

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

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Education, Arts and Communities Committee
Secretariat
Parliament House
George Street
Brisbane Qld 4001
Via email: eacc@parliament.qld.gov.au

10th April, 2025

RE: ELDER ABUSE INQUIRY IN QUEENSLAND

The Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence (GCCASV) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Education, Arts and Communities Committee in relation to the Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland. This submission will focus specifically on the issue of Elder Sexual Abuse (ESA).

About GCCASV

GCCASV (formerly Gold Coast Sexual Assault Support Service) was founded on the Gold Coast in 1990. The agency is a feminist community based, not for profit, charitable organisation that has been providing free, confidential, specialist sexual violence intervention and prevention programs for more than 30 years. Our vision is safe communities free from sexual, domestic, and family violence. GCCASV provides a safe, supportive, woman-centred environment in which sexual, domestic and family violence survivors can begin their healing journey become aware of their own strengths and gain confidence and control of their lives. The organisation also provides community education and training to the public, schools, and other professionals. Since 2018, GCCASV has also delivered specialist counselling to domestic violence victim/survivors through our Women's Health and Wellbeing Program.

Please find submission attached and do not hesitate to contact the writer if further information is required.

Yours sincerely

[Redacted signature block]

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Director

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ELDER SEXUAL ABUSE (ESA) SUBMISSION TO EDUCATION, ARTS AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

ESA Definition

Elder sexual abuse (ESA) is any kind of non-consensual sexual behaviour, language, or activity that makes an older person feel uncomfortable, threatened, frightened, or unsafe.

ESA background information

Age is not a protective factor in relation to sexual abuse. Ageism and sexism combine to render older women invisible, then if we combine this with the issue of sexual violence which is also largely invisible, the result is that the sexual abuse of older women is DOUBLY invisible. The lack of prevalence data on the sexual abuse of older women further obscures the problem. However, the lack of data does not equal the absence of sexual abuse. The fact that ESA is under researched and under reported has led to the misconception that it rarely happens (Macleod, 2019).

Among the limited pool of research, evidence exists describing older women as victim/survivors of sexual violence, perpetrator characteristics, the nature of sexual violence encountered by older women, reported volume of incidents of sexual violence in Australian aged care settings, leading to difficulties in typifying ESA.

Older women constitute only a small proportion of victim/survivors of sexual violence, however, there is evidence to suggest that existing research underestimates the extent of ESA (Fileborn, 2017). Lee et al. (2004) observe “Although 9 million older adults are estimated to be victims of sexual violence and abuse globally each year, this population is largely overlooked in criminological research”.

ESA is committed by partners, family members, carers, friends, neighbours and strangers. However, the abuser is statistically more likely to be known to the victim.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (n.d.). reports that men are more likely to perpetrate abuse than women, particularly physical, sexual and financial abuse. Women are more likely to report being victimised by physical abuse and significantly more likely to report sexual abuse (Qu et al., 2021).

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2020) estimated the number of incidents of unlawful sexual contact in Australian Aged Care was an average of 50 per week.

Although there is no “typical” older person, definitions of “older” vary substantially with age classifications ranging from 50 years of age to 70 years of age. This inconsistent data then distorts the reality of ESA (Lee et al., 2024).

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CURRENT ESA ISSUES:

Mythology and lack of community awareness

The combination of Ageism, Sexism and Mythology serves to inform the community about ESA and who might be victims and who might be offenders. It is often believed that a younger man would never sexually abuse an older woman because why would anyone want to engage in any sexual activity with someone considered old and therefore not sexually attractive.

In Queensland, there is no easy-to-understand community information on ESA which means a lack of knowledge about options to get support and to report abuse. The more it continues to be publicly stated in Senior’s information and general elder abuse information that ESA is rare, the less likely victim/survivors will be to disclose, thus creating a cycle of misunderstanding and silence detrimental to their health, wellbeing and safety.

Barriers to disclosure

Older women may be socially isolated and have no one to tell. They may be unaware that the behaviour committed against them is criminal. Because of shame and fear, older victims are less likely to spontaneously disclose and are more likely to mask, minimise and manage the sexual abuse. They may have experienced past abuse, disclosed and have been disbelieved as a child, as a teen, as a young woman so they are less likely to disclose now. There is a knowledge gap around where to go for support and many believe DFV/SV services are for younger people.

Lack of consistent language

Government funding separates out domestic violence, sexual violence and elder abuse sectors. Where the partner is the abuser, he may have been abusing for decades so it’s still domestic violence and /or intimate partner sexual violence but when it occurs in later life it may be termed elder abuse obscuring the reality that it is actually domestic violence grown old and denying the reality of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV).

It is estimated that 17% of Australian women have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15. This behaviour continues and unfortunately sexual violence does not suddenly stop on the 65th birthday (Barrett, 2024).

