

HISTORIC GENDER INEQUALITIES

PRINCIPLE

Historic gender inequalities shape contemporary experiences of sexual assault for older women. Understanding these inequalities is essential for improving recognition, reporting, and service responses.



CONSIDERATIONS

Older women have lived through eras in which their legal, economic, and social rights were significantly restricted.

Examples include:

- Marriage bars that **forced women to resign** from public service roles upon marrying.
- **Inability to secure bank loans, mortgages, or credit** without a male guarantor until the 1970s.
- Legal requirements for a **husband's consent for contraception, passports, and medical procedures** such as tubal ligation.
- **Divorce laws** requiring women to prove wrongdoing by their husbands, often trapping them in violent relationships.
- **Exclusion from superannuation systems**, resulting in lifelong financial inequality.

Institutional harm also affected many older women, including those from the Stolen Generations, Care Leavers, Forgotten Australians, and women affected by Forced Adoption policies.

For hundreds of years, marital rape immunity **laws normalised sexual violence within marriage**. Australia repealed these laws between 1981 and 1992, shaping a cultural context in which many older women still do not conceptualise sexual coercion within relationships as sexual assault.

IMPLICATIONS

These historical inequalities **continue to influence**:

- Older women's **perceptions of sexual rights** and bodily autonomy.
- **Reluctance to report sexual assault** due to shame, fear, and internalised beliefs about duty or marital obligation.
- **Financial dependency**, which may prevent women from leaving abusive relationships.
- **A cultural silence** in which older women believe they will not be believed or taken seriously.

Understanding this history is essential for interpreting contemporary disclosures, reluctance to report, and barriers to support.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

- **Provide staff training** on historic gender inequalities and their present-day effects.
- **Engage local older women** to share lived experiences in safe, supported settings.
- **Encourage reflective practice** among staff to identify how historical inequities may influence current service responses.