

**Round Table on Preventing Sexual Assault of Older Women
Parliament House Canberra.
International Day for Elimination of Violence Against Women; 2019**

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I want to start by thanking Senator Rachel Siewert for hosting this Round Table today. This is the leadership that so many of us have been waiting for and this is a turning point in history.

I have thought long and hard about what I might say to you all here today. I wondered if I should share with you the distressed and angry calls that I receive from family members who often tell me that they don't feel heard and that they don't know what to do.

I wondered if I should share what it feels like to say to families: I am sorry that happened to your mother; and then to listen as families break down and tell me that this is the first time they have felt heard.

I wondered if I should share what it feels like to take these calls from families and then to meet with service providers – who say that this is not in their brief or that they don't believe this is a problem / or a significant problem.

And I wondered if I should share with you how I, as an articulate, empowered women who coordinates a National Project to prevent the sexual assault of older women – how I struggled for three days to find services that would support Margarita Solis, a 95 year old woman who rang to tell me that she had been sexually assaulted.

When I thought about why it was difficult to decide what to share with you today; I realised that there has been silence for so long, that it has seemed almost unimaginable that there would come a day when we would be here, talking about how older women matter and how sexual assault can be prevented. In this House where so much change is possible, there is now political leadership – and with that there is now hope.

I want to share with you briefly what I know about the sexual assault of older women; from my experiences as a nurse, a researcher and a cultural engineer. And I want to frame the solutions that I see, in the hope that we can leave this room with a real commitment to change.

I began my career as a nurse working in residential aged care; including almost a decade as a Nurse Unit Manager. It was there that I first recognised that older women experience sexual assault and that our responses were (and still are) inadequate. While I was working in residential aged care, I developed education and resources on The Sexual Rights of Older People. This work has led me to become a lightning rod for stories about the sexual assault of older women – and over the past 20 years I have heard hundreds of stories.

I left aged care and was employed as a Senior Research Fellow at La Trobe University; where I established a Sexual Health and Ageing Program. In this role, I was also the Chief Investigator for Norma's Project, funded by FaCHSIA to develop Australia's first evidence base on sexual assault of older women. Norma's project provided irrefutable evidence that older women experience sexual assault at home and in care – and that urgent systemic reforms are required. The project was completed in 2014.

While I was at La Trobe University I also coordinated a project working with older women to explore ways of opening up conversations about sexual safety. The project demonstrated how engaging approaches that build rapport and trust provide a useful approach to talking about sexual assault. I was also involved in research that took an Appreciative Inquiry into exploring what aged care service providers are doing to address sexual assault; that research highlighted the power of service providers to make a difference.

In 2016 I left academia to establish the Celebrate Ageing Program, a social enterprise building respect for older people, and preventing sexual assault of older women. I wanted to undertake research that translated directly into cultural change. The Celebrate Ageing Program includes the OPAL Institute, addressing the sexual rights of older people and the Power Project, preventing sexual assault of older women.

Over the last two years I've had the privilege of working with Margarita Solis, the only older woman in Australia to publicly share her story of sexual assault. We need to understand this silence, not as an indication that sexual assault is rare; rather that it is rarely reported, because we have not created safe spaces for older women to talk about sexual assault.

On International Women's Day this year, at the age of 97, Margarita launched a National Campaign called #SheToo, which raised awareness of the importance of listening to older women who report sexual assault. Margarita's message is that listening is a small act that can make a big difference. She developed 14 principles of listening to older women that reflect her understandings as a former nurse and her life as an older woman living in an ageist and sexist world. I want to share with you four very telling principles:

- **Principle one:** Show an interest. If an older woman knows that you care - she will feel safer to tell you how she is actually feeling
- **Principle two:** Be respectful of older women - don't poke fun at them because they will think you won't be interested in listening to them. If you do things like telling stupid jokes about ageing, it may lead her to believe because she's old, she must be stupid, or because of how she looks, or dresses, or her frailties, she is somehow not worthy or you just won't believe her. To be sure, don't share cartoons, or post cards that are ageist making older people look silly or ugly, or saying ageist things
- **Principle three:** I know some older women who have told someone they have been sexually assaulted and have not been believed. This can make them reluctant to tell anyone else. But if you are encouraging, they might trust you to talk about what is, or has been, happening to them.
- **Principle four:** Some older women feel ashamed of sexual abuse and blame themselves - or are worried that others will blame them. Tell older women it's not their fault. That is essential.

Margarita's messages are so simple, and they also highlight how much work we still have to do. In 2018 Margarita graduated as a Fellow of the Elder Leadership Academy, in recognition of her work on preventing sexual assault of older women.

Margarita would be so proud of us all here today; because we are listening. I have bought some badges with Margarita's image and #SheToo hashtag and I invite you all to wear a badge to show you are listening. I also invite you to go to the OPAL Institute webpage to watch Margarita's short film.

