

# THE RIGHTS OF THE OLDER WOMAN

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Preamble: There was a request circulated via the web for information on issues related to the human rights of older women which was being planned as a forum for discussed by the Committee of the United Nations *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*. We briefly listed several serious concerns we have in relation to the older women who contact us, women in their 60s and a few older. Having previously worked in health care systems, Linda still does work organizing health care in homes for older women or for women who may have a chronic illness, our concerns relate to how this specific population of women who have endured various forms of non-state actor torture (NSAT) will be treated as they grow older.

We provide the following several examples:

1. The older women who have endured non-state actor torture risk being in duress and mistreated by uninformed care-givers because of the general socio-cultural silence that surrounds their victimization. This concern is comparable to women Holocaust survivors whose duress is misunderstood when their distancing barriers that kept historical horror at bay dissolves with aging.<sup>1</sup> When this happens the women may revert to earlier times/events in their lives. For example, when asked to shower they may get aggressive because they flashback to the Nazi death camp ovens and they may become resistive because they think they are being sent to the death camp 'showers'. If care-providers are not educated to realize what the woman's response is related to then the older woman's responses are misdiagnosed, she may be medicated inappropriately, become disorientated on the medication or restricted in a physical way. Over-medication is a serious problem with the older adult population and poses a serious health risk. Because violence against older women is just becoming acknowledged the histories of the older women who have survived many forms of NSAT remains particularly silenced as NSAT is still being silenced globally. The older women who have survived forms of NSAT perpetrated in the private sphere and who contact us have concerns about their increasing age and how they will manage or be cared for.
2. Another case history involves a woman approaching her 50s, with a disability that required home care services. When an occupational therapist (OT) visited to do a mobility evaluation, the OT opened her instrument bag and the women became highly agitated and yelled at the OT to leave. The woman had been considered "a difficult client" by care-givers, however, when my colleague Linda approached the woman to understand the meaning of her reaction she learned that the woman had been a victim of spousal captivity, torture and human trafficking and the OT's tools triggered the woman into remembering the tools that were used for torturing her. The woman had never revealed her history for over 25 years. Linda was able to facilitate the development of a care plan, with the woman's participation, that took in her history and torture triggering responses. Planning a meeting with the woman and all the care-givers the woman was able to share her ordeals. Her care-givers began to understand her and became very caring of her. She was no longer "a difficult client". She grew to the

point of permitting a male home care-provider helping her, this she saw as a huge success to know that all men were not torturers. All her torturers had been male, but this is not always the case.

The point in these two examples is that it is not sufficient to speak of violence against women; the type of violence needs to be specifically named in order to understand women's responses to the type of violence she endured. When Linda and I read about women around the world many have endured NSAT which needs to be recognized if their right to health and health care is knowledgeable and respectful. Article 12 of CEDAW specifically relates to health, and the elimination of discrimination and promotion of equality for women in health care. Presently torture research, diagnosis and recovery is focused in the public sphere on state torture. Since the NSAT of women in the private sphere is not acknowledged as a specific and distinct form of violence women so harmed are excluded from benefiting from such specialized care required when torture victimization has caused the trauma.

We hope this is information that will be considered important regarding the rights of older women and for the development of an eventual general comment by the CEDAW Committee.

Sincerely,  
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<sup>1</sup> David, P., Tafler, M. & Goldhar, J. (2000, Spring). Caring for the Aging Survivors of Early Life Trauma Due to War Holocaust Survivors: Case in Point Training Manual. *If not now e-journal*. Available: [http://www.baycrest.org/If\\_Not\\_Now/Volume\\_1\\_Spring\\_2000/default\\_7150.asp](http://www.baycrest.org/If_Not_Now/Volume_1_Spring_2000/default_7150.asp).