



# **An Uncomfortable Truth: The sexual assault of older women by Dr Catherine Barrett**

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**Dr Catherine Barrett**



The fact that older women are sexually assaulted is an uncomfortable truth; no one wants to believe this happens. It is important to understand that our disbelief and discomfort are significant barriers to appropriate responses and effective prevention. Let me give you an example. [Margarita Solis](#) was sexually assaulted in a Seniors' Rental Service when she was 95 years old. The perpetrator was the Acting Manager of the service and a friend of the Manager. When Margarita reported the sexual assault to the Manager, her immediate reply was "he wouldn't do that, he's a family friend." Perhaps the Manager could not believe that a friend of hers would sexually assault an older woman; but disbelief does not erase the facts.

Responses that reject the possibility of the sexual assault of older women are not uncommon. [Research](#) indicates that without education on sexual assault, service providers too often dismiss reports of sexual assault as the recall of a childhood sexual assault, or the older woman having a urinary tract infection, dementia or delirium.

Older women may also find they are silenced by their family when they raise sexual assault by an intimate partner or other family member. The disbelief in families can be compounded by feelings of shame that one family member has perpetrated the sexual assault of another.

There is a body of [research](#) demonstrating that sexual assault of older women is a problem that is not being addressed. We have [data](#) from residential aged care homes that shows that for the 2018-2019 period there were 790 reports of 'unlawful sexual contact' and although the number is likely to be significantly higher given there is no requirement for compulsory reporting of sexual assault by a cognitively impaired resident. We also know that [17% of Australian women](#) have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or previous partner since the age of 15 – it would be naive to think the sexual violence suddenly stops on a woman's 65th birthday.



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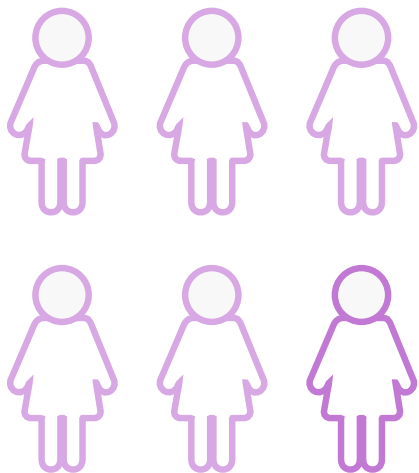
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Australian Research Centre  
in Sex, Health and Society



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# 1 in 6

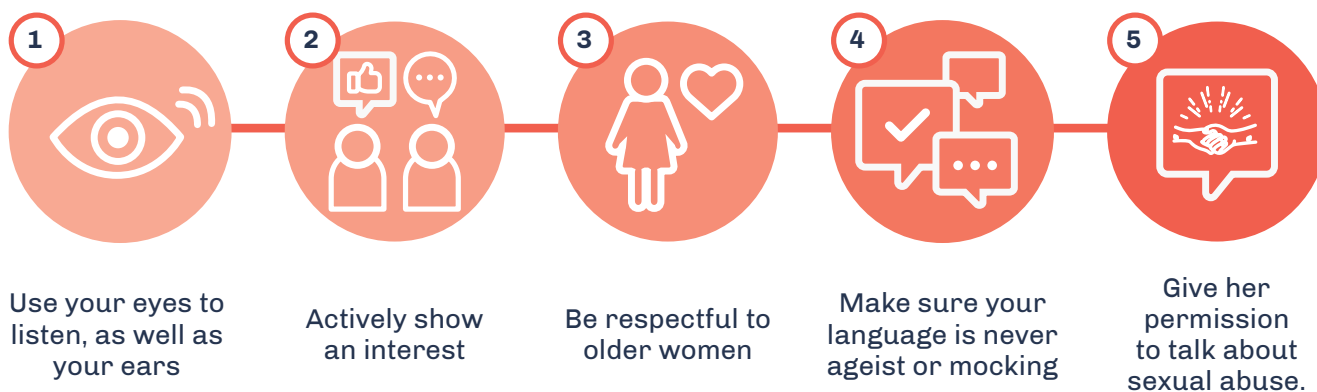
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Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)  
2016 Personal Safety Survey

## Strategies to Prevent the Sexual Assault of Older Women

Strategies to prevent the sexual assault of older women need to begin with education to raise awareness that older women experience sexual assault. There is so much we can do to give older women permission to talk about sexual assault, to respond appropriately and prevent it from happening – some of these strategies are outlined below.

### Listening strategies to respond and prevent sexual assault



# How to listen

Listening is the most powerful strategy for responding to and preventing sexual assault. In her [#SheToo Guide to Listening to Older Women](#), Margarita Solis urges us to:

1. Use your eyes to listen as well as your ears
2. Show an interest. If an older woman knows that you care - she will feel safer to tell you how she is actually feeling
3. Be respectful of older women - don't poke fun at them because they will think you won't be interested in listening to them
4. Make sure your language is never ageist or mocking
5. Give her permission to talk about sexual abuse.



