providing some basic definitions. Is this abuse physical in nature? Is it psychological? Is it purposive or is it accidental? Does neglect constitute abuse? Is abuse only that which is repetitive, or can it also be limited to a single incident? The definitions of abuse include all the above factors.

Lawrence Faulkner, writing in the spring, 1982, issue of *Family Law Quarterly*, defines elderly abuse as relating to abuse and neglect by primary care-givers within the home. Others, such as M. Block and J. Sinnott in *The Battered Elder Syndrome*, include three major categories of abuse: physical, psychological, and economic. Physical abuse includes both bruises as well as lack of supervision and proper care that can lead to injuries. Included in the category of psychological abuse are threats and isolation. Stealing or cheating the elderly out of their own funds and possessions constitutes material or economic abuse. Abuse can further be defined in terms of verbal and emotional factors.

Elderly abuse is similar to child abuse and wife battering in many ways; the hurt can be physical, emotional, or verbal, and it strikes individuals who are powerless to prevent the hurt.

Some abuse is considered criminal assault, while other forms relate not to a specific action, but to neglect, the failure to act, and this failure to

provide safe supervision leads to abuse.

While abuse can take place within institutions that care for the elderly, or assault can occur on the streets in the form of a mugging or robbery, this paper will focus on the intra-familial abuse of the older adult. In our society, a small percentage of the elderly are being cared for in institutions. Elderly women are especially dependent on their families for daily care. They may never have worked, have few financial resources, and may be physically incapable of living on their own as they get older.

Who are the victims?

Richard Douglass, author of "Domestic Neglect and Abuse of the Elderly: Implications for Research and Service" (*Family Relations*, vol. 32, 1983), identifies them as ". . . the older, elderly persons, frail, mentally or physically disabled, female and living with the person responsible for the abuse." In the United States it is estimated that one million elderly people may be victims of moderate to severe abuse. We have few comparable Canadian statistics regarding abuse, but we do have the certainty that it is increasing.

Who abuses?

Reports from the United States House of Representatives Select Committee on Aging identify the son of the victim as the most likely to abuse, followed by the daughter, and finally the spouse of the victim.

Why does family abuse of the elderly occur?

The answer to this question relates to family factors as well as to an understanding of the realities of the aging process. A "typical" abuse scenario might run as follows:

She is old and frail. She is poor and totally dependent on her children who live in her home. From time to time she gets confused and forgets things. One day she forgot what she was talking about, and even who she was talking to. She forgets to pay her bills. Her son is unemployed, and her daughter-in-law works the double shift of the overburdened housewife and worker. Her first shift is from 8:30 to 4:30 at the factory, and then she comes home to the shift that lasts the rest of her

waking hours. During her 'second shift' she cares for her family, including her mother-in-law. When there are money problems, overworked family members react with short tempers. When she forgets to eat, her son hits her . . . and that is how it begins: granny-bashing, or gran-slamming.

Written into this scenario are feelings of frustration and conflict about the dependent mother. The physical condition of this woman makes her victimization possible. The victim is often blamed, in this case, for being old, dependent, powerless, ill, and frail. Economic factors also trigger abuse. In a family where all the adults work there is less supervision for the older person. Stress is added by the higher medical and health costs incurred by "Granny." This situation tends, moreover, to last for many years, since we live longer and have a greater life expectancy.

Family difficulties can also arise due to the changed status of the various family members. The mother may have headed this family for many years, and now roles are reversed; she has lost her power and her particular functions and roles within her family. Abusive families may contain members who have a drug problem, a drinking problem, or marital problems.

Another aspect that must be considered is the condition of the aging process. Being frail and in ill health heighten the sense of dependency and create a fear of revealing abuse. In many cases the abused woman needs and loves her family and fears the loss of their support.

Some families abuse or neglect the older person due to a lack of understanding of how to care for this person. They don't know how to cope with her frailties and ill health. Other families are unable to handle the financial and emotional stress caused by having "Granny" live with them in an already overcrowded home, where money is scarce and privacy is at a premium.

