

Hear Our Voices: Body Mapping, sexual assault and older women

Dr Catherine Barrett, Yumi Lee and Deborah Barndon
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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and live, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present.

We acknowledge the sorrow of the Stolen Generations and the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We support the Uluru Statement from the Heart, the call for a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Australian Constitution and a Makarrata Commission to oversee agreement-making and truth-telling.

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Introduction

This document outlines a Body Mapping project with older women in New South Wales to co-design a training package aimed at improving services for older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault. The Body Mapping project was part of the *Hear Our Voices Project*,¹ led by the Older Women's Network NSW² and funded by the Department of Communities and Justice, New South Wales Government.³

The Body Mapping project was conducted in 2024-2025, a period of increased recognition of the silencing of older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault.⁴ This recognition included:

- The Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches to End Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence, which listed older women as a priority group⁵
- The [un]Silencing of Older Women, A LifeStages Approach to the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children⁶
- The [un]Silencing of Older Women, A Gender Lens for Elder Abuse⁷
- The Biscuit Tin program, Australia's first primary prevention initiative focused on older women and gender-based violence and abuse.⁸

To understand the need for these and other strategies to prevent sexual assault of older women, this report begins by outlining the historical and contemporary inequalities that contribute to the vulnerability of older women to sexual assault.

Historical gender inequalities

Older women have been silenced by a lifetime of gender inequalities. This includes limited property rights,⁹ a ban on working in the public service after they were married,¹⁰ inability to secure a bank loan without a male guarantor,¹¹ or a passport without a husband's authorisation.¹² Tubal ligation (a form of contraception) was prohibited without a husband's consent.¹³

¹ <https://ownsw.org.au/project/hear-our-voices/>

² <https://ownsw.org.au/>

³ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/>

⁴ <https://opan.org.au/education/training-for-aged-care-professionals/ready-to-listen/>

⁵ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/unlocking-prevention-potential.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/embolden2024.html>

⁸ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/biscuittin.html>

⁹ <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUJIGendLaw/2009/6.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.vwt.org.au/gender-equality-timeline-australia/>

¹¹ <https://timeline.awava.org.au/archives/1286#:~:text=Following%20a%20campaign%20from%20women's,without%20requiring%20a%20male%20guarantor>

¹² https://web.archive.org/web/20060614171552/http://www.passports.gov.au/Web/passport_history.aspx

¹³ <https://www.ogmagazine.org.au/18/3-18/importance-saying-no/>

Marital separation was complicated by these limitations and by laws that required a woman to prove that her husband's behaviour warranted divorce.¹⁴ Additionally, women who separated did not have access to child support,¹⁵ and had little or no superannuation.¹⁶

However, perhaps the most telling gender inequality relates to marital rape immunity laws - husbands were not required to obtain sexual consent from their wives.¹⁷ Over hundreds of years, marital rape immunity laws established a sexual power imbalance in heterosexual relationships. Husbands were not required to negotiate sexual consent with their wives and they were immune from rape prosecution.¹⁸ A cultural tone was set and women who challenged this dynamic were labelled vindictive.¹⁹

Marital rape immunity laws still exist in many countries,²⁰ and it was only as recently as 1994 that all the states and territories of Australia legislated to recognise that rape in marriage is a criminal offence.²¹ However, the legacies of these laws continue to shape perceptions of sexual consent, sexual rights and responsibility, particularly for older women.²² Some older women have been sexually assaulted across their lifetime,²³ many never disclosed and those who spoke out were silenced.²⁴

Contemporary inequalities

In addition to these historical inequalities, older women experience a particularly caustic form of ageism which is compounded by sexism.²⁵ Ageism increases with age,²⁶ bringing with it increases in gender inequality and intersectional blindness, or a failure to consider the ways older women's identities, relationships and social factors create intersecting forms of oppression.²⁷ In other words, ageism invisibilises older women, exacerbating the inequalities they experience based on their gender and other intersectional characteristics.²⁸

Recent research for #TheBiscuitTin project²⁹ explored representations of older women in popular culture and identified that older women are commonly portrayed as greedy, disagreeable, unpleasant, bad tempered, selfish, fussy, irritating and evil villains.³⁰ The research also highlighted the frequent ridicule of older women's bodies and sexuality as a prominent theme.

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-11/history-no-fault-divorce-and-family-law-in-australia/11931556>

¹⁵ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/history-of-the-child-support-scheme>

¹⁶ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Women%27s%20economic%20security%20in%20retirement.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://law.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdffile/0004/1699006/3737.pdf>

¹⁸ https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1699006/37_3_7.pdf

¹⁹ <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/marital-rape/>

²⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/book/26404/chapter-abstract/194774379?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

²¹ "Rape in marriage: Why was it so hard to criminalise sexual violence?" Australian Women's History Network, December 7 2016

<https://www.auswhn.com.au/blog/marital-rape/>

²² <https://www.opalinstitute.org/rights.html>

²³ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/researchreport.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/marital-rape/>

²⁵ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/biscuittin.html>

²⁶ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

²⁷ <https://unwomen.org.au/our-work/focus-area/intersectionality-explained/>

²⁸ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

²⁹ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/biscuittin.html>

³⁰ <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

These ageist-sexist representations of older women contribute to contemporary inequalities. This includes financial hardship and vulnerability to homelessness as the following data highlights:

34%

of single older women live in poverty ³¹

60%

of older women leave paid work with no super ³²

61%

of older women rely entirely on the old age pension ³³

31%

of retired women rely on their partner's income ³⁴

40%

increase in homelessness between 2011 and 2021³⁵

400,000

women (aged 45+) are at risk of homelessness ^{*36}

*Based on AIHW data, at least 7,000 older women (55+) were homeless in 2023–24 while seeking help from Specialist Homelessness Services. The true number is significantly higher due to hidden homelessness.³⁷

These inequalities contribute to a vulnerability to sexual assault and other forms of violence. For example, the fear of homelessness may trap older women in abusive relationships.³⁸ Additionally, lack of finances can increase vulnerability and reduce the likelihood of disclosure³⁹ and reduce access to legal justice.⁴⁰ These inequalities are compounded for older women from marginalised groups who also experience racism, ableism, metro-centricity, classism and queerphobia.⁴¹

³¹ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf

³² <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

³³ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/Economic_security_for_women_in_retirement/Report/c09

³⁴ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/retirement-and-retirement-intentions-australia/latest-release>

³⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/older-clients>

³⁶ <https://www.oldertenants.org.au/resource-themes/older-women>

³⁷ Estimate calculated by applying the AIHW gender distribution for older SHS clients (64% women) to the 10,900 older people (55+) who were recorded as homeless when presenting to Specialist Homelessness Services in 2023–24. This produces an evidence-based minimum of approximately 7,000 older women experiencing homelessness. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/older-clients>

³⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/378301348_Elder_Abuse_Statistics_In_Queensland_Year_in_Review_2022-23

³⁹ <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315641751-8/sexual-assault-older-women-bianca-fileborn-catherine-barrett-karen-roberto>

⁴⁰ https://www.ngocoa-ny.org/recent-documents-of-interest/a_76_157_ie-report-on-older.pdf

⁴¹ https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979_copvm_report_onl.pdf

The ageist-sexist disrespect for older women and inequalities outlined are drivers of the violence and abuse experienced by older women. Research shows:

23%

of women aged 60 years+ have experienced physical or intimate partner violence ⁴²

330,000

Based on national prevalence rates, an estimated 330,000 older women in Australia experience elder abuse every year - and most never report it ⁴³

40+ to 50+

sexual assaults are reported weekly in aged care – most victim/survivors are women ⁴⁴

28

older women (55 years+) were killed in 2023 in family violence homicides. ⁴⁵

The failure to prevent or even recognise the violence and abuse experienced by older women is an important context for understanding the silencing of older women in relation to sexual assault.⁴⁶ Silencing is amplified in the sexual assault context but is evident in many aspects of older women's lives.

The silencing related to sexual assault of older women is motivated in part by ageism. Older women's sexual rights are not recognised or promoted.⁴⁷ There is also a commonly held myth that old age is a protective factor against sexual assault - by those who believe that sexual assault is motivated by sexual attraction and that older women are not sexual or sexually attractive. In reality, sexual assault is generally motivated by power.⁴⁸

⁴² <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/376338/9789240090996-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

⁴³ This estimate is derived by applying the national elder abuse prevalence rate identified in the National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (AIFS, 2021), which found that 14.8% of Australians aged 65+ experienced abuse in the previous 12 months. According to ABS Estimated Resident Population data (2023), approximately 2.25 million women in Australia are aged 65 or over. Applying the 14.8% prevalence rate to this population produces an evidence-based estimate of around 333,000 older women experiencing elder abuse each year.

⁴⁴ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/prevalence.html>

⁴⁵ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-victims/latest-release#data-downloads>

⁴⁶ <https://ownnsw.org.au/document/lifestages-the-un-silencing-of-older-women/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.routledge.com/Addressing-the-Sexual-Rights-of-Older-People-Theory-Policy-and-Practice/Barrett-Hinchliff/p/book/9781138189188>

⁴⁸ Groth, A. Nicholas, with H. Jean Birnbaum. "Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender." New York: Plenum Press, 1979.

The failure to prioritise prevention of the sexual assault of older women is also underpinned by the ageist myth that sexual assault is less harmful to older women, particularly women who have dementia.⁴⁹ In reality, women living with dementia are targeted by sexual predators who recognise the barriers to reporting,⁵⁰ and this inability to speak may compound sexual assault trauma.⁵¹

The failure of multiple sectors to adequately confront the sexual assault of older women has enabled this form of violence to continue largely without prevention strategies, and a glaring lack of dedicated healing and recovery services. This failure allows harm to continue and contributes to the silencing of older women. The silencing is intensified by failures in services and data collection processes.

Silencing older women

In addition to ageism by the broader community, older women are silenced by their invisibility in multiple services, policies and data collection processes.

Data on sexual assault of older women is captured through family violence⁵² and elder abuse data,⁵³ the personal safety survey,⁵⁴ elder abuse research⁵⁵ and the Serious Incident Response Scheme⁵⁶ for residential and home-based aged care. Across these services and data collection points the voices of older women victim/survivors of sexual assault are silenced for different reasons.

Services for women (e.g. family violence and sexual assault services) may not be accessed by older women because the services are not promoted directly to older women.