“**‘Listening with your eyes’** is particularly relevant when listening to women with dementia, who are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault because they are unable to defend themselves or report a perpetrator.”

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Margarita's advice on 'listening with your eyes' is particularly relevant when listening to women with [dementia](#), who are [particularly vulnerable](#) to sexual assault because they are unable to defend themselves or report a perpetrator.

Service providers need to take proactive steps to communicate to older women that they are listening. This includes Elder Abuse, Family Violence and Sexual Assault services developing specific information about responding to older women who experience sexual assault.

“ In outreach to older women, consideration also needs to be given to the language used. The terms *sexual assault*, *sexual violence*, *sexual abuse* or *unlawful sexual contact* are unlikely to be used by older women. ”

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In outreach to older women, consideration also needs to be given to the language used. The terms sexual assault, sexual violence, sexual abuse or unlawful sexual contact are unlikely to be used by older women. This may be attributed, in part, to the influence of [Marital Rape Immunity Laws](#) in Australia which have resulted in some older women thinking it is their responsibility to provide for their male partners 'conjugal rights' whether or not consent is negotiated. Early [research](#) on opening up conversations with older women indicates language may need to be more subtle than the current legal terms.

### Principles for responding when a sexual assault is reported by an older woman or her family.



Secure safety



Seek medical treatment



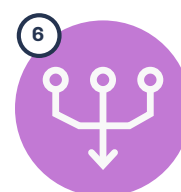
Reporting  
(1800 RESPECT)



Emotional support



Develop a safety plan



Consolidate strategies for prevention

## How to Respond

There are some [generic principles for responding](#) when a sexual assault is reported by an older woman or her family. These include:

1. **Secure safety:** ensure the older woman is safe from further sexual assault by the alleged perpetrator
2. **Seek medical treatment:** determine if the older woman requires medical attention. If urgent, phone triple zero to arrange an Ambulance or if less urgent arrange suitable medical treatment



3. **Reporting:** most states and territories have a specialist sexual assault team – if you can't find this information, call [1800 RESPECT](#) for information. If sexual assault is alleged to have occurred in aged care, an approved provider must report to the [Quality and Safety](#) Commission and the police, within 24 hours. If the alleged assault is reported to families (in residential aged care) it is important to: be honest with family; don't minimise the incident or harm done; apologise for what has allegedly occurred. You may also call [OPAN](#), the Older Person's Advocacy Network; it is important to note that not all OPAN staff have had education on responding the sexual assault
4. **Emotional support:** Older women have the right to support, whether or not a perpetrator is charged. Contact your local Centre Against Sexual Assault (or call 1800 RESPECT to find the closest option) to identify support options for the older woman and her family. It is also important to communicate to the older woman that you are listening and that it is not her fault
5. **Develop a Safety Plan:** make sure the older woman is safe (and feels safe) from further assault. If at home - contact Family Violence Services to help plan for safety in the home. Victims Assistance Program may also be able to assist in improving home safety. If in residential aged care the older woman may require female carers only
6. **Consolidate strategies for prevention:** organise staff debriefing to provide safe spaces for staff to talk about how they are feeling and how they could prevent further sexual assaults



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## How to prevent

There is so much that can be done to prevent the sexual assault of older women. At this particular point in history – listening to older women may be the most powerful tool for prevention. The [#InHerShoes](#) Campaign, which is documenting responses to older women and their families who report sexual assault, has found that the systemic failure to listen to older women results in missed opportunities to hold perpetrators to account and prevent sexual assault.

None of us want to believe that older women are sexually assaulted – but that won't make this problem go away. The campaign to eradicate sexual assault of older women begins with each and every one of us listening without judgement. By doing so, we open up new conversations that help to make older women safe.

Margarita Solis made a [film](#) about her experience of reporting sexual assault because she wanted older women to understand that sexual assault is not their fault. She also wanted to thank service providers and community members for transforming her life by listening. Margarita's message is simple: listen with your eyes and ears, be respectful and give her permission to talk.

## by Dr Catherine Barrett



Dr Catherine Barrett is the Director of the OPAL Institute. Catherine is an advocate for the sexual rights of older people. She recently launched the #InHerShoes research and awareness raising project documenting the experience of older women who have reported sexual assault.

Other topics you might be interested in that you can find on [Compass.info](https://compass.info)

**Financial abuse** is theft or misuse of an older person's money, assets or property.



[Financial abuse](#)



[Creating your financial support team](#)



[10 common forms of elder financial abuse](#)



[Financial elder abuse and the importance of enduring documents by The Hon Dr Kay Patterson AO](#)