SEXUAL ASSAULT AND THE OLDER WOMAN

A. Possible Profile

“An American study of 28 cases of suspected elder sexual abuse victims found victims to be female, in their 70’s, suffering a major impediment to self-care and were sexually abused by a known person whom the victim was dependent upon for care” (Ramsey-Klasnik, 1991)

1. The Status of Older Women in Today’s Society

Older women are not a homogenous group. Some differences include a woman ethno-cultural background, age, sexual orientation, rural/urban living arrangements, physical and mental health, work history, education level and abuse history.

As a group, older women will constitute a large proportion of persons in Canada, as the population continues to age. For example by the year 2030, it is estimated that there will approximately 7.5 million Canadians over the age of 65. A significant number of this person will be women. Since women also live longer than men, it is anticipated that the number of ‘very old’ in our population will be largely made up of women.

Some older women, particularly those who are widowed or who have spent their entire lives as home-makers, or working on the family farm or a reserve or in small business, are not financially well-off, particularly as they approach old age. This inequity is daring to the lack of fair pay and benefits for (full-time and part-time) working and non-working women. Poverty is still an issue for many women, even in old age.

Older women who live alone may be more dependent on others for daily needs such as shopping, transportation, and personal care. Such dependency can make them vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment.

2. Who is sexually assaulted?

Some Canadian Statistics on Sexual Assault

“A 1993 Statistics Canada survey found that one-half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of sexual assault or physical violence. Almost 60% of these women were the targets of more than one incident”. (Canadian Panel on Violence against Women)
Rape happens to women of all income levels, cultures or race. No woman can be guaranteed safety from sexual assault. Because rape is a crime of violence and power, women of any age are sexually assaulted.

Any woman who is vulnerable or is perceived as being vulnerable can be a target for sexual assault. For example, women with disabilities are raped more often than able-bodied women” (DisAbled Women’s Network, 1994). As well, many women have been sexually abused as children. It has been estimated that “at sometime during their lives, about 1 in 2 females and 1 in every 3 males have been victims of unwanted sexual acts. About 4 in 5 of these incidents first happened to these persons when they were children or you.” (Badgely, 1984)

In light of these statistics, it is likely that advocates and professionals will come into contact with women who have experienced more than one incident of sexual abuse in their lifetime.

“Older people are subject to a wide variety of stereotypes associated with helplessness, diminishing power and competence. Research has shown that many assailants seek out vulnerable people who they can easily overpower and manipulate. Although older people are not necessarily more vulnerable, these misconceptions make older people a target for violence. (National Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 1993).

Older men may also experience sexual assault; however the overwhelming majority of adult sexual assault victims are women.

3. The Impact of Sexual Assault:

Impact of Sexual Assault

‘The impact of sexual assault for an older woman can be particularly difficult. Age and generational differences may make it difficult for older women to disclose their experiences because of greater feelings of shame, fear, vulnerability and the increased isolation and dependency that may come with age.” (Ministry of Citizenship, Office for Seniors’ Issues, 1994)

Older women are the targets of many types of ageist and sexist beliefs that can lead to abuse and victimization. Some people fear and lack of understanding about aging and its impact may lead to a form of prejudice known as ageism.

Most women who are sexually assault never report it to anyone. For some women, it may be months or years before the abuse is disclosed. Often, a present day assault can trigger memories of an earlier assault (e.g. sexual abuse during childhood or adult
years) if this is the case, the woman may be dealing with the impact of more than one assault.

The crisis that occurs as a result of a sexual assault leaves a woman feeling powerless: it damages self-esteem and erodes personal confidence. Even if a woman receives no direct threats against her life, the loss of power and control over her own body will often generate a tremendous amount of fear. For many women, the fear for one’s life and feelings of being powerless continue to occur after the assault as may feelings of anxiety, depression and loss of self-esteem.

In addition, women who have been sexually assaulted often experience shame, betrayal and loss of trust, especially when abused by someone known to them. Often, women will ask, “why me” after a sexual assault.

Older women may become confused and disoriented after an assault. Like other women who have been sexually assaulted, an older woman may be afraid of not being believed if she speaks out. Given the stereotypes of older women as being forgetful and delusional, a woman may be at risk of being ridiculed if she speaks out about this crime.

A woman’s response to sexual assault varies and is affected by her resources, ability to cope, health, cultural background, and support systems. It is important to be aware of many factors at play in seeking help.

Unlike her younger counterparts, older women often do not have to worry about the threats of pregnancy, following an assault. Unfortunately, older women are more vulnerable to physical injury and infections (e.g. an increased susceptibility to urinary tract infections due to the aging process can be aggravated by sexual assault.). Also, injuries to an older woman can be more critical because brittle bones break easily and will often take a long time to heal.

4. Indicators of Sexual Assault/Abuse

Often changes in a woman’s behavior may be the most likely indicator that something is wrong. Helpers should consider this and check out whether a change in an older woman’s behavior is an indictor or deteriorating health or a sing that the person is suffering from the stress and trauma of abuse.

There are two types of incompetence. One relates to financial and the second to personal care matters. An older woman who is incompetent of managing her affairs could be quite competent in looking after her personal needs and vice versa. Similarly, an older woman who appears to be incompetent may be quite capable of meeting the requirements of telling the truth in court. Remember the onus of proving someone
competent is the responsibility of a physician, the court and the person challenging the mental capacity of the older person.

Severe physical injury, fear of death, psychological devastation, long recovery, increased anxiety, financial problems and loss of independence are all concerns of older women following a rape. “ (Burgess and Holstrom, 1974)