There are also currently no Independent Third Person (ITP) programs⁵⁷ working with older women, particularly those with cognitive impairment,⁵⁸ to help them access counselling, police services and the criminal justice system.⁵⁹ This is particularly concerning given older women are less likely to be believed if they report sexual assault.⁶⁰ They are less likely to have their cases processed through the criminal justice system, due to ignorance and disbelief, insufficient evidence, victim inability or unwillingness to participate, or the prosecution's decision not to proceed.^{61,62}

Older women may not understand these services can assist them, particularly if they do not conceptualise their experiences as family violence or sexual assault. It is therefore not surprising that sexual assault services report limited uptake of their services by older women experiencing contemporary sexual assault.⁶³

⁴⁹ <https://opan.org.au/toolkit/sexual-assault/sexual-assault-in-aged-care>

⁵⁰ Burgess, Ann W., and Steven L. Phillips. 2006. "Sexual Abuse, Trauma and Dementia in the Elderly: A Retrospective Study of 284 Cases." *Victims & Offenders* 1 (2): 193–204. doi:10.1080/15564880600663935.

⁵¹ <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/216550.pdf>

⁵² <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/resources/fdsv-summary>

⁵³ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EAPU-Year-in-Review-2023.pdf>

⁵⁴ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/australias-disability-strategy/technical-resources/data-sources/australian-bureau-of-statistics-pss>

⁵⁵ <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-summary-report>

⁵⁶ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/resource-library/sirs-reportable-incidents-unlawful-sexual-contact-or-inappropriate-sexual-conduct>

⁵⁷ <https://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/opa-volunteers/independent-third-persons>

⁵⁸ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_DementiaMAP.pdf

⁵⁹ <https://www.secasa.org.au/programs-and-services/making-rights-reality/>

⁶⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/advance-article/doi/10.1093/geront/gnab144/6381181>

⁶¹ https://cnpea.ca/images/eldersexualassault_revised_literature_review_final_submitted_august_23_2018.pdf

⁶² <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1222&context=mjgl>

⁶³ https://media.accessiblecms.com.au/uploads/opan/2022/06/RTL_6SexualAssaultServices.pdf

Research on gender-based violence may also fail to engage older women because recruitment strategies are not inclusive of older women. Additionally, in the context of silencing, older women may not feel safe nor confident to participate in sexual assault research.

Many services for older people have historically silenced the problem of sexual assault.⁶⁴ In residential aged care, older women may be sexually assaulted by other residents, staff, visitors, intruders or their family members visiting the institution, or while they are on a home visit.⁶⁵

The Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care⁶⁶ estimated there are 50 sexual assaults in aged care in Australia each week and called this a disgrace and source of national shame. Data published in the Aged Care Sector Performance Reports show rates of reporting at 40-50 reports of sexual assault each week.⁶⁷

The reports of sexual assault in residential aged care are often dismissed as overreporting. While the current figure likely includes incidents that were not sexual assault; it is also likely there is a problem of under-reporting. Based on the authors' experience, under-reporting stems from cognitive dissonance, the belief that sexual assault couldn't or shouldn't happen, leading to denial, along with shame and organisational defensiveness.⁶⁸

Gathering elder abuse data on older women's experiences of sexual abuse/assault is difficult for a multitude of reasons. Older women who have lived most of their lives with Marital Rape Immunity Laws may not conceptualise their experience as sexual assault or abuse – even when it is. They may feel too embarrassed or ashamed to disclose sexual abuse/assault,⁶⁹ or fear the consequences of disclosure, such as retaliation, abandonment, institutionalisation or ostracization.⁷⁰ They may also have realistic concerns they will not be believed or fear the stigma of sexual assault.⁷¹

Older women with a male partner living with dementia may be experiencing sexual assault related to her partner's dementia induced sexual disinhibition,⁷² or hypersexuality.⁷³ A person living with dementia may no longer understand the importance of checking sexual consent.⁷⁴

Gathering data on older women's experiences of sexual abuse/assault is also limited by the approaches of service providers.⁷⁵ Sexual assault is one of the forms of elder abuse older women are least likely to seek support for.⁷⁶ Given the barriers outlined, this is not a surprise. However, it is important that low rates of reporting are not equated with low prevalence.

⁶⁴ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_MAPGuidelines.pdf

⁶⁵ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_MAPGuidelines.pdf

⁶⁶ <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/aged-care>

⁶⁷ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/news-publications/reports/sector-performance>

⁶⁸ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_OpenDisclosure.pdf

⁶⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524838019860616>

⁷⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334391483_Help-Seeking_Behavior_in_Victims_of_Elder_Abuse_A_Systematic_Review

⁷¹ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

⁷² <https://baycrest.echoontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/7-Resource.pdf>

⁷³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/hypersexuality-in-dementia/E2CFB1E9F2791BBCAE15F9580388BD19>

⁷⁴ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/072023_RTL_CarePartners.pdf

⁷⁵ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

⁷⁶ *ibid*

Data from the National Prevalence of Elder Abuse survey showed low rates of sexual assault (<1% of elder abuse reported) and noted that most perpetrators of sexual assault were friends.⁷⁷

This finding highlights a gap in reporting of sexual assault by a male partner. As discussed earlier, older women who do not believe they have sexual rights and those who are dependent physically or financially on a male partner may be unlikely to report sexual assault/abuse by their partner. The low rate of reporting in this context should not be viewed as low prevalence – rather as an indicator for the need to educate older women on their sexual rights and the support that can be provided by services.

Data collection and research is essential to building shared knowledge about how to improve policy and practices to prevent sexual assault,⁷⁸ and support older women. It can give voice to victims/survivors, help understand sexual assault,⁷⁹ build a sense of urgency around the need for change, as well as identify tangible actions to prevent sexual assault.⁸⁰ But if services and data collection processes are not inclusive of older women, victim/survivors of sexual assault will not access these services or participate in the research.

The voices of older women victim/survivors of sexual assault are seldom heard. Margarita Solis is still the only older woman who has felt safe to share her experience of sexual assault publicly in Australia.⁸¹ Globally, the media interest in the case of Gisele Pelicot who was raped by at least 100 men over a period of a decade while she was in her 60s showed the stark contrast between the widespread public outrage her case generated and the general silence surrounding sexual violence against older women. Her story exposed the systemic failures in recognizing and addressing sexual assault in later life, highlighting both the media's selective attention to such cases and the broader societal reluctance to confront the issue.

The absence of other stories and low rates of reporting are often misconstrued as low incidence of sexual assault. It would be more accurate to say that we have not yet created enough safe spaces for older women to share their experiences. There is a need for innovative approaches to hearing older women's voices.

⁷⁷ Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2021). *National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final report*. Australian Government.

<https://aifs.gov.au/research/reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study>

⁷⁸ <https://anrowsdev.wpenginpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/National-Research-Agenda-May-2014.pdf>

⁷⁹ <https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/rr18.pdf>

⁸⁰ <https://hbr.org/1995/05/leading-change-why-transformation-efforts-fail-2>

⁸¹ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/margarita.html>

The importance of hearing older women's voices

Hearing the voices of older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault is critical to prevention of sexual assault and promotion of older women's sexual rights.⁸² The abstraction of older women's experiences (sharing facts without narratives) is a barrier to understanding and compassion; and action to create change.⁸³ Abstraction prevents us from understanding the urgency of reform to prevent sexual assault. We need to create a sense of urgency to build momentum for change.⁸⁴

Stories help us to connect with others.⁸⁵ Our empathetic responses to the stories of others have been attributed to mirror neurones, or brain cells that are activated in response to hearing about the experiences of others.⁸⁶ When stories are told, the listener and the storytellers' brains exhibit similar physiological responses.⁸⁷ The compassion generated through first-person narratives is an important catalyst for change.

Hearing the voices of older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault indicates we have created safe spaces for older women to disclose. Body Mapping is one innovation that could help to create these spaces.

A Body Mapping solution

Body Mapping is an approach to storytelling that was first developed in South Africa in 2002 as an art-therapy method for women living with HIV⁸⁸ and later adapted using narrative processes.⁸⁹

While initially developed as a therapeutic tool, Body Mapping has been adapted as a qualitative research method, particularly by Gestaldo and others,⁹⁰ who describe augmenting Body Maps with brief first person accounts. The focus on the body enables embodied experiences and meanings to be shared and the shape and meaning of the story is determined by the storyteller.

This innovative approach was adapted by Barrett,⁹¹ to promote the sexual safety and wellbeing of older women.⁹² The need to innovate was identified in national research on the sexual assault of older women – which unsuccessfully called for older women to share their stories of sexual assault via an interview or survey.⁹³ In response, Body Mapping workshops were facilitated with an established group of older women to create a safe space to share stories of sexuality and sexual assault. The creative process was soothing, safe and unified the group, with several older women talking about sexual assault for the first time in their group. This technique has been expanded for the Hear Our Voices project.

⁸² <https://ownnsw.org.au/document/lifestages-the-un-silencing-of-older-women/>

⁸³ Kenyon, G., & Randall, W. L. (1999). *Introduction: Narrative gerontology*. *Journal of Aging Studies*.

⁸⁴ Kotter, J. P., & Cohen, D. S. (2002). *The heart of change: Real-life stories of how people change their organizations*. Harvard Business Review Press.

⁸⁵ Plummer, 2013b

⁸⁶ Manney, 2008

⁸⁷ Stephens, Silbert & Hasson, 2010

⁸⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312022551_The_Moon_the_Stars_and_a_Scar_Bodymapping_stories_of_women_living_with_HIVAIDS

⁸⁹ <https://apssi.org/product/living-with-x/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/wildoutthere.pdf>

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/wildoutthere.pdf>

⁹³ Mann, R., Horsley, P., Barrett, C., & Tinney, J. (2014). *Norma's Project: A research study into the sexual assault of older women in Australia* (ARCSHS Monograph Series No. 98). Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.

About this report

This report outlines a Body Mapping project. It begins by detailing the project aims, objectives, participants and ethical considerations. Then it describes the Body Mapping workshops and interviews – with reflections on and evaluation of the relevance and effectiveness of the Body Mapping process. The discussion section reflects on the lessons learned about how to improve services for older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault.

Attachment 1 shares 10 Body Maps from workshop participants who were also interviewed and includes a photograph of their Body Map and their description of it from the interview.