These stories I have shared with you provide context for understanding the work we have done and still need to do. I now want to draw on this work, and the international evidence to share with you, some facts about the sexual assault of older women:

1. Old age is **not** a protective factor against sexual assault
2. Most sexual assaults of older people are perpetrated by men against older women
3. Older women with dementia are targeted by perpetrators because of their vulnerability
4. Older women who have a male partner with dementia, who is hypersexual or sexually disinhibited, are at increased risk of sexual assault
5. Older women who grew up with Marital Rape Immunity Laws may believe that sexual assault is their fault – and may feel too ashamed to report
6. Older women are sexually assaulted in residential aged care by other residents, staff, family members, volunteers and visitors
7. Family members and residents who report sexual assault in residential aged care may be discredited or have their reports minimised

8. Not all sexual assaults in residential aged care are reported
9. There does not appear to be any evidence that data on the reporting of sexual assaults in residential aged care is utilised to identify patterns and develop education or resources that contribute to prevention
10. The limited circumstances clause (or compulsory rather than mandatory reporting) is a barrier to understanding the extent of the problem in residential aged care and contributes to a belief that 'unlawful sexual contact' is not a serious offence
11. Some residential aged care homes that receive reports of sexual assault, conduct their own internal investigation and do not report sexual assault because they do not believe a sexual assault has occurred. This practice misses the intention of reporting to an external body
12. Aged care service providers in residential aged care need to be better resourced to respond to residents who perpetrate sexual assault and also to understand how to respond when they see signs a colleague is perpetrating sexual assault
13. Perpetrators of sexual assault are seldom held to account because there are inadequate systems in place eg: to manage resident perpetrator behaviour or to appropriately deal with staff perpetrators (particularly those who are moved on) or to open up conversations with older women at home
14. Older women are sexually assaulted at home by their intimate partners, other family members, home care workers and strangers
15. Financial abuse is reported to be the most common form of Elder Abuse and some reports note that sexual abuse is rare. It is more accurate to say that sexual abuse is rarely reported – and we need to understand why this is the case
16. Aged care service providers have significant capacity to prevent the sexual assault of older women – but do not have the education or guidance realise this potential
17. Aged care service providers who work with older women in their own homes are powerfully placed to identify signs of sexual assault and provide older women with information about their choices; however, service providers need education to make this possible
18. Sexual assault of older women in their own homes is less likely to be reported if the perpetrator is a family member; because of the shame and the limited options for addressing this issue.

The decades of silence are coming to an end – families of older women are taking a stand; and some are talking to the media because they don't feel heard by a multitude of service providers. The community is saying 'enough', older people deserve respect; and older women count.

This Round Table is a significant step forward in addressing the community expectation that we would not allow older women to experience sexual assault without taking action. The community expect leadership on this issue and news of this Round Table will be very well received.

There are other pockets of leadership that I also want to acknowledge today including the following:

- I want to particularly acknowledge the **Australian Association of Gerontology** who has demonstrated considerable leadership on this issue and I have had the great privilege of working with them on their initiatives which include:
 - an interdisciplinary workshop at their 2018 Conference and development of a discussion paper from that
 - a workshop on compliance in residential aged care in partnership with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission at the 2019 conference
 - a submission on sexual assault for the review of the Serious Incident Report Scheme
 - and a framework for preventing sexual assault
- **Elder abuse services** in New South Wales and Queensland (ADA) placed a focus on sexual assault in their National Elder Abuse conferences
- A **sexual assault service** in Victoria and one in Queensland have developed resources for older women and aged care services
- **The Victorian Institute in Forensic Medicine** has conducted research, hosted a seminar and supported Monash University students Meghan Wright and Ashleigh May to focus on sexual assault in residential aged care for their honours thesis. Meghan and Ashleigh's work included meeting with politicians and led to series of events that culminated with this Round Table. Special thank you to Meghan and Ashleigh
- **The Older Women's Network of New South Wales** is partnering for the #InHerShoes project which documents the experience of reporting from the older woman's perspective. Sandy's story was shared earlier in the Round Table. This project will raise awareness and provide a needs analysis, identifying gaps in service responses. The OWN will also be holding a Vigil for older women on International Women's Day 2020. The vigil will involve older women placing their shoes on the steps of a prominent public building as an act of solidarity with older women who experience sexual assault. Community members are then invited to do the same. The proposed Vigil has generated significant interest in other states/territories.

It is heart-warming to see these steps taken towards change. However, I am sure you will agree that these steps alone are not sufficient to prevent sexual assault of older women. We need a systematic approach to reform, supported by the Commonwealth Government.

In partnership with the AAG we have developed a proposal outlining a systematic process of change. The proposal involves the following key steps:

1. Establishing a National Advisory Group
2. Developing a strategy that outlines reform across systems including: reviewing the evidence, research required, policy changes, legislative reforms, education and capacity building
3. Implementing and evaluating the Strategy

These reforms will take a number of years to achieve and so we propose the immediate development of resources to improve responses to and reduce risk of sexual assault.

To finish I want to acknowledge that none of us want to believe that older women experience sexual assault. But that doesn't make this problem go away.

Our silence has enabled sexual assault to continue, and in some cases escalate.

But today we are at a turning point – there is no looking back now.

Today we step up and we meet community expectations by saying we will do everything we can to prevent this crime – because older women matter.

Thankyou for being here and thankyou for listening.