

**DISCUSSION RESOURCE**

**together  
making  
change**

PROJECT OF  
5TH NATIONAL ELDER  
ABUSE CONFERENCE

HOSTED BY SENIORS  
RIGHTS SERVICE



# SEXUAL ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN

**DR CATHERINE  
BARRETT**





## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

In February 2018, Seniors Rights Service hosted the 5th National Elder Abuse Conference, which brought together more than 500 delegates from a broad range of backgrounds. The conference culminated in an announcement by the Commonwealth Attorney-General, Hon Christian Porter MP, that a “National Plan” would be developed to ensure the protection of older people in Australian society.

To further the conversations generated by the conference, Seniors Rights Service engaged Ellen Fanning to conduct a series of interviews with experts who attended the conference. These videos, along with a discussion sheet for each video, are freely available to community members, professionals and students of all sectors, to enable engagement with the content using suggested discussion questions and to follow up with further reading.

### IMPORTANT! READ THIS BEFORE HOLDING A DISCUSSION GROUP

Many people will share and benefit from participating in study and discussion on the topics.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics, however, group leaders should ensure they are prepared to support individuals to find qualified assistance in a timely manner, should a topic generate personal concerns or issues for individuals.

As a minimum, group leaders should have available information sheets and phone numbers from the relevant seniors' legal rights service and/or elder abuse prevention service in your state or territory (on page 4 and current as of 2018).

## ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

### SHORT DESCRIPTION

Dr Barrett discusses how sexual abuse of older women is significantly under-reported. She explains how the perception of older women as asexual can lead to dismissal and disbelief when sexual abuse is reported. She also argues that there is little recognition of older women's risk of sexual abuse by service providers. Dr Barrett discusses how The Power Project provides information around the prevention and reporting of the sexual abuse of older women.

### FOCUS AREA

Sexual abuse of older women

### RELATED TOPICS

Elder abuse, ageism, sexual assault, legal responses, law, social work

### AUDIENCES

Legal professionals, police officers, community members, health workers, aged-care workers, community workers, researchers, students, advocates, policy officers

### MATERIALS FOR FURTHER READING

Dr C. Barrett, (2016) Submission #68, Australian Law Reform Commission Elder Abuse Enquiry, accessed from [www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/subs/68.\\_c\\_barrett.pdf](http://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/subs/68._c_barrett.pdf)

### SUGGESTED AGENCIES

The Power Project  
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## DR CATHERINE BARRETT

DIRECTOR, THE OPAL INSTITUTE (OLDER PEOPLE AND SEXUALITY)

### BIOGRAPHY

Dr Catherine Barrett is the founder and director of Celebrate Ageing, a program challenging ageism and preventing elder abuse. The program includes the OPAL Institute (Older People And Sexuality) addressing the sexual rights of older people – including the right to be free from sexual abuse. Dr Barrett was the chief investigator for Norma's Project – documenting older women's experiences of elder abuse – and was also a researcher on a Victorian-based project that documented a state-wide strategy to prevent the sexual abuse of older women. Dr Barrett believes that to achieve the social and cultural changes necessary to prevent elder abuse, we need to work together. In February 2018, Dr Barrett launched The Power Project, a national resource mapping how we can work together to prevent sexual abuse.

## SEXUAL ABUSE OF OLDER WOMEN

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### *Why is sexual abuse of older women under-reported?*

There are several reasons. Firstly, all sexual abuse is under-reported. There is a lot of silence about sexual assault because of shame. Also there can be disruptions to established and extended family relationships and home life. For older women, there is a significant issue of under-reporting where they are being abused by an intimate partner or family member. But also, Dr Barrett explains, older women may have experienced rape in marriage at a time when there were immunity laws in that situation. They were told to "just go home and be a good wife". And lastly, Dr Barrett says, older women are seen to be immune from sexual assault because of their age. Older women are thought of as asexual, so it is assumed that age is a protective factor against sexual assault. It is not.

#### *Does age make women more vulnerable to sexual abuse or, typically, have older women experiencing sexual abuse been enduring it for decades?*

A bit of both. Dr Barrett explains that some women have experienced sexual abuse all their married lives, and this continues into older age. Sometimes the abuse occurs in the context of a new relationship, when they remarry and the new partner is abusive. Or, Dr Barrett says, the abuse could be occurring in an institutional setting, such as residential aged care, where there is no, or little, recognition that older women can be victims of sexual abuse. The assumption, Dr Barrett says, is that older women are immune from the risk because of their age. But this is incorrect because sexual abuse is about power and control more than it is about sexual attraction.

#### *What is the Power Project?*

The Power Project is a research project that includes a website, or central portal, that is a "one-stop shop" for resources and information on preventing sexual abuse of older women and how to respond if an older woman reports sexual abuse.



STATE/TERRITORY	AGENCY CONTACT	CONTACT
<b>AUSTRALIA-WIDE</b>	<b>Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN)</b>	1800 700 600 Connects you with aged-care advocacy services in your state or territory
<b>NEW SOUTH WALES</b>	<b>Seniors Rights Service</b>	1800 424 079
	<b>NSW Elder Abuse Helpline</b>	1800 628 221
<b>AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY</b>	<b>Older Persons Abuse Prevention Referral and Information Line (APRIL)</b>	(02) 6205 3535
	<b>A.C.T. Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS)</b>	02 6242 5060
<b>NORTHERN TERRITORY</b>	<b>Elder Abuse Information Line</b>	1800 037 072
	<b>Seniors and Disability Rights Service of Darwin Community Legal Service</b>	1800 812 953
<b>QUEENSLAND</b>	<b>Elder Abuse Prevention Unit</b>	1300 651 192
	<b>Aged and Disability Advocacy Australia (ADA Australia)</b>	1800 818 338
	<b>Caxton Legal Centre</b>	(07) 3214 6333
<b>SOUTH AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>Aged Rights Advocacy Service</b>	(08) 8232 5377 (Adelaide)
	<b>Alliance for the Prevention of Elder Abuse</b>	1800 700 600 (rural)
	<b>Legal Services Commission of South Australia</b>	1300 366 424 (08) 8111 5555
<b>TASMANIA</b>	<b>Tasmanian Elder Abuse Helpline</b>	1800 441 169
	<b>Advocacy Tasmania Inc. (ATI)</b>	(03) 6224 2240
	<b>Legal Aid Commission of Tasmania</b>	1300 366 611 (03) 6236 3800
<b>VICTORIA</b>	<b>Seniors Rights, Victoria</b>	1300 368 821
	<b>Elder Rights Advocacy (ERA)</b>	(03) 9602 3066 1800 700 600 (rural)
<b>WESTERN AUSTRALIA</b>	<b>Advocare Inc.</b>	1300 724 679 (Perth) 1800 655 566 (rural)
	<b>Older Persons Rights Service, Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre</b>	(08) 9440 1663 (Mirrabooka) (08) 9301 4413 (Joondalup)

## DISCLAIMER

This is information only, not legal advice. If you have a legal problem, call our service directly or see your lawyer. The views expressed in the video are the views of the individual making them, not those of Seniors Rights Service Inc.