Project overview

The project involved Body Mapping workshops and follow-up interviews with older women living in New South Wales. Six workshops were facilitated, three in regional NSW and three in Sydney. The workshops were hosted in partnership with local women's groups and health services, who assisted in the recruitment and support of participants. The project aims, participants and ethical considerations are outlined below.

Aims

The aim of the Body Mapping project was to help improve services for older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault by:

- Facilitating peer support workshops for older women to talk about their sexual safety and wellbeing
- Exploring principles of trauma-informed support for older women
- Providing safe spaces for older women to talk about sexual assault
- Connecting older women with services to support their recovery from sexual assault
- Reflecting the experiences and needs of marginalised groups of older women
- Utilising a Body Mapping technique to document older women's stories
- Learning from older women about how to improve services for older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault
- Utilising information from older women to develop information and education for service providers
- Sharing older women's Body Maps to raise awareness in the broader community and help to prevent sexual assault of older women.

Participants

Project flyers calling for participants were disseminated through the networks of the Older Women's Network NSW and host organisations. The flyer called for participants who were women, aged 65+ who were prepared to talk about sexual safety and wellbeing. Following feedback from older women, the flyer was updated to clarify that participants were not required to be victim/survivors of family violence or sexual assault.

Sixty-four women participated, including women who were Aboriginal, CALD, lesbian, pansexual, transgender, neurodiverse and living with disabilities. Around 35% of participants are from CALD backgrounds, and an interpreter was utilised in one workshop.

The participation by women from diverse communities was a priority, given concerns about the voices of older CALD women missing from family violence and elder abuse data.⁹⁴

Most women shared stories of family violence or sexual assault. No demographic data was collected.

Ethical considerations

Women who expressed interest in participating were provided with an information sheet and consent form. They were required to return a signed consent form prior to the workshop. The information sheet summarised ethical considerations, particularly related to traumatisation and confidentiality as outlined below.

To help mitigate trauma, the information sheet detailed the workshop processes and listed all workshop topics and questions. The sheet also acknowledged that the nature of the topics may be difficult and potentially upsetting and encouraged women not to take part if they were concerned about this. A list of support services was also included.

Careful consideration was given to establishing a trauma-informed workshop space (see next section). This included starting each workshop by reiterating the topics and questions being covered and inviting participants to help identify a list of local support services. Identifying these together was considered important to destigmatising service use. Where host organisations provided counselling and other supports, they were invited to introduce themselves and describe the nature of services available.

The importance of these processes was reinforced in the first workshop where one participant reported:

The workshop was totally not what I expected. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't like the rest of the ladies. My life was trashed but I got through it so that's okay. When [the workshop] started, I started to get a panic attack and I went and sat outside and told myself to focus, focus, focus. Then I went back inside and saw the photo [flash card] of a trashed house and I thought that was me and then I said I got to make this work for me.

Interview, The Realist

⁹⁴ Mitra-Kahn, T., Newbiggin, C., & Hardefeldt, S. (2016). *Invisible women, invisible violence: Understanding and improving data on the experiences of domestic and family violence and sexual assault for diverse groups of women* (ANROWS Landscapes, DD01/2016). ANROWS.

Where participants shared feeling anxious or vulnerable, the supportive responses of other participants (and the reminder to opt out or access support services) appeared to encourage other participants to share their feelings of vulnerability.

A lunch was provided at the end of each workshop to thank older women for participating, as well as to provide a further opportunity to check older women's support needs.

Privacy issues were addressed in the information sheet and discussed early in the workshop, in a section developing guidelines for working together. Participants were invited to de-identify their Map image, description and interview notes – and to be respectful of the stories and experiences of others by not discussing other women's stories outside the workshop.

The group nature of the workshop was greatly valued by participants (see evaluation section on peer support), and also raised an issue related to participant vulnerability. One participant described sharing 'everything' in a group – while other women shared nothing:

I did enjoy the small group; they were really interesting group of women. I was a bit disconcerted that two women I know socially turned up. There is a risk that if I say something it will put people off. Neither of these women said much in the workshop, they didn't participate much at all. And so, because I'm sharing all of my experiences in my Body Map - once again my arms come up across my body. I was worried they just listened without shared themselves. That didn't sit well with me. They were entitled to say nothing, but I felt vulnerable because I shared everything, and they shared nothing. I felt exposed. ... if we all sat there without sharing there is not as much benefit as there is in conversation.

Interview, Flower Power

This feedback in the evaluation highlighted the need to encourage all women to share, and to understand that some women feel vulnerable – even when they are not sharing. It also reinforced the need to clarify the importance of not judging each other and remembering that what is shared in the group, stays in the group.

Workshops

The Body Mapping workshops were three hours long and began with a presentation of the evidence and building a trauma-informed space. Participants were then invited to make a Body Map. They could either draw a silhouette of their body or choose from a range of silhouettes representing different body shapes.

They then used a variety of craft materials which were provided, together with items that they were encouraged to bring from home, to decorate the silhouette. The workshop ended with an invitation for older women to share their Body Mapping stories and find a strong word to describe either themselves or their story. Each of these steps is outlined below, with reflections on the rationale and effectiveness.

Presenting the evidence

Each workshop began with a presentation of the evidence related to gender inequality for older women. The presentation highlighted the ageism and sexism older women face, research data on inequalities, with particular focus on the bodies, sexuality and intimate relationships.

The presentation was designed to navigate optimism bias,⁹⁵ or the difficulty some older women have in acknowledging sexual assault could happen to them. Naming the ageist-sexist portrayal and treatment of older women and the subsequent inequalities was considered an important first step in dismantling the disrespect older women face. It provided context for the Body Mapping and an understanding of the urgency of reform.

Building a trauma-informed space

Following the presentation of evidence, a formal process was undertaken to build safe and supportive spaces for women to work together, in a trauma-informed way.

The provision of trauma-informed spaces for older women to talk about sexual assault has been sadly lacking,⁹⁶ and a driver of the need for the Body Mapping project. The Body Mapping process recognised the importance of older women feeling safe to disclose sexual assault and to listen to their peers without being traumatised.

⁹⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature06280>

⁹⁶ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_Trauma_Informed_Framework.pdf

Drawing on trauma-informed principles⁹⁷ women in each workshop established a set of shared guidelines for working together. This included:

- **Safety:** inviting participants to share what safety meant to them and identifying if they did not feel safe. Providing information on local support services and introducing support services provided by the host organisation. Agreeing on principles of sharing and listening
- **Choices:** reminding participants they had the option to leave the workshop at any point and withdraw from the project. Inviting participants to think about how much or little they want to share with the group and with the broader community (i.e.: sharing their Map image and story)
- **Collaboration:** asking participants to help create a space where they and others feel safe sharing their experiences and perspectives
- **Trustworthiness:** asking participants to build trust through the ways they listened to and supported other workshop participants by respecting the perspectives of others, listening without judgement and providing supportive feedback
- **Empowerment:** providing supportive comments when participants shared their stories and perspectives, inviting participants to identify where the power was in their Body Map and then share this with the group. Ending the workshop with an invitation for participants to identify a 'strong word' (see following section).

⁹⁷ <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/implementing-trauma-informed-systems-of-care-in-health-settings-the-with-study-state-of-knowledge-paper/>

The application of trauma-informed principles was valued by participants, with many participants disclosing sexual assault, violence or abuse. One woman described the value of such a space in the following way:

To be with other women you can see their experiences, what they have in their lives. Sharing was good. We are helping ourselves and we are helping each other. We are building trust. I gained confidence.

I'm not the only one being abused. I am not the only one who feels stupid. I am not the only one that thinks my body is ugly. I am not the only one who wants to cover my body. I am conscious of my scars. I will not wear anything that shows my scars. I will not wear a dress. But being in a workshop like that I am not the only one with funny feeling about my body. Every one of us older women have that feeling about their body. It was good to be open and honest - to be yourself.

We did some Body Mapping on small paper on the table and some with chalk on the wall. The map on the wall was about openness. There was no shame of sharing. On the paper it was a secret. On the wall there was no secret. If I share with you – you share with me. With older women somehow you always feel strong person, you can survive. If you have two other women you are not scared, you are together.

We will be safer. We will be more confident and powerful. I want to be with other like-minded people. With one other older woman, good. Two older women, great. Three, better. The power of older woman.

Interview, The Power of Older Women

Creating a safe workshop space for older women to talk about abuse, violence and sexual assault required significant focus and effort. However, feedback from participants (see also evaluation section) suggests this was effective. Participants reported feeling safe to talk about their experiences and perspectives. This reflects a significant opportunity, beyond the project – for service providers to create spaces to hear older women's voices.

Making mapping paper

The need for a Body Mapping wallpaper emerged from the first workshop, where participants' stories overflowed from their body silhouettes (see next section) onto the surrounding paper. The silhouette was not large enough to hold participant stories, so they used the whole page. What frequently emerged on the paper surrounding the body silhouette were participants' stories that extended beyond their sexual safety and wellbeing.

In response to this emergent activity, the Body Mapping process was adapted to include making Body Mapping wallpaper, which was completed before the decorating of body silhouettes.

To make the mapping wallpaper, participants were provided with a blank A3 sheet of paper and art and craft materials, to supplement materials participants were invited to bring from home. Participants were then invited to decorate the wallpaper to represent their journey to this point – using the following prompts:

- **Being here:** participants were invited to select a Flashcard (postcard with an image on it) to communicate why they were here and what they wanted from the workshop. They were then invited to share their card and response with the group, and to paste their card onto their wallpaper
- **Growing up:** participants were invited to share responses to the following questions: what it was like for you growing up? (did you have sexual rights and was it different for boys) and did you have family? Participants were then invited to decorate their wallpaper to represent their responses
- **Community perceptions:** participants were also invited to share their responses to the following question: how are older women perceived in the community? And then to decorate their wallpaper to represent their responses.

The group discussed the questions as they were asked, and as they decorated their wallpaper. The wallpaper provided space for older women to voice something that was not, at first glance, part of their Body Map, but which forms a critical foundation and point of entry to their stories. As one participant narrates:

The leaves [on my Body Map] were shiny things, and the fruits remind me when I grew up ... we had a green garden and chooks and cows - until I got married. We had all this beautiful nutrition food thanks to my mum. I never had that again after I got married. But that was a really beautiful memory that I appreciate so much more now. We made cheese and butter, and we had our own chickens and eggs. We had tomatoes and mum would make salsa for the whole year; she dried the tomatoes and made tomato paste. Every Sunday we had home-made fettuccini. That was good memories and very different to when I got married.

