

# Book review

## **Sexual Violence Against Older People (Victims, Culture and Society)**

*Edited by Hannah Bows*  
*Abingdon, Oxon*  
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The book is based on an empirical mixed-methods doctoral research study which examines the extent, nature and impact of sexual violence against people aged 60 and over in the UK (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Bows argues that sexual violence against older people has received little attention in the UK and internationally in contrast to that of younger people. The research from which the book is based on is situated in feminist criminology and gerontology. The research involved three phases of data collection. Phase 1 consisted of a quantitative analysis of police recorded rape and sexual assault by penetration offences against those aged 60 and over which was sought through freedom of information requests. Phase 2 consisted of qualitative interviews with 23 professionals who work with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, and Phase 3 was qualitative interviews with three older survivors of rape and sexual assault. Bows clarifies that although the study looked at older people in general the findings discussed in the book mainly focuses on women. The reported findings draw attention to the emotional and physical impact of rape and sexual assault by penetration offences against older people, challenges and support available to survivors (including

macro-level barriers to accessing support).

The book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the intersections of gender and ageism. It highlights the positioning of older women in research on sexual violence and criminology. The chapter argues that although different forms of abuse against older people have been acknowledged in research, sexual violence against older people have been defined in the context of physical abuse. Chapter 2 examines three overlapping and yet distinct fields of enquiries: elder abuse, domestic violence against older people and sexual violence against older people drawing attention to similarities and differences. Bows discusses the findings of analysis of the police recorded rape and sexual assaults by penetration offences against those aged 60 and over in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 discusses findings from the qualitative interviews with professionals who work with older survivors of sexual violence. It focusses on physical, emotional and lifestyle impact; support needs and gaps in service provision. The physical impact included the trauma of sexual violence, genital injuries, broken bones, bruising and cuts which were reported that although similar in young victims of rape were more severe in older people. The chapter includes discussions of overlapping challenges, macro-level barriers, lack of awareness campaigns, multi-agency partnership and the emotional impact of work. Chapter 5 reports findings of the interviews with three older women survivors of sexual violence and rape. The chapter is compelling and a must-read, and it provides insights about survivors accounts of impact,

challenges and access to support which those engaged in supporting older women survivors of rape and or sexual violence would find very helpful.

The concluding chapter draws together the key issues discussed in the previous chapters. It includes discussions on the extent and nature of sexual violence against older people in the UK, practitioners experiences of supporting older survivors and the experiences of older survivors. The chapter draws attention to a number of concerns which include the impact of intersections of ageist and sexist assumptions about “real rape” stereotypes, lack of guidance for supporting older people who are living with dementia; emotional challenges exacerbated by prevailing cultural norms which inhibit disclosure (e.g. general attitude around masculinity and homosexuality where older men are concerned); lack of inter-agency collaboration; lack of awareness of sexual violence against older people among practitioners; training and emotional impact of work. The three survivors case studies are drawn on to highlight the impact of continuum violence across the life course, support need and gives insights about how to work with survivors who

have experienced sexual violence across the life courses.

The book makes valuable contributions to the field of safeguarding adults by addressing gaps in knowledge about the extent and nature of sexual violence against older people. Those with a particular interest in working with older people who are victims and or survivors of sexual violence, rape and sexual exploitations would find this book very useful. The book will also appeal to those with an interest in working with older people more generally and specific to older survivors or victims of sexual violence both in the UK and internationally; researchers, academics and practitioners who are working in the frontline (Criminologist, Forensic, GPs, Police Services, Social Workers, Nurses, students and Safeguarding Adults Boards).

The style of writing is accessible, it is a challenging subject, and Bows does it justice by respecting survivors in how she tells their story. She calls for greater awareness and coordinated response and research on sexual violence against older people. It is a welcome addition to the field.

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