



Research on mistreatment of older adults in Quebec: summaries of scientific articles

Sexual Assault Against Older Women: An Unrecognised Social Problem.

REFERENCE

Beaulieu, M. et Lussier-Therrien, M. (2017). Sexual Assault Against Older Women: An Unrecognised Social Problem. *Recherches féministes*, 29(2), 199-213.

TEXT TYPE

Format: Scientific article

Content: Theory and literature review

DISCUSSED THEMES

Concept of gender; Detection; Extent of the phenomenon; Intervention; Mistreatment in institutional settings; Organisation of services; Prevention; Profile of the mistreated person; Profile of the person who mistreats; Reporting; Training

GOAL OR RESEARCH QUESTION

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the sexual assault committed against older adult women through an international literature review of the sexual mistreatment experienced by older adults.

PROBLEM

In Quebec, sexual assault against older adults is an example of sexual mistreatment identified in the 2010-2015 *Governmental Action Plan to Counter Elder Abuse*, as well as the *Reference Guide to Counter Elder Abuse* (2013 edition). It is therefore a recognised social and health problem that is becoming increasingly widespread around the world. However, few scientific studies focus on developing ways to address sexual assault against older adults in terms of prevention, detection or intervention.

METHODOLOGY

Following an international review of the scientific literature conducted by the Research Chair on Mistreatment of Older Adults in May 2015 in about ten data banks (Ageline, Érudit, Cairn, etc.), twenty (20) English-language texts dealing with sexual assault on older adults were selected and analysed. Of these, only three (3) deal specifically with sexual assault committed against older women, while others do not specify the gender of the individuals studied. Most of these writings come from the United States and the United Kingdom.

RESULTS

The timid recognition of sexual aggression towards older women as a social issue is partly explained by the ageist perception associated with the analysis of this problem. The idea that sexual assault is primarily directed towards, if not only, young women, results in the experience and needs of older women going unrecognised. This common perception has significant consequences when a situation of this kind is shared with intervention workers. These victims risk being misunderstood, their experiences invalidated or their testimony contradicted. As a result, their request for help is affected if the person they are confiding in isn't aware of this reality.

Countering sexual assault against older adults is divided into several areas: prevention, identification of past or present assault indicators, and direct or indirect intervention with the older adult. Prevention includes activities to raise awareness to demystify pre-constructed ideas that older women cannot be involved in sexual assault. Identification is based on the relationship of trust established between a professional, a doctor for example, and the older adult in order to validate the hypothesis of sexual assault and then trigger an intervention which is appropriate to the situation. To ensure an effective response, it is imperative that professionals receive up-to-date training and be comfortable addressing the issue directly with the individual affected. Finally, examples of intervention in the event of a proven case of sexual assault are: support for specialised services, emotional support for the older adult and interdisciplinary intervention. All of these actions aim to improve the quality of life of the older person by restoring control over their life.

DISCUSSION

In light of this literature review, several elements must be put in place to support professionals in their efforts to counter the sexual assault of older adults, particularly against older women. Training on the subject remains to be enhanced in the health and social services network, as well as the creation of tools to facilitate the detection of sexual assault. In addition, it is essential that access to the judicial process be facilitated so that older adults who wish to lodge a complaint can do so without hindrance (access to information, reduced time limits).

CONCLUSION

A collaboration between those concerned for the well-being of older adults is essential in order to identify avenues to promote the recognition of sexual assault against older adults as a problem in and of itself. For example, collaboration between the research, policy, police, community agencies (Québec Coalition of Sexual Assault Centers (CALACS), and Crime Victims Assistance Centers [CAVAC]) and the health and social services network provides responses and interventions that are more responsive to these situations which are both emotionally difficult and are professionally complex.

AVENUES FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Since this field of research remains very little explored for the moment in Quebec, it is all the more important that future efforts to document this reality ensure that the personal accounts of these older women are focal point of the issue. Indeed, they are the best positioned to determine what professional interventions would be most beneficial in such situations of sexual mistreatment.

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