Interview, The Fighter

These reflections from The Fighter's story, about chickens, eggs, tomatoes, cheese, butter, fettuccini and salsa represent the meanderings in many of the stories shared. These reflections present the context of older women's lives – and frame their stories about sexual rights and sexual assault. Older women wanted their experiences to be heard in full context. They were invited to Body Map and returned with an invitation, or rather a requirement, that they be seen and heard and valued. It was an empowered process of older women taking control of their lives and their narratives.

Creating a body silhouette

Body Mapping methods traditionally involve a forensic tracing of the participant's body. This requires a relatively large piece of paper and considerable physical dexterity – both potentially difficult in a group space with older women. The process was adapted to A3 paper – with the option of clipart silhouettes for participants who were not confident to draw a silhouette.

The provision of clip art silhouettes limited the diversity of the Map and in the final three workshops, participants were encouraged not to use them. The resultant Maps were more individualised and abstract, as one participant noted:

I really loved the Body Mapping exercise, and I really loved seeing how differently people interpreted it. You said we didn't need templates because we were creative, and you were right. It's mind blowing how different people are. It was interesting what people did with them.

Interview, Flower Power

The shift to working without fixed silhouettes also reflected the confidence of the facilitators in encouraging participants to be creative.

Decorating as story

Once participants completed a Body Map wallpaper and a silhouette, they were invited to decorate their silhouette to represent their own body, intimate relationships and sexuality. The following questions were presented as prompts:

- What does your body look like?
- What stories does your body tell?
- Does your body have scars?
- Are bits of your body gone or been replaced?
- What makes your body safe?
- Where is the power in your body?

During the first workshop, several participants suggested including more direct questions about sexuality and intimacy, including the following:

- Are you in an intimate relationship?
- What intimacy do you value e.g. kisses, hugs, touch, sex, partner does the dishes?
- Has your relationship with yourself changed as you have aged?

While this directness had been avoided after feedback from service providers that such directness would be a barrier to older women participating, most participants embraced the questions. Only one participant raised concerns:

The question about intimacy I found so confronting. I didn't feel part of that. I felt alienated or othered. I know that was not the intention, I need to speak with my counsellor about that. Other women didn't seem to have the issue with it that I have. I haven't had a long-term intimate partner ever. I lived with someone for two years, that was 48 years since it ended.

Interview, Step on the Stage and Fill It

When participants had finished decorating their silhouettes, they were invited to give their Body Map a title and then share something of the story of their Body Map with the group.

Sharing stories

Participants were given an A4 sheet to clarify if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview and share their Body Map in an exhibition, the project report and on the webpages of the project partners. Forty-four participants agreed to share their images.

Participants were also invited to write reflections about their Body Map and then share their Map with the group.

Finding a strong word

The final formal activity for the workshop was inviting participants to identify a strong word that reminded them of their power and strength. Participants were also invited to share their word with the group and write down the word on a small card provided and take it home as a reminder of their strength.

At completion of the workshop, a lunch was provided by participants and host organisations were invited to attend to check the support needs of participants. Workshop participants were also given a grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for their time.

Interviews

Workshop participants were invited to take part in follow-up interviews, to help explore their Body Maps in greater depth and document a story to accompany their map. Ten women were interviewed (see their stories in the attachments at the end of this report).

An information sheet and consent form were developed specifically for the interviews and participants were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Tell us about the Body Map you made – and how you decorated it (including your body, intimate relationships, and sexuality)
- Where are your strengths in the Map?
- Are there places in the Map that show vulnerability?

Interviewees were also asked for their reflections on the workshops (see evaluation section) and their suggestions for service providers working with older women. The suggestions for service providers have been incorporated into the *Hear Our Voices* project report and education module for service providers.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone, and an interpreter was used for one interview. Notes were taken during the interviews and returned to participants for verification, deidentifying and any other changes.

The interviews provided an opportunity to explore Body Maps in depth in a way that was not possible in the group workshops. Most interviews were conducted around six months after the workshop, enabling participants to reflect on any changes in their life since the workshop – an important component of the evaluation.

Evaluation

An evaluation was conducted using The Kirkpatrick Model,⁹⁸ or a review of participants reaction, learning and planned behaviour change. Participants were provided with an evaluation form at completion of each workshop, and the survey results complemented the data from participant interviews.

Scores for workshop relevance and learning were measured on a 7-point Likert Scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of agreement with statements about workshop relevance, new learning, and believing they will be able to use the new knowledge/skills learned (i.e.: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Results were as follows:

- **Relevance:** 92% agreed or strongly agreed the workshop was relevant
- **New learning:** 100% agreed or strongly agreed they learned something new
- **Practical:** 100% agreed or strongly agreed they would use what they learned.

A deeper understanding of these results is provided through reflection on the interview data below.

Relevance

Interview data clarified the relevance of the workshops, with several participants describing the Body Mapping method as an engaging and powerful tool. One participant reported she would like to: *use something like this with my counsellor. We map my mind map but haven't mapped my body.* (extract from The Breakout). Others noted:

There was a woman in the workshop who said she could have done Body Mapping all day. I think she was right. I could have worked on my Body Map and then stopped to reflect and come back to do more. I love visual imagery but am not always sure how to represent my body image. My Body Map wasn't very in-depth. But I can see when you first start you think it could be done quickly. If it was all day workshop I wouldn't have participated - but she was right that we could do it all day. There are so many facets to how we represent our bodies and how we feel about ourselves. There is a side we present to the world and then the side we hide.

Interview, The Breakout

⁹⁸ <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/the-kirkpatrick-model/>

Others elaborated that the significance of the workshops was that it helped themselves or other older women's healing and recovery:

One of the [workshop participants] has told me since [the workshop] that she thought we didn't know how much the workshop helped her. It enabled her to move on in her life. She was holding back a lot of stuff. There were issues that were pushing people away from her. She told me the workshop helped. That meant a hell of a lot.

Interview, Happy Freedom

I loved the workshop, and I loved the sharing. I thought it was really powerful to think about my Map and then put it down in such a concise matter. ... The day flowed beautifully. I feel better for having done the Body Mapping workshop. It was a marvellous experience. It really was.

Interview, Flower Power

I think these workshops are useful. It makes older women sit back and look at things, focus on things. ... older women need to stand up for themselves, because they are vulnerable. You have helped me in ways that I can't describe.

Interview, The Realist

In reflecting on the aspects of the workshops that were most relevant, participants described the learning from other older women.

New learning - from peers

The evaluation form invited participants to provide feedback about what they had learned. In response, the following comments were made:

- *I learned that we have help if we look for it*
- *I learnt how I feel about myself*
- *Learning about gender inequality and ageism - how women are represented*
- *[To] be myself and give more credit to me*

In interviews, several participants described the learning and support from other older women was a workshop highlight. Participants felt empowered in a safe and supportive space – and a sense of solidarity:

The workshop was very beneficial. It gave me the opportunity to not be alone with my body stuff. To be with a group of women who have all experienced all aspects of what I have experienced - that was empowering in itself. I looked at all those questions and felt the feelings in a space where there was support. I felt it was empowering and enabling.

Interview, Step on the Stage and Fill It

Participants allowed themselves to be vulnerable by sharing stories of violence, abuse and sexual assault. It was particularly interesting to note that in several groups, the women knew each other outside of the group but had not made deep connections until the workshop.

The connection made through the sharing of violence, abuse and sexual assault in a supportive space resulted in several participants describing solid friendships which were formed with other workshop participants.

Suggestions for improving services

In Body Mapping interviews, participants were invited to share suggestions to improve services for older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault. In this final section of the report, those suggestions are outlined – alongside understandings gained from the project.

The insights shared here relate to all services that could support older women who are victim/survivors of sexual assault. This includes women's health services, sexual assault and family violence services, aged care providers, trauma services, police and the justice system; as well as policymakers, researchers, and advocacy groups working to address gender-based violence and elder abuse.

Undertaking outreach and welcome

The most cited suggestion for improving services was to encourage service providers to reach out to older women and build relationships of trust. Examples included the women's health services who co-hosted a Body Mapping workshop, who also facilitated groups and activities for older women that enabled older women to trust the services and understand the range of services they could access.

Older women noted that some service providers did not promote their services to older women – and so older women who were victim/survivors of sexual assault may not understand the services are for them. This barrier to service access was highlighted by one participant who had not heard of the services:

I think another barrier to older women accessing services is that the services are not supportive of, or welcoming to older women. I recently asked a service provider what they were doing to welcome older women – the answer is nothing. We were at their service to deliver training and when I walked into the reception, I thought it was not a friendly place.

Interview, Happy Freedom

In addition to reaching out to older women, services were urged to communicate to older women that they were valued. As the following participants suggested:

You are as good as the reception at the front of your organisation. What do you think it is like for an older woman who has lost everything and has to walk away with nothing except the clothing, and she gets to the reception and the receptionist barks 'sit there.' Older women who aren't welcomed, don't stay. Some of the service providers tell us they notice that older women don't come back, they need to find out why. Older women need to be welcomed and feel comfortable to come back.

Interview, Happy Freedom

To have someone personally make me welcome is to know I have landed in a safe space. When the reception staff or practitioner or group leader models to others that I am welcome as a trans woman they are encouraging others to do so.

Interview, I love Being a Woman

This level of engagement and valuing was viewed as important in a world where older women did not feel valued or respected:

Service providers should offer older women respect. We deserve to have respect. As an older [woman], maybe you have failures, but we contribute certain things to society. When service providers are approaching older women, they should be careful – not because of their condition or their physical being, but because they should be careful not to look down on them. All the older woman's reactions are telling you something. Be very respectful of that.

Interview, The Power of Older Women

Given the silencing of older women, particularly in relation to sexual assault, it is unreasonable to expect that older women would approach services that are not explicitly welcoming older women.

Without the message of welcome, older women accessing the services are not going to disclose all their care needs.

When I access services, I have my guard up because I never know when something is going to come along and hit me – when I am going to experience discrimination in the service. The service needs to be warm from the start – I don't want to wait until someone invites me in, I need to feel connected right from the very beginning.