One other major factor that relates to "granny-bashing" is the very startling realization that abuse is a learned response. There are learned patterns of violence and abuse, caused by a family history of violence. The developmental approach to abuse finds that adults who were

abused as children or wives tend to be abusive themselves when overwhelmed with stress or conflict situations. There is a 50 per cent chance that abused children will themselves abuse their dependent parents.

Mary Summers, who lives down your street, cannot walk alone due to her crippling arthritis. She often stays in her room all day, unable to eat because she can't manage to get downstairs to the kitchen. No one brings her anything before they all leave the house for the day. She is unfed and often unwashed. She is neglected and afraid to call attention to herself. She is afraid of being hit again; her arm was broken last year by her daughter when she called out in the middle of the night. She is afraid of being sent away. She is a victim of her frailties, her fears, and her humiliation due to her need to be cared for.

Mary is similar to the women studied by J. Steuer and E. Austin. Abused persons, they found, were frail, between the ages of seventy-three and eighty-six, with physical and/or mental problems that led to their dependence on others for food, medicine, and hygiene. *Most were women.* Donna Shell found that a typically abused person is a woman in her eighties who has been living with her family for a year or more. Her study indicated that the most common form of abuse was financial, followed by psychosocial abuse and then physical abuse. Included in the financial aspect was cashing pension cheques and withholding the funds, and gaining control of the older person's total financial resources. Verbal abuse fell in the category of psychosocial, as did isolation and confinement. "It was not uncommon for elderly persons to be confined to small, dark, cold cellars, basements, and bedrooms."

Assault constituting physical abuse was often followed by withholding food. "Physical abuse," reports Shell, "ranged from severe beatings, causing bruises, welts and fractures, to actual homicides." This study, carried out by the Manitoba Council on Aging, also concluded that a large number of abusive care-givers were themselves over sixty years of age. It seems clear that stress, overload, and burnout occurs in relation to aging as well as to the literature of work worlds.

What can be done?

The first step is to make the public aware of the varied forms of "private" or "domestic" abuse of the elderly. "Gran-slamming" will remain hidden until the issues can be dealt with. Families need help in dealing with the stress they encounter to their lives *before* they abuse the elderly in their midst. *Prevention* can be more useful than *intervention*.

One form of prevention is *education*. Families can be helped to understand the aging process better and taught ways to deal with the conditions of aging. Family members can then better understand the limitations and the fears faced by the elderly in their care. *Mutual-support groups* have emerged from the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s. The ability to share problems and discuss possible approaches built into a health and prevention model rather than a "problem or illness" model can be of great benefit.

Another step, further down the road, is to have mandatory *legislation* that would provide legal protection for the elderly. The final and least favoured solution is to provide referrals to the police and safe housing for the abused elderly — a form of halfway house when all else fails.

Richard Douglass lists the solutions to elderly abuse under three main headings: education, crisis intervention, and advocacy.

It is clear that the family is experiencing change in many areas and needs help in caring for the older family members. Families are not "typical." The "Mary Summers" of today could be living with her married child, with a single-parent family, or even in a blended family. The family that is the primary care-giver for the aged, dependent woman is varied in its forms and particular problems. Stress and conflict exist, and the victim of abuse is often blamed for contributing to her dependency. Specific help can be given these families in routine matters. The family can get support from meal-preparation programs and from visiting homemakers. Transportation help can be provided for the older person to enable her to participate in daycare programs outside the home. Finally, tax incentives can be

given for those who care for an older adult within the home.

In Canada, we anticipate that by the turn of the century one quarter of our population will be "gray," aged sixty years and over. Will the Mary Summers of the year 2000 be able to look forward to peace, care, enjoyment, and challenge after a life of working both within the home and perhaps outside in the workforce? Or will she face a slow death brought about by abuse, neglect, fear, and isolation? We must be aware of the crime of elderly abuse, and we must begin to initiate programs and attitudes to prevent it. We support rape-crisis centres, we fight to help the battered wife, and we speak out against child abuse in all forms. We fight for a quality of life. Why are we silent when our mothers and grandmothers struggle alone and in silence in their battle for survival, for growing old in an atmosphere of dignity and understanding? We must provide the strength for those who no longer have much strength. We must hear the silent cries, and our voices must help them speak. We too will grow old, and we too want to live in a world of mutual respect, love, and care, not increased elderly abuse, not a world of "granny-bashing."

