



**#InHerShoes**

## **Stopping the sexual assault of older women through improved responses to reporting**

### **Background**

Older women are experiencing sexual assaults in residential aged care (by other residents, staff, and visitors) and in their own homes (by intimate partners, family members and service providers). Data from the Department of Health shows 547 reports of 'alleged unlawful sexual contact' in residential aged care for the 2017-2018 year, a 40% increase from the previous year. Data is not collected on sexual assault of older women in their own homes.

Responses to reports of sexual assault are inadequate; with a significant number of older women and their family members/advocates reporting they do not feel heard.<sup>1</sup> There is also evidence that service providers do not have the information, resources, policies and skills to adequately respond to reports of sexual assault.<sup>23</sup>

There is a need to document the experiences of older women and family members who report sexual assault, so that we can identify the gaps that need to be addressed and so that we can learn about good practice.

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<sup>1</sup> See Norma's Project: <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/researchreport.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Australian Association of Gerontology report: [https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/aag056\\_-\\_a\\_fair\\_future\\_for\\_older\\_women\\_who\\_experience\\_sexual\\_abuse.pdf](https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/aag056_-_a_fair_future_for_older_women_who_experience_sexual_abuse.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See Submission on Sexual Assault to the Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care submitted by OPAL Institute: <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/sexualabuse.pdf>

## **About the Project**

#InHerShoes is a research, narrative and awareness raising project documenting the responses to older women (and their families) who report sexual assault, as an older women. It documents the experience from the older woman's perspective (or family members on their behalf) so that we can identify strategies to improve responses as a concrete way to prevent sexual assault.

The project will enable us to understand the responses which the older woman who experienced the sexual assault (or her representatives) had to face, and to view the situation from her perspective. In other words, it invites us to step into her shoes. This 'shoes' based approach has been demonstrated to assist in building empathy and understanding experiences of others<sup>4</sup>. This will set the foundation for the action necessary to change narrative and practice around the sexual assault of older women.

## **Aims**

This project aims to:

- (i) inform strategies to prevent sexual assault of older women by documenting current responses to older women and their families who report sexual assault, from the perspectives of older women and their families.
- (ii) provide a needs analysis for the development of a National Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual Assaults Against Older Women in Care (see proposal developed by the OPAL Institute and the Australian Association of Gerontology).
- (iii) raise public awareness of the issue of sexual assault against older women.

## **Key actions**

1. Establish a project advisory group of key stakeholders including: elder abuse services, Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission, Older Women's Network etc
2. Establish a project webpage to communicate project processes and findings
3. Develop an information sheet and consent form for participants
4. Call for older women and their families to participate in interviews that document:
  - a. The context of the sexual assault (but not details of assault or names of perpetrator or service)
  - b. People/services types that the sexual assault was reported to, and their responses
  - c. Outcomes of reporting (that is, what happened as a consequence of the reporting)
5. Invite older women and their families to provide a pair of shoes to be photographed to accompany their story on the webpage
6. Upload stories and photos to webpage
7. Analysis of stories to identify key themes for report by the advisory group
8. Produce a report on the project and recommendations, and link it to the proposal submitted by AAG and OPAL Institute for development of National Strategy for the Prevention of Sexual Assault of Older Women.

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<sup>4</sup> See Walk a Mile in My Shoes: <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/featured-content/a-mile-in-my-shoes>

9. Execute an awareness raising campaign with the Older Women's Network on the issue of sexual assault against older women. This will involve organising events to call on the public to stand with the old women through a creative exercise.

### **Timelines**

The first story will be launched on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2019 and then funding sought for the project.

### **Funding**

Required for: project coordination, photography, web design, graphic design, public awareness raising campaign

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### **PROJECT TEAM**

The project will be coordinated by Dr Catherine Barrett, Director of the OPAL Institute. The Older Women's Network is a confirmed partner for this project, and the Australian Association of Gerontology will also be invited to be a partner.

#### **Dr Catherine Barrett**

Dr Catherine Barrett is an experienced researcher and well regarded for her capacity to engage and work with key stakeholders and reach marginalised groups. Dr Barrett's research is grounded in a capacity building approach – or framing research as a catalyst for change.