Interview, I love Being a Woman

Welcoming older women is something that is critical to equity of services but also to older women who access the service feeling able to disclose their needs.

Identifying the legacies of historical inequalities

Many Australians are aware of the history of gender inequality in Australia, particularly pivotal turning points in history. However, there is a need also to understand the lived experience of that history, or how historical gender inequalities have shaped older women's vulnerability, preparedness to report and access sexual assault services.

Service providers need to acknowledge the fact that there is a lot of suffering in a lot of lives, and it really does affect how we perceive things and behave in later life. Like how we connect with people and whether we go out. ...It also colours the way we want help.

Interview, Flower Power

Understanding what older women have experienced can help build service provider momentum for reaching out to older women and understanding the barriers to reporting and accessing services.

Understanding ageism

Most older women who participated in the workshops were very aware of the ageism older women experience. This was evident in their calls for service providers to value them as older women, as one participant reflected:

For service providers, if you do everything from the heart, your eyes will tell [older women] that you care. If you show you care they will not feel fearful to tell you what they are experiencing. If you are kind in your tone of voice and your demeanour, this will tell older women you care. You have to show them you are genuinely there to help. ... See the person first. Build confidence. Build rapport.

Interview, The Power of Older Women

It is difficult to imagine another generation of women who are concerned that they would not be valued because of their age. This ageism exacerbates the gender and other inequalities older women experience.

While ageism may limit the valuing of older women by service providers it may also be a powerful barrier to older women who internalise it. Older women may not feel they are worthy of support.

Providing ongoing safe spaces

Older women greatly appreciated the safe and valuing spaces that were created for them in the Body Mapping workshops. As previously discussed, the application of trauma-informed principles was an important part of this process, as was peer support (see following section).

Until recently, safe spaces for older women to disclose sexual assault and seek support were limited to periods of project or research funding. Safe spaces were created in these funding periods – and then went. The intermittent nature of these spaces raises ethical issues – the safe spaces are created, and then taken away. It is also unreasonable to expect that older women will share their stories of sexual assault because a project survey calls for it – just because we are now ready to talk about sexual assault of older women does not mean they are.

Harnessing peer support

The workshop evaluation identified a high value placed on peer support in the workshops. The shared experiences of violence, abuse or sexual assault enabled women to feel like they were not alone and were therefore able to speak about their experiences.

To me the workshop was valuable. What I felt was for the very first time was I was with women who were able to speak the truth. Finally, you have women who say this happened to me and I don't have to suffer it on my own now. I related to the suffering and silence the other women talked about. I don't remember a lot about what was said but I have found some friends from the workshop. I felt peace. Joy. Freedom to say what happened to us. Now I am me.

Interview, I am Free

Some workshop participants reported forming significant friendships with other workshop participants. What surprised some women was that friendships were formed with women they knew from their local community or groups they participated in. Their paths had crossed before and a strong connection had not been made as they felt they had little in common. However, the Body Mapping workshops were an equaliser. Participants did not imagine each other had experienced abuse. The stories which were hidden when shared built a connection between the women.

Peer support is a valuable tool for empowering older women to disclose their experiences and begin a new process in their healing and recovery.

Engaging marginalised groups

The workshops engaged older women from a range of marginalised communities, which was considered critical to promoting equity – and also to recognise that older women are diverse and their intersectional characteristics can make them vulnerable to added oppression. In one workshop, a participant shared the following observation:

My body is so contested. To have my body be valued and to have a safe place to express and to be heard was important. I love to hear other people, to listen to people open up to what is inside. That's real living.

Interview, I Love Being a Woman

Some participants were initially concerned about the diversity of the group. For example, The Realist's interview noted: *I wasn't like the rest of the ladies. My life was trashed ...* (Interview, The Realist). However, the Body Mapping processes were an equaliser, encouraging older women to recognise how much they had in common. The diversity of the groups provided valued opportunities for older women to learn from each other.

Providing information

At the beginning of each workshop, participants were invited to identify local services that could assist older women who were experiencing sexual assault or family and domestic violence. The conversational nature of this section of the workshop provided older women the opportunity to learn from each other about services that worked for them. It was interesting to note that in most workshops, older women expressed significant interest in services they previously did not know existed.

The information about local services – and the knowledge gained from other women in the group - were welcomed by participants. Most participants described the legacies of growing up without rights, particularly sexual rights. They also reflected on the power of service providers to support older women and provide information about their rights.

*The service providers don't tell us we have rights. They need to tell us so that we can tell them what is happening in our lives, and we don't have to feel ashamed. The older women shouldn't believe that because the priest said it is okay, that it is okay. This is what they are being taught.
The service providers have to tell us we have rights.*

Interview, I am Free

Service providers have a pivotal role to play in providing information to older women about their choices. This information was viewed as empowering.

Understanding narrative plots

The stories older women told were both meandering and purposeful. Questions about safety and wellbeing led to stories about life experiences epitomising what life could or should be like. Older women who have been silenced invited us on a journey. They wanted to show us they were valued and loved – and that they were hurt and silenced.

The stories shared by older women sometimes appeared not to have a clear beginning, middle or end – but they were purposeful. The stories checked we were listening, checked we were valuing and checked they were safe. Older women want their voices to be heard and want to take control of their lives and their narratives.

Body Mapping

The Body Mapping process was embraced by older women in the group context and could be adapted to one-on-one assessment or therapeutic sessions with older women. As one participant reported:

I think beyond the Body Mapping workshops being part of a study ... if this was offered as a general activity and people weren't put off by it being part of a study, they could come and do this as a day activity. It would be an amazing activity in its own right. It could be offered as a healing activity. If this was offered on a semi regular basis as a healing thing – it would be a wonderful thing. You would need facilitators to guide the conversation – as a healing thing it is an amazing activity. Putting things on the page was a way of seeing it and moving.

Interview, Flower Power

The Body Mapping process was a useful and valuing approach to hearing the voices of older women. Over six workshops, 64 older women provided peer support while stories of violence, abuse and sexual assault were shared. They also shared stories of empowerment and strategies for service providers to create more spaces where older women's voices can be heard.

*A Body Mapping Tool Kit for Older Women's Sexual Safety and Wellbeing*⁹⁹ has been developed for service providers who want to replicate the method with older women.

⁹⁹ You can find the Toolkit at <https://voices.ownsw.org.au/resources/>

Attachment 1: Body Maps

The Fighter



I called my Body Map *The Fighter*. It's not that I look for fights, but everything in my life has been hard, extremely hard to achieve. I had to fight against a lot of obstacles and problems. That is the reason I put 'the fighter' as the name.

I drew a ball of sunshine because I love the sun. I was born on a Sunday and people who are born on Sunday are under the influence of the sun. For me that is the light. Darkness is sad. I know we need the night and the day. But in the day, we live thanks to the sun and the air and the water. Can you imagine if we didn't have the sun? For me the sun gives life. That's what I feel. The sun is always right there for me.

The card of the joker is there because it's like God always helps me. I am a big believer in the spiritual life – I believe our relatives who are not here still help me. They are not here but they help me. However hard it was for me in the past, they were there.

I probably don't know exactly the meaning of the joker, but in even the worst time when I didn't have enough money to pay for what we needed, I would pray to God and sometimes I just made the payments we needed. In Spanish we say you have a card in your sleeve. Somehow, I managed, and I know I had help from God.

The heart is big because I have a big heart. I have always been kind and nice and I gave a lot. It makes me happy helping others.

The leaves were shiny things, and the fruits remind me when I grew up in Argentina, we had a green garden and chooks and cows - until I got married. We had all this beautiful nutrition food thanks to my mum. I never had that again after I got married. But that was a really beautiful memory that I appreciate so much more now. We made cheese and butter, and we had our own chickens and eggs. We had tomatoes and mum would make salsa for the whole year; she dried the tomatoes and made tomato paste. Every Sunday we had home-made fettuccini. That was good memories and very different to when I got married.

The music I am very fond of, and it gives me the strength to continue sometimes. When I get down, I put on music, and it helps me. When someone does horrible things and then goes to work, you remain with that in your heart - and I need to change myself and so I put on the music because I had to do things. I used to put the music loud. It gave me life. It is therapy. I love to listen to nice music. Every time I am on my own and I do the home chores I put on the music.

I was married at 19 and had my first child when we came to live in Australia. We were in a hostel for months. My husband was always crazy, with crazy ideas. He was like a child who didn't understand the consequences. He never had good ideas. He was like a gypsy and with the kids it was crazy, crazy. I couldn't say I didn't want to because that wasn't allowed. That was the kind of person he was.

I don't know why he wanted to marry me because I was extremely good and knew how to do a lot of things. I left him six times in three years. There were red flags, but he was very careful to present well to me, so the flags were not big. Each time I left he would ask for forgiveness. He would tell me that he will be lost without me. He would cry and tell me he would change. He didn't change, he got worse.

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Once we came to Australia, he got much worse. I had no family and no one to run to. We did farm work for a while, and they paid us peanuts. Then we moved back to the city without money, and I was pregnant and couldn't work, but I did work a bit in a restaurant as a waitress. Being a waitress with a big tummy wasn't considered nice in those days. I had to make a lot of sacrifices.

A friend introduced us to a charity who gave us furniture and then we saved up to buy a fridge and then a washing machine. It was a hard time. I had to do everything. Because I had the kids, I always make sure everything is sterilised. I just wanted to make sure they didn't get sick. He never helped in any way.

Then I was pregnant with my third child, and I wanted to buy a house. I wanted to have security. A roof over our head. I was pushing a little bit, and he accepted, and we bought a house. Paying the mortgage and bills was really difficult. He wanted a lot of money in his pocket, to show off to his friends. He was pretending he was a wealthy man; he had aspiration that he was a wealthy man.

It was always hard. Then after the third child the circumstances were really bad at home. He was always screaming, banging, crazy, breaking things. It was so difficult to live with him. I had to do the best I could to make sure he wouldn't hurt the kids. My eldest child was at kindergarten, the second one was on toilet training, and I had to bottle feed my daughter every two hours. Because I was not putting a lot of attention to my son, he would put poo everywhere. I didn't have anyone to give me a hand.

My husband was getting crazy because he didn't have enough money to splash. So, I had to take a job – I did sewing from home so I could take care of the kids. Of course, I had to sacrifice my sleeping time and my resting time. Then I had to pick up my daughter from school. I would finish at 2am. When I went to the kitchen there was all the plates on the table. He wouldn't put them away. I had to wash them because in the morning he would get angry.