Further Reading:

M. Block and J. Sinnott, eds., *The Battered Elder Syndrome*. College Park, Md.: University of Maryland Center on Aging, 1979.

Peggy Eastman, "Elders under Siege," *Psychology Today*, January, 1984.

Doris Ferguson, "Aged Abuse," *Journal of Gerontological Nursing*, June, 1981.

Donna Shell, *Protection of the Elderly: A Study of Elder Abuse*. Manitoba Council on Aging, 1982.

J. Steuer and E. Austin, "Family Abuse of the Elderly," *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, vol. 28, 1980.

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"La demora en morir"

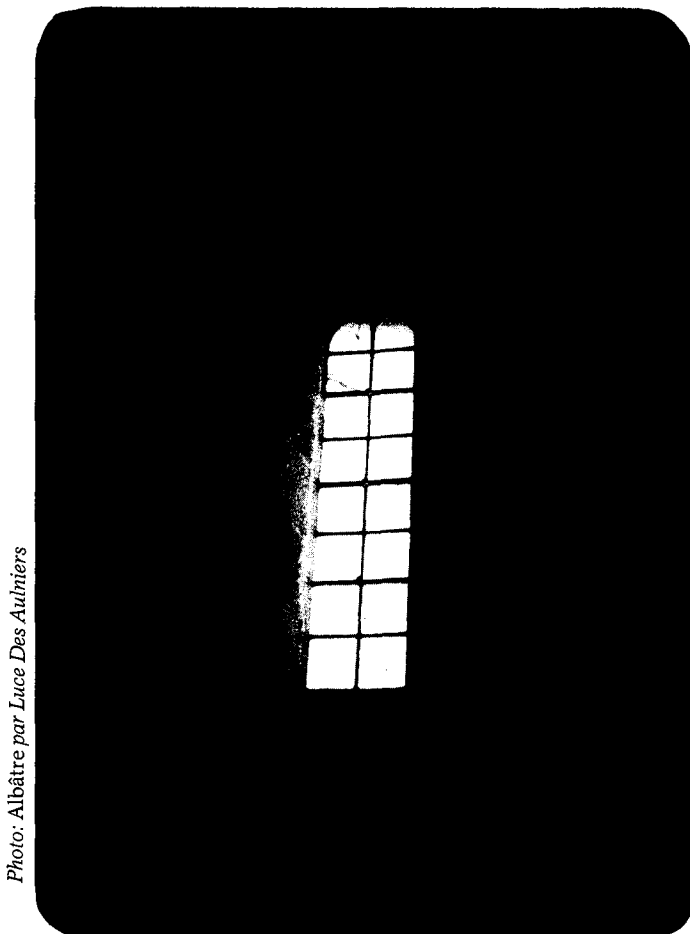


Photo: Albâtre par Luce Des Aulniers

ou la lenteur à mourir

Luce Des Aulniers

La mort est présente, elle le sait. Elle le sent avancer d'un pas lent et froid le long de ses jambes, emplir son corps d'un fourmillement de sommeil, tâter son cœur avec ses doigts glacés et attentifs, la colorer de violet, la transmuier en marbre. Elle ne peut plus articuler de son. Elle ne peut plus grogner. Elle ne peut plus maudire. Elle fait appel à ses dernières forces pour cracher son mépris, mais la mort lui serre la gorge, l'étouffe, l'emmène dans son royaume, loin, très loin de son soleil natal.

La neige se remet à tomber, sereine, fidèle, enveloppant dans son suaire le cadavre d'une femme nommée Ana Paücha, soixante et quinze ans, qui fut épouse, mère et

veuve de quatre hommes Paücha, fauchés par la guerre civile espagnole et ses prisons de la haine. Nulle pierre tombale ne perpétue ces cinq noms:

Ana Paücha
Pedro Paücha
José Paücha
Juan Paücha
Jesus Paücha, dit le "petit"

Nul oeil ne les pleure.
Nulle mémoire n'en garde trace.
Ce ne sont que les noms de cinq saints sans église.

Des anti-noms.
Des non."

Augustin Gomes Arcos
(*Ana now*, Paris, Stock, 1977)

Voilà. Sans commentaires.

continued