

# Older women and sexual violence: Exploring the possibility of enhanced knowledge, data-sharing and collaborative practice

Project examining how improved data sharing and multi-agency collaboration can strengthen prevention, reporting, safeguarding and support for older women experiencing sexual violence, informing future policy.

## Key details

|                                      |                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Lead institution</b>              | <a href="#">Scottish Policing Academic Centre of Excellence (SPACE)</a>                      |
| <b>Principal researcher(s)</b>       | <a href="mailto:sipr@napier.ac.uk">sipr@napier.ac.uk</a>                                     |
| <b>Police region</b>                 | Scotland                                                                                     |
| <b>Collaboration and partnership</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Police Scotland</li><li>• Seniors Together</li></ul> |
| <b>Level of research</b>             | Professional/work based                                                                      |
| <b>Project start date</b>            | August 2026                                                                                  |
| <b>Date due for completion</b>       | August 2027                                                                                  |

## Research context

This project explores how enhanced data sharing and multi-agency collaboration can improve the prevention of and response to sexual violence against older women (SVAOW). Identified as a priority by Police Scotland's Public Protection team, SVAOW is a significant but largely hidden issue that remains under-reported and under-researched, limiting understanding of risk, prevention and support needs. Older women are less likely than younger women to report sexual violence, often delay disclosure and are more likely to confide in family members, healthcare professionals or

counsellors rather than the police. Consequently, organisations beyond policing may hold valuable information about risk indicators, victim experiences and opportunities for intervention.

Statutory and third-sector organisations are also well placed to engage older women, raise awareness and facilitate access to support. However, barriers including ageism, limited service awareness, physical and digital exclusion and the persistence of rape myths reduce formal help-seeking. Existing multi-agency frameworks, such as MAPPA, MARAC, MATAC, and MASH, primarily focus on domestic abuse and high-risk offenders, creating potential gaps in information sharing and safeguarding for older women experiencing sexual violence, particularly where offenders have no criminal justice history.

This project will address these gaps by examining how collaborative approaches can strengthen prevention, improve referral pathways and enhance understanding of risk and protective factors affecting older women.

## Aims and objectives

The study aims to investigate barriers and facilitators to effective information sharing and multi-agency working in relation to SVAOW, and to identify collaborative practices that can better use existing knowledge and data to prevent harm.

The project will:

- review the existing literature
- conduct thematic focus groups with key stakeholders and older women
- undertake qualitative and quantitative analysis of a sample of Police Scotland SVAOW case files
- facilitate a multi-stakeholder World Café/Go Wild workshop
- disseminate findings to inform policing, partner agency practice and future research

## Research methodology

This project adopts a three-phase mixed-methods approach, combining professional perspectives, the experiences of older women and analysis of police case files. Consistent with the literature, older women are defined as those aged 60 and over at the time of the offence. The study will focus on Lanarkshire (Q Division), providing a representative mix of urban and rural communities.

## Focus groups

Three online focus groups will be conducted with five to seven professionals from Police Scotland, public and third-sector organisations to explore current responses to sexual violence against older women and opportunities for improved information sharing and multi-agency collaboration. Three additional focus groups with five to seven older women, facilitated through Seniors Together, will examine awareness of reporting pathways, support services and barriers to help-seeking. All data will be analysed thematically.

## Case file analysis

Approximately 30 rape and sexual assault cases involving older women reported to Q Division over a two-year period will be analysed using Police Scotland systems (for example, STORM, iVPD and UNIFI). Data on victim and offence characteristics, disclosure, vulnerabilities and victim-offender relationships will be examined using qualitative thematic analysis and descriptive quantitative methods to identify risk factors, intervention opportunities and prevention strategies. All data will be collected on Police Scotland premises and pseudonymised at the point of collection.

## Stakeholder workshop

A multi-agency workshop using World Café and Go Wild facilitation methods will bring together stakeholders from Police Scotland, public sector organisations, third-sector organisations and community partners to co-produce practical recommendations for strengthening collaborative, age-responsive approaches to preventing and responding to sexual violence against older women.

## Research participation

The study will involve three participant groups:

### Professionals (approximately 15–21 participants)

Police Scotland officers and staff, alongside representatives from relevant public and third-sector organisations involved in safeguarding, victim support and violence against women and girls (VAWG) services. Participants will take part in online focus groups exploring current information-sharing practices, multi-agency collaboration and opportunities to improve responses to sexual violence against older women.

## **Older women (approximately 15–21 participants)**

Women aged 60 years and over will be recruited through community partner organisation Seniors Together to participate in focus groups. Discussions will explore awareness of reporting pathways, experiences and perceptions of support services, barriers to help-seeking and views on improving responses to sexual violence against older women.

## **Police case files**

Approximately 30 anonymised Police Scotland case files relating to reported rape and sexual assault offences involving women aged 60 years and over will be analysed. No direct contact will be made with victims or offenders as part of this element of the study.