One day there was a big pile of dishes, because I had a big deadline of sewing. I asked him if he could do the dishes. He threw them on the floor and the pieces were scattered from the kitchen to the front door. That was the help he would give me. I couldn't sleep because there was so much I had to do.

He was so violent, there was an incident with my children. I had a part time job and when I came home my son had a toy guitar and he broke it on my son, and I had to take him to hospital. He used to shake the babies if he didn't sleep, so I had to get up. So, I had to do all the load because he was the opposite of help. I could never leave the kids in his care because I thought I would find the kids dead.

I don't know if I am powerful, but I have to be for my kids. If I had to fight for me, I don't. But if I have to fight for my children, I did.

I don't know if I am powerful, but I have to be for my kids. If I had to fight for me, I don't. But if I have to fight for my children, I did. I do all this for my kids. In those days I felt like I wanted to die because I was so exhausted. But I had the kids, and I thought who is going to love them more than me. So, I had normal strength, but I had to keep going. I had no choice. Breath in and continue.

Because my ex was so nasty, I didn't feel like doing anything sexually and when he wanted sex, I froze and that was my revenge in a way. I didn't do it consciously, I did it because he was restricting me so much. I got frozen. I don't know how to explain. No part of my sex drive was there. He would say that I was frigid, and he wasn't having anything with me that he had other women. He had another woman, and he told her he was a good man and that I was frigid. She told me that. He told her that I was always the problem for him. I never enjoyed sex with him.

Then he forced us to go back to Argentina – he wanted to sell the house so he would have money. I suggested he go and leave me in Australia with the kids. He started breaking the house, putting big holes in walls. It was terrifying, so eventually I had to give in. Once the house was on sale, we had to buy special wood to cover the holes in the walls, they were very big. It was terrifying. He knew in Argentina I would have less rights.

In Argentina he was impossible. He got five one-way tickets for me and the children and a return ticket for him. He dumped me there. He told me to figure out how to produce money so that when he came back, he would have a machine making money. That's what he expected of me. This is the type of person I was married to. My kids were afraid of him. When he couldn't control me, he started to control the kids and turn them against me.

He came back after four years and bought a restaurant, but he was not a good administrator or hostess. Clients would tell me things that he did that were not ethical. He did so many mistakes that we ended up with six court cases. All of a sudden, he wanted to give me a divorce. I was praying to keep my kids safe – so when he came with the divorce idea, I thought it was from God. We got a divorce, and he left me with all the problems of the restaurant, and he went to back to Australia.

At that time, we were living in my parents' house and my father abused my two daughters. That was such a blow. I never expected. How can I feel? My own father!

The kids accused me that I didn't take good care of them. After all I did for them, this is the way they see it.

It's like a dagger to my heart. My husband betrayed me and so did my father; and they are the people who should be there for me.

I was over exhausted until I could sell the restaurant. All that time I couldn't spend with my kids and the bond broke with them. It is hard because I don't have any relationship with them now. That is the worst thing. I could put aside all the things this bloody man did to me, but it has been 20 years since I spoke with my children and that is the worst pain. It is like my life is not as meaningful as it could be.

I wasn't able to talk to anyone about my first husband. Now in the women's health centre I see the counsellor, it helps me in some way, but it can't get rid of the problem. It doesn't change what happened. I believe that if my kids would be nice to me, I would be okay. It would get away all the pain I have. I don't know if that's going to happen. I have been waiting for a long time.

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I have been with my second husband for over 30 years, although at present time my husband is impotent, but he is still very affectionate and kind to me, and we are working as a team. We got a lot of affinity, and we fell in love with each other and that was when I really experienced sex and enjoying it.

When I was a young woman, we didn't have sexual rights. I wasn't aware that those things existed. I didn't know anything. Affinity and respect are important for sex. He looks after me, he helps me. We help each other. There is still an intimacy, there is still hugs and kisses – not long kiss like in the old days, but still there are kisses. In the morning, we say good morning and we hug. In the nighttime we hug. He is a good companion. He is the opposite to my first husband.

The Realist

My WHOLE LIFE UNTIL I GOT TO
62y old.



FAMILY

~~TRASHED.~~

Adult
LIFE.

LIFE NOW.



I'm a basic person. I am no angelic angel. I got a pretty bad past. But I get blamed for anything and everything. I am a realist, that's what I called my Body Map. I think if you do the crime, you do the time. I call the world as it functions. Things happen for me in the real world. I see how people are, and I call it. I am a realist. I won't back down. I say it as it is.

At the background of my Body Map there is a building that has been destroyed. That was what my family was like. That was my whole life until I got to 62 years old. My parents were separated and then got back together for a week and mum got pregnant with me, then they separated again. She never wanted me. I knew that. When I was eight, she said I was her biggest regret in life.

Some of my friend's parents knew what was going on at home and they were better parents to me than my mum was. I can honestly say I never loved my mother. Her life revolved around my brothers. I didn't know my dad. Mum hated the fact that I was bigger and stronger than my brothers. My life was trashed. To this day I don't know if she is alive or dead – and I don't care. I have no photos of me as a kid.

The cupcake is because I have had a lots of serious mental health issues over the past five years. I got over them. I am soft and gentle, that means some people take advantage of me. Emotionally I am completely and utterly wrecked. Insomnia. PTSD. Agoraphobia. This morning I lay on the couch watching the TV, a show with David Attenborough. It had bugs and insects; it keeps me calm.

I am soft and gentle, that means some people take advantage of me. Emotionally I am completely and utterly wrecked.

I got over the mental health issues with a clinical psychologist. She is the only one that keeps me going. I won't take antidepressants; they make me worse. I tried to kill myself twice and then I had listeria - it nearly killed me. But I am still here, isn't that ironic? I got to look at the funny side of that. My psychologist has stabilised me. I am a lot happier. I don't go far from home. The psychologist can ask me anything about my past and it has worked. It has been a long journey.

I put cog wheels for my knees because I've got chronic osteoarthritis in both knees. I need an operation, but I have other issues to deal with. I've stopped smoking. I've lost weight. I have applied for the disability pension. I am now on the waiting list, but I am in no hurry to have the surgery on my knees.

The cactus are part of my recovery. I needed to get focus back in my life. After I lost weight and gave up cigarettes - I knew I needed to focus in on something. Cactus can be a bit prickly and deadly. If you touch them, they can bite. I have 200, which gave me focus and strength to get off the cigarettes. I don't go far from home.

The cactus gives me focus. My psychologist gave me focus and purpose. People say I should sell the cactus; I am not interested - my plants are my therapy. One of them bit me the other day, broke off in my skin. I should use tongs.

There is one and a half strawberries because I have one and a half breasts. I had to have one removed and then my teeth removed because of the antibiotics I used to take. It happens.

I have lots of tattoos and the snakes and lizards were the only things I could find that were like my tattoos. These are animals that like to be left alone.

I scratched some of the paper off the groin to show that I have no sex drive. My libido has gone. I couldn't care less. I'm stable and I am not looking for a partner, I couldn't give them anything. In the future one day maybe it will come back.

I am gay. I am attracted to women. I don't hate men; I have every reason to, but I don't. A real man is someone like Sir David Attenborough. Then there are boof heads and they only think about one thing – their genitals. I have only been attracted to women for 30 years. I can't do romance and intimacy anymore. I would rather sit here on my couch watching David Attenborough.

The intimacy I miss is being on the lounge together having a kiss and cuddle. My sex life with other women was good. I used to achieve orgasm, that was good. But now I would rather just be on the couch together. Intimacy maybe it will happen again one day. I don't know. I just want to enjoy life as it is at the moment, now that I am starting to get it back together.

I was told nothing about the facts of life. I had to learn as I went along.

When I was growing up, we were told nothing about sexuality or sexual rights. God no! I was told nothing about the facts of life. I had to learn as I went along. Not a goddam thing. My mother didn't even tell me about period, my friend's parents had to tell me.

For some reason I seem to stand out. That has been a part of my mental health issues. I get prejudged. I'm tall and heavily tattooed. I don't start trouble, but I finish it. That's where my philosophy of the turtle comes from. I won't put myself into dangerous situations. I don't do drugs or pubs or night clubs. I keep to myself because I don't want people to start harassing me.

The turtle is slow and steady and keeps to itself – but when they stick their head out, they will nip. Don't piss them off, they will take your fingers off. Leave them alone. If people have a go at me, I will have a go back. I have a foul mouth, and I will let it rip. I can't help myself sometimes.

Sexual violence against women is only getting worse. Men think they are entitled to anything. Men love their wife, but they are only loyal to one thing – their genitals.

So many of them are screwing around. They think they are entitled to do whatever they want to women. If you are walking and a male grabs you and you fight back, you will get in more trouble than he will.

That's the way the law is. Men are protected. He may get probation or community service – she would go to jail because that is his manhood. That's the way it is.

Women in nursing homes are raped, and they can't defend themselves and if a man breaks into the nursing home, he gets six or nine months on probation. Men need to know that they can't rape women and get away with it. Older women can't defend themselves against rape by a younger man. A guy last year raped a woman and said in his defence that she had 'come fuck me eyes'. I watch what is going on and the law needs to change to protect women.

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If a woman walked down the street scratching her crutch, she would be called a slut and men would say, 'let's go and rape her'. There is two sets of policies. I have seen things. Keep your cock to yourself. Not all men are bad. But there are two policies - one for men and one for women. Sexual violence against women is only going to get worse.

The workshop was totally not what I expected. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't like the rest of the ladies. My life was trashed but I got through it so that's okay. When it started I started to get a panic attack and I went and sat outside and told myself to focus, focus, focus. Then I went back inside and saw the photo of a trashed house and I thought that was me and then I said I got to make this work for me.

I think these workshops are useful. It makes older women sit back and look at things, focus on things. For me I am a realist. The woman I sat next to said she was a pragmatist. Everyone is different. There are few women that rape other women; when that does happen, the women are crucified. No one deserves to be raped.

Older women need to stand up for themselves, because they are vulnerable. You have helped me in ways that I can't describe. I didn't know what to expect. I wasn't like the rest of the ladies. My life was trashed but I got through it, so that's okay. People think I am being cynical; I'm a realist.

