

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

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Education, Arts and Communities Committee
Secretariat
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4001

Email: eacc@parliament.qld.gov.au

RE: ELDER ABUSE INQUIRY

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry and in particular respond to issue of older people, mainly women, being subjected to sexual violence.

About QSAN

The Queensland Sexual Assault Network (QSAN) is the peak body for sexual violence prevention and support organisations in Queensland. We have 20 member services, including specialist services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, culturally and linguistically diverse women, women with intellectual disability, young women, men and children and our membership are located throughout Queensland, including in rural and regional locations.

Our network of non-Government services is funded to provide specialist sexual assault counselling, support, and prevention programs in Queensland. QSAN is committed to working towards ensuring all Queenslanders who experience sexual violence recently or historically, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background receive a high-quality response in line with best practice, client-centred principles. Our work and analysis of sexual violence is from a feminist perspective and addressed within a specialist trauma framework.

We are committed to engaging with government and other bodies to raise systemic issues of concern, and to ensure the voices and experiences of victims of sexual violence are considered in the formulation of policy and legislation that impacts on sexual violence victims in Queensland.

Community Myth: That age as a protector against sexual violence

Our services do provide responses to older women and as a community we often believe that being older and possibly considered less attractive, in a society that values 'youth' should be a protection against sexual violence. Unfortunately, this is not the case and many older women are vulnerable and this can make them more of a target for sexual abusers. Older women can be dependent on their abuser for care, housing, income and other support. They may also lack social support. These

issues mean some older women are not protected against sexual assault and can be targeted for sexual assault and exploitation. The Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence developed a training kit on elder abuse and sexual violence after receiving funding from the Victim Assist Community Grants in 2018. This community education kit requires funding support to update it and to support its rollout across the state.

Recommendation 1

That there be specific training for the sector, health workers and aged care facilities on sexual assault and the rape of older women.

Recommendation 2

That the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence be funded to both update their existing resource on elder abuse and sexual violence and to rollout the training to community services and other relevant agencies across the state.

Intersection with dementia

There are increasing referrals of women to specialist sexual violence prevention services who live with dementia, who come to the hospital from aged care who have been sexually assaulted. These cases are invariably complicated and questions around consent and issues about forensic examinations and proceeding with these or not need to be considered. There are also additional complexities as interactions with other family members and guardians are required.

There are also a range of issues about identifying the offender.

Grooming

Older women can be targeted and groomed by individuals and these cases involve a balancing of rights between maintaining the independence of the older woman and honouring her choices but also being aware they may be targeted for exploitation and abuse.

Our services provided feedback that this can occur in all locations but is especially prevalent in rural locations. The women are very vulnerable to opportunistic people and often will not report a rape. If a rape is reported, sometimes the police will not proceed with a criminal charge but say “they will go and have a chat to him” as there is often not enough evidence to proceed to a criminal trial.

Sometimes these opportunistic individuals can groom older women and begin relationships with them to get access to their assets or also perhaps their grandchildren for the purposes of child sexual abuse.

Recommendation 3

That any community awareness campaigns about elder abuse include information about grooming, recognising the signs and sexual violence.

Dating apps

There is an increasing trend of older women on dating apps that are often set up by their children. This often can occur after the breakdown of a long-term marriage or relationships. The older women are vulnerable and often very trusting. This sexual abuse is often intersecting with fraud and financial abuse.

The information about online safety is targeted to young people and teenagers and this cohort is especially vulnerable as there is no information directed towards their situations.

Recommendation 4

That community awareness campaigns about dating apps be developed for older women and are inclusive about the risks of sexual violence.

Sexual abuse by adult sons and grandchildren

Elderly mothers can be vulnerable to sexual assault and rape by adult sons. There are high levels of shame associated with this abuse and mothers want to protect their child and their family's name and do not report the abuse to authorities.

This abuse can be difficult to detect, even by service providers especially if the adult son is also conducting personal care in the home as there are not many checks and balances on this occurring.

If the woman does speak out, their experience can be discounted or dismissed because she is both older and female and she may have cognitive concerns.

Our community are also disgusted by such crimes, and this may also add to the disbelief about this behaviour – *“who would do that: no one would do that?”*

Intellectual disability

Women with intellectual disability face the same issues as other women but their vulnerability is amplified. Often, they have experienced lifelong histories of abuse and are therefore more vulnerable to ideas about the normalisation of abuse which means they do not report the issues to anyone.

One of our member services is aware of issues where an adult daughter with intellectual disability lives at home and the father is abusing the wife and the daughter.

Cultural and Linguistically Diverse Women

Similarly for women with disability, CALD women can be isolated and especially vulnerable to being targeted.

Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Again, similarly to all women, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women can be targeted to sexual abuse and exploit and would require culturally appropriate and sensitive interventions and responses to ensure they trust the engagement.

Ride shares and taxis

It is quite common for older women to be sexually abused in ride shares and taxis and often they do not want to report the incident.

In a case recently, a taxi driver offered to take their groceries inside the house and the woman agrees as she thinks this is a kind act but once inside the house, she is sexually assaulted.

Lack of information or awareness of referrals for older women and sexual violence

There is a lack of information about where to go if there are concerns about sexual assault or rape for older woman.

Often aged care facilities will not put up information or have this on public display, as it takes away from their promotion of their site as a safe place.

There are limited referrals to sexual violence services from aged care facilities and if a woman is referred, it is often by family members or friends and not the facility. Often it can seem these facilities are more concerned about their reputation than the safety of the older person.

Addressing these issues should be a government priority given the findings of the Aged Care Royal Commission in 2020 that there were on average 50 sexual assaults each week occurring in residential aged care across Australia.

Recommendation 5

That the state government work with the federal government on an urgent and appropriate response to sexual violence in aged care facilities requiring a response to be a part of an action item under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022 – 2032.

Aged Care Facilities

Aged care facilities are often stretched in relation to staffing etcetera and for staff it is just about doing the job and not assessing the risk of abuse or harm.

The staff are often just getting through their duties and do not have time or do not undertake risk assessment. Such environments are perfect grounds for predators to take advantage of.

Families can also be concerned about rocking the boat and making a complaint about certain practices, as they believe this might impact on the care of their mother.

Individual rooms can often be soundproof and quite insular, which again is very good for privacy but is difficult when there are concerns about sexual abuse.

Recommendation 6

That risk assessment for sexual assault and rape be implemented and considered when developing processes and procedures within aged care facilities.

Recommendation 7

That any community awareness campaigns that are developed provide avenues for referral for sexual violence and rape.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the Secretariat.

Kind Regards,

Angela Lynch
Executive Officer
QSAN.