Worker knowledge and skills

Workers report that they are not as comfortable exploring whether sexual violence has occurred as they are in exploring the dimensions of physical and psychological violence affecting older women.

Failure of workers to recognise and respond to ESA may prolong the danger to women, who may conclude that there is nobody to tell and continue to experience repeated sexual abuse with serious physical and psychological impacts.

The shared stories of older women who have experienced ESA point to very low disclosure and reporting rates and a critical need for education for workers to attain the skills necessary to recognise, respond and refer. Currently, there is a gap in service delivery and very few tools for community workers to utilize and refer appropriately (Wallace, 2018).

In Australia, there was no specific ESA training program for health, justice or community workers until 2018 when GCCASV received funding from Victim Assist Community Grants to develop Australia's first 2-day intensive training for professionals on ESA. This program was rolled out through Queensland, but because of a number of legislative and policy changes, now requires funding to update and support its rollout across the state.

Access to justice

In an Australian study, less than one quarter (24%) of participants who experienced ESA reported that they sought help or advice about their experience (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2022).

Older women face particular barriers to disclosure, reporting to the police and accessing the justice system, including cultural context, ageism, perceived credibility, cognitive and health impairments resulting in their experiences remaining hidden (Fileborn, 2017). Elderly victims of sexual abuse may have difficulties communicating, confusion, or memory loss which can affect their credibility and ability to report the abuse which then protects offenders.

Dating apps

Dating apps are rife with sexual violence and better safeguards are needed. An Australian study found that three-quarters of users surveyed experienced online sexual violence while one-third reported in-person incidents (Wolbers et al., 2022). Older women are also using general dating apps as well as apps specifically for over 50s such as SeniorMatch, SilverSingles and OurTime. Many have been away from the dating scene for decades rendering them vulnerable and underprepared for the current changed landscape.

First Nations women

First Nations people are vulnerable due to factors like geographic isolation, marginalisation, lack of resources, and the ongoing effects of colonization and the Stolen Generations. For Indigenous women, shame and the reality that their partners may be related to workers in their communities; creates a silence where victim/survivors fear ostracism within their communities (Parkinson and Cowan, 2008).

CALD women

Women from CALD communities may have more conservative attitudes to gender roles, marriage, sexual activity and may not have words to describe the sexual abuse. They may be unsure of their rights and Australian law. They may have been forced into sexual acts condemned by their religion and/or culture and afraid of police and/doctors because of previous life experience.

Older women in culturally and linguistically diverse communities may face particular issues including language barriers, unaware about rights and of what constitutes ESA (De Mezza, 2025).

Primary focus on setting

Although there tends to be more data available on sexual abuse within aged care residential settings, intimate relationships are the most common setting for sexual assault; and these result in the highest levels of chronic rape and physical injury (Russell, 1990; Myhill and Allen, 2002).

The focus on residential aged care as the primary site of elder sexual abuse creates an opportunity for sexual abuse in the home by offenders known to the victim to fly under the radar. This includes support workers who now have access to older people in their homes

Primary focus on financial abuse

In the elder abuse sector, the most common form of abuse focussed on is financial abuse. This may be more acceptable for both the victim and support workers to discuss. However, financial abuse can mask other co-occurring forms of abuse. Where there is one form of abuse there will likely be others as power and control is exerted in many different ways.

RESPONSE AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

There are many opportunities to improve policy and responses to elder sexual abuse in Queensland, within the government, broader community, non-government, and private sectors, ensuring responses are victim centric, trauma informed and culturally appropriate.

Recommendation 1

That ESA is recognised as an important cross portfolio issue involving health, domestic violence, sexual assault, women, police and justice.

Recommendation 2

That in conjunction with specialist sexual violence services, First Nations and CALD communities, the government fund the development, promotion and distribution of ESA awareness information for older women, their friends and families and the general community in relation to their rights, reporting to police and accessing specialist support services.

Recommendation 3

That the Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence be funded to both update their existing training package on ESA and to rollout the training to health, legal and community services and other relevant agencies across the state.

Recommendation 4

That the DFV and SV sector, police, justice, health workers and aged care facilities are required to participate in specific ESA training.

Recommendation 5

That Elder Sexual Abuse is defined and specifically named in relevant policies, communication, resources, education and training.

Recommendation 6

That Elder Sexual Abuse is specifically named and represented in all Elder Abuse inquiries, roundtables, government and community mechanisms.

Recommendation 7

That all sexual and domestic violence, aged care, health and welfare, police and justice workers undertake training to understand, recognize and respond to sexual violence in the context of elder abuse.

Recommendation 8

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

Recommendation 9

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.

Recommendation 10

That government collaborates with First Nations organizations, and community groups is essential to develop effective strategies to prevent and respond to elder abuse.

Recommendation 11

That all senior information lines have relevant information to support and connect victim/survivors of ESA to appropriate specialist sexual violence services.

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