The Breakout



My Body Map is called The Breakout. On the top left there is a birdcage, and the door is open and what is coming out is not pretty. We are often forced into being pretty. She pushes her way out. She breaks the cage. No one opens it for her, she breaks out. Breaking out of all the constraints that are forced on you is not pretty. The mental constraints, the expectations by ourselves, by society, our families and others.

I had depression and anxiety for 10 years. Then finally an assessment revealed I have autism, and I am on level 2. That means my autism is in the midrange. I am autistic and I also have ADHD, and I also have Misophonia, which means I get triggered by sounds.

The little girl in the background of the Body Map with her arms over her ears is to show the noise of the world was too much for me. I was the child who would hide under chairs and rock back and forward. They thought something was wrong with me - I was such a confused child. My mum died at 19 and as a child I didn't understand anything and had no tools to deal with it. No one recognised I had anything other than typical needs.

I have suffered a lot of trauma in my life. I was an orphan. If someone loses a child, no-one says 'go off and foster a child'. But when you lose a parent, they tell me to go off and volunteer in an aged care home.

My body is a working body. There is no trauma shown, other than the imposed silence. I used to think there was no point saying anything, I wanted to be invisible.

In the background of the Map there is a photograph of a book with glasses, old hands and an old book. I think books are underestimated for the knowledge they have. Increasingly we want little bits of information, rather than a book. Old hands and old books tell stories that are often hidden or lost. Women have always done things to get out of the cage.

My body is a working body. There is no trauma shown, other than the imposed silence. I used to think there was no point

saying anything, I wanted to be invisible. I have been trying to hide for a long time. I still struggle with it. It is so easy to be misunderstood. If a woman speaks up, she is considered brash and abrasive. If a man does it, he is considered assertive. Men are listened to – women are not. When you have that pushed on you, you learn to be silent.

I have written the words 'all seeing', because when you are silent you see everything that is happening in the world. I am not looking for anything or anyone, and I can see what is going on. I feel like the fool on the hill watching it, all thinking what a waste of time.

On my head I have drawn lots of words. My brain is going nuts. It is very busy.

That's the ADHD. I make more connections in my brain. I talk fast and move from one thing to another. Things are always in the way. My brain doesn't stop.

I have written the word 'open' because I am an open person. It has been important for me to maintain my breath. For years when I got anxious, I would hold my breath. You have to have an open chest. The breath feeds my body. I see women holding it in. You have to take deep breaths to the bottom of your lungs. When I am anxious, I have a closed throat. My brain is racing. As long as I keep breathing that is all I need.

My body is a working body. Strong lungs. Strong legs. I have just started learning how to surf. We should be given lots of opportunities to learn different things at our age. We have to give women opportunities to engage in these things.

I placed a veil over my Body Map. The veil gives it an opaqueness. It references the underside. We pretend to give women space to speak. When we are told we can speak, we still have to veil it, so it is not confronting. The veil makes things partly visible. For there to be change, we need to be fully visible.

Hands are her story – her story in her hands. Hand maidens. You use your hands to create things. Everything is in the hands. You can look at a person's hands and tell if they have had a privileged or a hard life. Hands tell the truth of people. If you look at hands, it tells you what their life has been like. I am a musician, so my hands are important to me.

**Hands are her story –
her story in her hands.
Hand maidens.**

Faustina is a Catholic Saint who was the 'Secretary of Divine Mercy'. Mercy is all encompassing - it is more broader than compassion. It has aspects of forgiveness and action. Be merciful to yourself and others. Faustina professed the message of mercy. She is the perfect woman's saint. She acknowledged evil and people taking advantage of others, and she still practiced mercy. Her message was, you don't hold onto the things that hurt you, or do things to others that hurt them. We need to apply the Mercy to ourselves and the situations we find ourselves in. We don't make choices; we are forced into choices.

After 60 my life became more constrained. I went to women's groups and otherwise went nowhere because social interactions become painful. I appeared functional, but I am not so good at formulating and maintaining relationships. Social situations were a nightmare for me.

I went through early menopause, and I didn't know what was happening. I had two children, and I ended up giving up work and taking off bush. I didn't know I was neurodivergent. We don't understand the impact of menopause on our bodies until we go through it. I could do a Body Map just on menopause – my body, depression and feeling lost. I felt like it was the last spring, and I was going to die on the spot, which was ridiculous. Those things we don't understand about our bodies and our minds. We are still tied to our evolutionary selves. Unless you have someone walk

you through it, you will have trouble coping. It was horrible. I got no sympathy. There are so many myths. It wasn't just about stopping periods.

We have to share our stories with other women. This affects everyone – children and women and the workplace. We got taught to hide it because we were no longer women. My sister carried tampons around for five years after menopause because she didn't want to admit she had gone through menopause. Somehow, we are taught that we are a lesser woman because we went through menopause before 60.

Going out was too much for me. I know there is a lot of women out there who are autistic and get written off because they are older women. They are home and looking after the grandchild.

I was just sitting at home waiting to die. It was so dark and horrible. The assessment helped me to understand my past. I have tools and aids to regulate to minimise the intrusion of noise. People think I am strange and that hurts.

With the right tools and with support from a psychologist - having someone like that on my side meant I wasn't sidelined.

With the right tools and with support from a psychologist - having someone like that on my side meant I wasn't sidelined. If you are on the spectrum, talking is not a good way to express yourself.

I think we are all born bisexual, and we can choose who we love. It's easier to choose to be straight. In the future people won't blink an eyelid. I have had relationships with both men and women, and I won't trumpet about being anything other than being me.

My gender is not much to do with my identity, except that is how women get treated. I get treated differently because I am a woman.

There was a woman in the workshop who said she could have done Body Mapping all day. I think she was right. I could have worked on my Body Map and then stopped to reflect and come back to do more. I love visual imagery but am not always sure how to represent my body image. My Body Map wasn't very in-depth. But I can see when you first start you think it could be done quickly. If it was all day workshop I wouldn't have participated - but she was right that we could do it all day. There are so many facets to how we represent our bodies and how we feel about ourselves.

There is a side we present to the world and then the side we hide. Some things I only communicate to my psychologist. In the future I would use something like this with my counsellor. We map my mind map, but haven't mapped my body.

She can do anything



With the Body Map I made I wanted to show the power and empowerment of women. I wanted to show how much a woman can do. A woman can be independent. She can do anything.

The butterflies are a symbol of freedom, they represent being able to do anything you want to do and believing in yourself. The butterflies show getting free from the cocoon and being able to fly. It's about an emergence and starting a new life. The butterfly shows that the woman is changing from something to something else.

I have put diamonds on the paper. These represent the everyday challenges we face, small or great. We must see them and continue living. We must face them.

I believe that if I do what I need to do in a successful way - I am showing myself how strong I am. That makes me keep going.

I have had a lot of challenges in my life, like so many people I know. I had a very sick husband, and I looked after him. I never felt appreciated. I did it because I wanted to have a peaceful conscience. I did it for myself. I believe that if I do what I need to do in a successful way – I am showing myself how strong I am. That makes me keep going.

Since my husband passed away, I can paint do art and be independent. My husband had a stroke 20 years ago and it was very difficult for me - but when he passed away, I had some peace of mind.

We are from Iran and my daughter migrated to Australia. I love my daughter and my grandson. It feels perfect. My daughter goes to work, and I do some painting.

In Iranian culture, women are respected. Especially older women have respect in the family and with their children. Iranian families look after their older people at home, and they do not go into an aged care home. There is always special respect for older people and women.

The values in my culture are different from the values of Iran's regime. The Islamic regime doesn't have any respect for women. Women in Iran get suppressed in their everyday lives, they have to cover their bodies and hair against their beliefs. They try to remove women from society. As a previous Muslim who converted to Christianity, I will never be able to talk about my religion because according to Islamic laws, the punishment for this action is death. There is a huge gap between the values in our culture and what the regime says.

In Australian culture, there is respect for older women. I can see big differences between Australia and Iran. I can see here there are workshops for older women, and I see how much there is care for older people. I can see that there is transport here and no potholes in the street and that the government wants to try to make it easier for older people. There is a huge difference between here in Australia and there in Iran.

I come from a country where there is less or no respect at all and what I see here is amazing. We should look at how full the glass is. I think it is good here. This is a law-abiding country.

I am here on a bridging visa while I am applying for citizenship. Because I have a bridging visa, I don't receive any services. I know there are services for older people, but I don't know what they are like because I cannot receive services. In general, I can see that the government is providing services to its citizens.

It is difficult for me to go back to Iran. In the *Women, Life, Freedom* revolution in Iran, I participated in rallies to show my solidarity to my people and women in Iran. My attendance at rallies against the Iranian government was photographed and was broadcast on different Iranian social media. It can be dangerous for me to come back to Iran. As an old woman, I cannot bear the pressure and violence of the Islamic Republic regime in their prisons if they arrest me. My message to the government is that human rights should be considered for young and old.

There must be services for older women. About the Body Mapping workshops, I suggest that we have this kind of gathering once or twice a week. I felt so good at that workshop, and I saw everyone was happy. I loved it so much. If I can teach people to paint or make any kind of paint, I would like to assist.

What I loved about the workshop was that having the gathering itself showed that older women are important

What I loved about the workshop was that having the gathering itself showed that older women are important - because something has been organised for us. When you asked us to make a Body Map on the paper it gave us a good feeling that we have value, and we are asked to do things.

When we get older, and we think we have done everything, we have finished work and helped our kids, I think it is good to see people doing new things. It reminds me I still have some worth and feel good and happy to be doing that. I am so happy that I was able to share my ideas.

The power of older women



The plane on top of my head is because I have a love of travelling. I did a lot of travelling my whole life. When I was young in Vietnam we travelled a lot. The bird for me means freedom. Freedom was a big thing in my life. I chose freedom. Freedom of how I live my life. Freedom of my voice. It is from the heart. That is why I end up in Australia – I chose freedom. I became a refugee.

The circle of colours are the colours of the rainbow. We eat Asian food in our lives, it is important in Asian culture. I love all food. Food is a universal connection. Food teaches you about culture. It is radiating. It is part of my family culture. We are generous with food. During the war my family would give food out. We are a very open family. We embrace people and welcome them to our home. In Vietnam we bought food and rice to give to people in the orphanage. It's part of my memory. I love to give people food, and I love to support other people. I enjoy charity. I inherited that from my parents.

