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WORD TO THE WISE

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Older Women & Sexual Violence: Addressing Gaps in Knowledge, Research, and Service

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An Invisible Issue: Sexual Violence Against Older Women

Across all ages, sexual violence is one of the most underreported crimes and is often described as an “invisible” issue, compounding the invisibility many older survivors of violence already feel within services. The term sexual violence has a broad scope rarely recognized within research, including “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting.”¹

Estimates indicate up to 10% of older adults are victims of violent crimes in Canada, including sexual assault.² Rates of sexual violence are higher when women are older, 2SLGBTQ, racialized, low income, homeless and differently abled. Older women with cognitive impairments are rarely included in studies of elder abuse and sexual violence. The limited research available does indicate increased severity of physical assault when combined with sexual assault/violence and are described as particularly ritualistic and violent.

A recent literature review completed by CNPEA identifies sexual abuse of older adults as the most underreported and least acknowledged forms of violence against older women.³ Women aged 65-80 in Canada report experiencing physical or sexual violence/assault nearly three times more frequently than their male counterparts.⁴ Incidence of sexual violence against women is unknown due to the conflation of physical and sexual violence in elder abuse research and lack of age related data within sexual violence research.

Perpetrators of Sexual Violence Against Older Women

Older women have been sexually assaulted primarily by men including family members, intimate and past partners, caregivers/service providers, acquaintances and residents of care facilities. Older Indigenous women may have experienced sexual violence within a residential school. An older woman may be a caregiver to her perpetrator, or depend on her perpetrator as a caregiver.

Sexual Violence and Long Term Care

Staff, family members of residents, owners of Long Term Care (LTC) homes, doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals have a legal obligation to immediately report any suspicions with reasonable grounds of harm or risk of harm, which includes sexual violence.⁵ Risk for experiencing, and perpetrating sexual violence is higher for residents with cognitive impairments such as dementia. Older women with dementia may be targeted by sexual predators within LTC settings, and risk management complications include lack of memory recall in relation to disclosures and forensic exam consent.



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Understanding the Unique Impacts of Sexual Violence on Older Women

Women can experience sexual violence across the lifespan, from childhood to older adulthood. For older women, experiences of sexual violence throughout the lifespan can become compounded leading to physical, behavioral, emotional and cognitive changes. Barriers to support include mobility changes associated with aging and social stigma related to both older age and sexual violence. Particular challenges exist when supporting older women with dementia in relation to the sexual violence they may have experienced. Older women who have been sexually assaulted are more likely than younger women to experience severe genital trauma, chronic pain and bruising.⁶

Factors which may affect the impacts of sexual violence include:

- A history of intergenerational trauma, childhood sexual abuse or other significant traumatic experience(s); many older women are survivors of childhood sexual abuse
- The characteristics of the sexual violence experienced (nature, intensity, frequency, duration)
- The responses of others following disclosure/reporting of the sexual violence (e.g. positive or negative; helpful or not helpful)

These factors have significant implications for understanding and mitigating impacts of sexual violence on the survivor. Disclosures which are met with positive, support responses have the capacity to improve psychological health, sense of comfort, support, and validation and access to desired outcomes such as protecting others and perpetrator penalization.⁷

Building Capacity, Bridging Gaps

Research indicates the need for:

- Training for professionals (especially those within long term care and dementia services) focused on laws, risk factors, signs, symptoms and patterns associated with sexual violence both in survivors and perpetrators⁸
- Reducing stigma and shame which may be generationally tied to views of sexuality, age and sexual health⁹
- Increased collaboration between domestic violence, sexual violence, elder abuse, social work, health care and justice sectors, including community-based experts and advocates
- Increased training for forensic evidence professionals to include information specific to older women¹⁰
- Increased awareness and tailored training and support for those who work with older women focused on the impact of working with older women who have experienced sexual violence
- Further research focused on promoting resiliency for older survivors of sexual violence

OAITH thanks the Ontario Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres (OCRCC) for their contributions to this fact sheet. Access a list of OCRCC members via : sexualassaultsupport.ca/support/

Access Elder Abuse Ontario Training & Intervention Tools specific to older adults and sexual violence via: www.elderabuseontario.com/training-education/training/intervention-tools/

1 World Health Organization. "Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women." (2002).

2 Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. "Sexual Assault Against Older Adults, a Literature Review." (2018).

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Long-Term Care Homes Act, 2007, S.O. 2007,c.8

6 Bows, H. Practitioner Views on the Impacts, Challenges, and Barriers in Supporting Older Survivors of Sexual Violence. *Urban Education*, 24(9), 220-230. (2018).

7 Information in this section, thanks to: Violence Against Women Learning Network, Centre for Research & Education on Violence Against Women and Children, Western University. *Overcoming Barriers and Enhancing Supportive Responses: The Research on Sexual Violence Against Women, A Resource Document*. 4-5;25. (May 2012).

8 Canadian Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. "Sexual Assault Against Older Adults, a Literature Review." (2018).

9 *Ibid.*

10 Bows, H. Practitioner Views on the Impacts, Challenges, and Barriers in Supporting Older Survivors of Sexual Violence. *Urban Education*, 24(9), 220-230. (2018).