

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

15 June 2019

Sexual abuse of older persons must be exposed, says UN expert

GENEVA (13 June 2019) –The sexual abuse and rape of older persons is a subject rarely discussed, but nevertheless is a reality, says a UN expert. We must all be more attentive and report suspected cases of abuse of older people, says Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons Rosa Kornfeld-Matte. Ahead of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day on 15 June, Kornfeld-Matte issued a statement in which she says most abuse goes undetected and unreported, even when there are clear warning signs:

“Sexual abuse and rape of older persons is still a taboo. It remains largely unreported and undetected and thus invisible. With the ageing of our societies, this problem is expected to grow dramatically. However, without enough data, statistics and studies, we will not have even an estimate of the dimensions involved.

One of the challenges of sexual abuse is the perpetuation of the myth that strangers predominantly perpetrate it. Sadly, most abusers are family members, relatives or other confidants typically in caring positions. This explains the inherently sensitive nature of the issue.

This myth is sustained by a societal attitude that does not accept the concept of sexuality in older age, and therefore the idea that an older woman can be targeted because she is a woman.

Negative stereotypes, such as that older persons aren't sexual beings, their greater dependency on others, potential divided loyalty to staff members or residents, are unique barriers to reporting, detecting and preventing sexual assault in nursing homes. Despite severe health consequences, efforts to prevent and address abuse remain inadequate.

Another challenge of sexual abuse of older persons is that the opportunity to protect forensic and other criminal evidence can be lost by mistaken compassion or shame of others who desire to make the older person comfortable instead of calling the police.

Very often, the behavior of an older person, even if they have confusion, will tell you that something is wrong. Even with dementia, people can often make their feelings known if you take the time to listen, observe and take notice. A precondition for an increased abuse reporting and detection is that we all are aware and alerted that sexual abuse of older persons is conceivable.

Finally, let me reiterate that awareness and attentiveness is critical. Not only relatives and confidants but also staff in hospitals and care facilities must be aware of the existence of sexual assault and that it is their duty as care providers to report alleged or suspected sexual assault in a timely manner. More education, training as well as data and research is needed to address the knowledge gaps around incidence, levels of reporting, nature of investigations, responses required to better assist the victim, and the interventions needed to prevent sexual assault.”

ENDS

Ms Rosa Kornfeld-Matte (Chile) was appointed by the Human Rights Council as the first Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons in May 2014. Ms. Kornfeld-Matte served as the National Director of the Chilean National Service of Ageing where she designed and implemented the National Policy of Ageing. She has a long career as an academic and is the founder of the programme for older persons at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile.

*This year is the 70th anniversary of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, adopted by the UN on 10 December 1948. The Universal Declaration – translated into a world record 500 languages – is rooted in the principle that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” It remains relevant to everyone, every day. In honour of the 70th anniversary of this extraordinarily influential document, and to prevent its vital principles from being eroded, we are urging people everywhere to **Stand Up for Human Rights**: www.standup4humanrights.org*