As a Senior Research Fellow at La Trobe University, Dr Barrett was the recipient of a DACS grant for a two and a half year project supporting the development of LGBTI inclusive services in Australia. She was also cochair of the committee which developed the National LGBTI Ageing and Aged Care Strategy and worked on the strategy implementation and evaluation for a seven year period.

Dr Barrett has been working to prevent sexual assault of older women for the past two decades and some of the key initiatives include:

- 2019 (November): forthcoming workshop on Unlawful Sexual Contact - compliance, resourcing and prevention with the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission prior to the Australian Association of Gerontology Conference in Sydney
- 2019 (August) developed a submission to the Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care, on the sexual assault of older women
- 2019 (August): presented the perspectives of older women at a National Forum on preventing sexual assault in residential aged care. Forum hosted by the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine at Monash University
- 2019 (July): worked with 97 year old Margarita Solis to deliver a plenary presentation on her experience of sexual assault and her strategies for prevention at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Brisbane

- 2019 (July): participated in a panel on elder abuse (reflections on sexual assault) at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Brisbane
- 2019 (August): worked with the Australian Association of Gerontology on a paper outlining the outcomes of the November pre-conference workshop on sexual assault
- 2019 (March): worked with Margarita Solis to launch a social media campaign and online resource called #SheToo which raises awareness of the importance of listening to older women who report sexual assault and developed strategies to improve listening
- 2018 (March): co presented a webinar for the Australian Association of Gerontology on the role of aged care service providers in preventing the sexual assault of older women
- 2018 (November): Facilitated a preconference workshop on sexual assault prevention at the Australian Association of Gerontology Conference in Melbourne
- 2017: produced a film called Margarita which documents the experiences of Margarita Solis after her sexual assault, as a tool to educate service providers and community members
- 2017 (November): participated in a forum hosted by Senior's Rights Service NSW on Older Women, Ageing and Disadvantage
- 2017: coedited a book on the Sexual Rights of older people including their right to be free from sexual violence. In a world first, the book takes the World Association for Sexology's Charter of Sexual Rights and applies them to the lives of older people
- 2017: coordinated an interdisciplinary panel on sexual assault at the National Elder Abuse Awareness Conference in Sydney, which was hosted by Virginia Trioli. Video produced from panel and also podcast on sexual assault with Ellen Fanning
- 2017: developed training and a policy for aged care service providers on addressing sexual rights of older people and on sexual boundaries in home services. Made the policies available free online and delivered the training
- 2017: delivered presentations on sexuality and aged care at the Better Practice conferences in four states/territories
- 2016-2017: *Older Women's Right To Be Safe At Home and in Care*: researcher on a project being conducted by the Council on the Ageing, Victoria and ARCSHS to document aged care service providers strategies for preventing sexual assault and to work with peak bodies on the development of a state wide strategy to prevent sexual assault. Project funded by Victorian Women's Trust
- 2015-current: member of Victoria Police's Community Consultation, Seniors Advisory Group to present issues related to sexual assault
- 2015: *Its Gone Wild Out There*: chief researcher for a project in partnership with Women's Health in the South East (WHiSE) that documented older women's experiences of sexual wellbeing and safety
- 2014-2015: *Norma's Project*: chief investigator for Norma's Project which documented the first evidence base in Australia on older women's experiences of sexual assault - and strategies for the primary prevention. The project was conducted by ARCSHS in partnership with Alzheimer's Australia, Council on the Ageing, National Ageing Research Institute and the University of Melbourne and was funded by the Federal Government

- 2007-2011: researcher at La Trobe University working on projects addressing sexual safety for people living with a disability and project for White Ribbon Foundation
- *Victoria Police's Senior's Working Group* (2015 - current): working group member.

### **The Older Women's Network NSW**

The Older Women's Network was established 32 years ago as an advocacy group to lobby for the rights of older women. Its mission is to empower women as they age, and it has worked over the decades to promote the prevention of violence against older women through research and advocacy; as well as to promote the prevention of harmful and abusive behaviour to older women by providing information to lift general awareness. It has 17 groups in New South Wales, and over 1000 members.

Publications include:

- (i) Submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission into Elder Abuse 2016
- (ii) Submission to the NSW Family & Community Services' Discussion Paper: Foundations for Change – Homelessness in NSW, 2016
- (iii) Prevention of Violence against Older Women: The Disappearing Age, 2008
- (iv) It Could Be You: Single, Female, Older & Homeless, 2010