I was born in a war-torn country. A lot of people were suffering. My parents didn't have to suffer. I left home when I was a very young girl. I escaped. I was with my sibling. My teenage years were very hard. I came to Australia during that time. I suffered a lot.

Culturally we didn't get taught about sex at school. Then when I came to Australia it was a very lonely journey. Everyone keeps to themselves. Back then I didn't understand, but now I look back and I understand that was depression.

The first time I had my period I was in a refugee camp. I thought I was dying. I got no advice from my sibling. No one told me. They didn't care. I asked my neighbour, and she told me that it was because I was growing up.

The first time I had my period I was in a refugee camp. I thought I was dying. I got no advice from my sibling. No one told me.

When I came here, we had more variety to learn from more places – school and clinic and teachers.

They were very helpful. Sex was really very funny - we never talked about it. In our religion, we don't talk about sex either. For women, we didn't go to university, we grow up and we get married. I didn't and that caused a big problem in my relationship with my mother. I chose freedom and I chose to travel. I saw what happened to my mother and my friend who got married and I didn't want that.

My parents were happy and had strong marriage and lasted till the end. But during their marriage there was a lot of confrontation and conflict. It wasn't physical, but I felt I had to protect my mother. My father was a good man, but we were not taught properly about being a woman.

When I came to Australia, I realised that my father was a very good man, but it was not a smooth sailing marriage. My parents were fighting all their lives. They never divorced because of cultural reasons - they put up with each other. I didn't want to put up with that. I asked my mother why she didn't leave him, and she said he did nothing wrong; he was a good man.

My best friend gave up all her life and had two kids and got divorced and then kicked out of the house. She suffers. Looking at these women and I thought it was not worth trying to be in a relationship. I feel very strongly about not having a relationship. I still choose freedom.

On my Body Map I have drawn a circle on my left knee because there is a health problem. I used and abused my body a lot. As a kid I would do anything my parents asked me to do. I ended up wounded on my body. I had to take care of my mum, and I had to take care of her for a long time and it took a toll on my body. Twenty years ago, I fell, and I didn't look after myself well. All the negligence of my body is building up. Some days I can't stand up on my knee. It caused me a lot of problems.

A lot of things happened to me physically, mentally and psychologically. I was in domestic violence. I was resilient. I managed to survive because of my strong will.

Safety in my body I think in the Body Map is the star in my head. That is where my power is. I am a little person. I have a very strong will. I work most of the time by using my brain. It keeps me going. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here.

A lot of things happened to me physically, mentally and psychologically. I was in domestic violence. I was resilient. I managed to survive because of my strong will.

A person like me, educated here in Australia I knew nothing about the domestic violence I was experiencing. I was very shocked, I felt ashamed. I was scared. I'm not afraid of fighting, but at that time my mum was sick, and I was scared because the DV would scare her, and she would have a heart attack and die. I didn't know where to go. It was in my family, so I hide it.

One day the police came to my door, and I was freaking out. They gave me an AVO that was taken out by my sibling. I was shocked and I started crying. I told them what was happening. The police told me there was nothing to worry about and I had to go to court. I did. It was very nasty. After that I learned that there are services for Legal Aid and things like that. Before that I was naïve, and I let my family walk over me dead.

The person who hit me, put an AVO against me. He did it in front of my mum and it was scary for my mum because she had to see it. When I got served an AVO I told the police my story for the first time. I had told no one. From then I learned to protect myself. I prefer to be by myself.

I feel sad when I am by myself. It may seem strange, but I don't feel comfortable in a lot of people, in a crowd. I feel like I don't like to mix with them. It will be a mess if I hang out with them. I don't have many friends. I used to. I used to have a lot of friends. I feel safer on my own. You don't know who you hang around with. They can turn around and stab you any time. I prefer to be by myself.

When I was young, being with my parents was where I felt safe. Now it's not with my siblings because they were abusive. Now I don't want to hang around with people that I don't know. I only have selective friends.

Older women have never been respected. We have been neglected. We are used by the family. We are used by society. That's how I feel. That doesn't mean I will stop helping others. I feel very disappointed about the way I have been treated. But I also know I have been blessed that I am here, and I am still alive. If there is someone who needs me, I will help. My heart is broken at the moment because someone I know is dying. They have no one.

We are not useless; we are very smart. Who gives birth to all the men? We can do a lot of things. We get badly paid. I used to work in a male dominated profession. It depends on how you look at yourself and how you treat yourself. We need to support ourselves.

I wish there was a place that could bring older women together that they could look out for each other. It is hard when you are isolated. You can be treated badly or abused. If I could find a place for older women to stay together - one has a better body and one has a better brain to protect each other.

Not everyone has family. They can take turns to keep an eye on each other and visit each other, with understanding. Sometimes they won't tell you what is happening to them, but you can check on each other.

The Body Mapping workshop was a good thing. I really enjoyed it. To be with other women you can see their experiences, what they have in their lives. Sharing was good. We are helping ourselves and we are helping each other. We are building trust. I gained confidence.

I'm not the only one being abused.
I am not the only one who feels stupid.
I am not the only one that thinks my body is ugly. I am not the only one who wants to cover my body. I am conscious of my scars. I will not wear anything that shows my scars. I will not wear a dress. But being in a workshop like that I am not the only one with funny feeling about my body. Every one of us older women has that feeling about their body. It was good to be open and honest - to be yourself.

I'm not the only one being abused. I am not the only one who feels stupid. I am not the only one that thinks my body is ugly. I am not the only one who wants to cover my body.

We did some Body Mapping on small paper on the table and some with chalk on the wall. The map on the wall was about openness. There was no shame of sharing. On the paper it was a secret. On the wall there was no secret. If I share with you – you share with me.

With older women somehow you always feel strong person, you can survive. If you have two other women you are not scared, you are together. We will be safer. We will be more confident and powerful. I want to be with other like-minded people. With one other older woman, good. Two older women, great. Three, better. The power of older woman.

The Body Mapping paper I made for my Body Map has the Venus, or the female form on it. I chose this photo because it is representative of the sculptures and artefacts that I have seen of women's bodies way, way back in time. I feel a long and ancient connection with my foremothers going back thousands of years. It has always been a powerful thing for me.

The photo speaks to me of those ancient depictions of women's forms and the sacredness of women's bodies; and power that we will carry within us, but we don't necessarily know it or give voice to it. But I do. That's my thing.

The power in my Body Map is in the dark outlines that come with the cut outs of the female form. The strong delineations with the Body Maps, the heavy black lines are boundaries, they are where my power is.

The inner young lass is the energy that has always been within you. You don't have to keep it locked up.

I used two Body Maps, one on top of the other. One is the younger, physically stronger woman, who is still very much within me. The other woman is me, as I am now. We need to tell older women to keep in contact with that inner younger lass, to keep her at the fore. But not everyone can do that. The inner young lass is the energy that has always been within you. You don't have to keep it

locked up. You can expand to whatever extent your body enables you to. Feel the power you still have within you.

We need to remember the body keeps the score. She remembers everything she has been through. She remembers all the awful stuff, but more powerfully she remembers the fabulous stuff. There is so much more good than there is bad, we need to bring the good to the fore. We need to allow that to emerge.

I have written on my head that my mind belongs to me. This gives voice to something I have worked with since I was 16. It has been a lifelong journey working on my voice and understanding that it comes from the earth. When I say give voice, I don't just mean say your truth. In Hebrew there is a word *svoom*, which means 'to speak loudly'.

I didn't have voice before I was 16. Before then, every time I opened my mouth in my family I was told to shut up. I was silenced by my family. I have no concept of safety. I don't know what it is to feel safe.

I wrote on my map that the lines on my skin are a map of where I have been in my life. When I was 16, a makeup artist told me that I will get lines that will show where I have been. I have always passed that on to others, it is really important to me.

I wrote on the pelvic area of my map that my body is, was and always will be mine. That is important. My body hasn't always been treated as through it was mine by other people. The lines delineating my body are really important.

There are a lot of hearts on the Body Mapping paper and on my Body Map, because I have so much love within me. I have gone through so many traumas in my life and anyone of those traumas would have done another person in; but despite that I still have an incredible amount of love. It astonishes me that there is always more of it. It is endless. There is always more love. Some people have taken advantages of that in the past – but there is still more love.

When I had my first child, I thought love couldn't get any bigger than this. I was worried that my second child I would not love as much – but wow, where does it come from! I am astonished that it just keeps growing. Having grandchildren doesn't detract from my love for my children, it enhances it. It keeps building and multiplying. Absolutely astonishing!

Being a grandmother enhances my memories of the lovely things my daughter did when she was growing up. And my son as well. I had no idea it would be like this.

The triangle in the Body Mapping paper shows children playing on grass in the sunshine, which reminded me of my children and happy birthdays. There is something so joyous about that. It is so good to have both feet planted firmly on the ground. The Body Map shows my feet are planted in the earth. There are flowers growing. There is nature. There are always things growing.

Birthdays to me are really important, and so I wrote 'happy birthday' on the Body Mapping paper. A birthday is not just a number. That is bullshit. It is never a given. My life expectancy was seven years, because of life threatening asthma. It was considered miraculous that I made it to seven and then eight. On my 18th birthday I had been two months in the Vietnam war, and I nearly lost my life. Birthdays are not a given.

I wrote on my head that my mind belongs to me. I don't know when I was diagnosed with complex PTSD, but they offered me mind altering drugs. I don't always like what goes on in my head, but I need to deal with it – not block it. I need to know what goes through my mind is mine. I need to own that. I don't want to mask it. My mind is my creativity, I don't want that taken away. I am still learning how to deal with it.

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Over the years through counselling and self-expression I have control of my head. Now if I have intrusive thoughts, I tell them to bugger off. I still have nightmares, but I have learned to sleep.

I crumpled the Body Maps. The crumpling is very tactile. Squeezing paper into a tiny ball is a really empowering or strengthening thing to do. I know what crumpling feels like and the way it crumples it looks like the skin that has been around a long time. That appealed to me. It represents old skin.

The question about intimacy I found so confronting. I didn't feel part of that. I felt alienated or othered. I know that was not the intention, I need to speak with my counsellor about that. Other women didn't seem to have the issue with it that I have. I haven't had a long-term intimate partner ever. I lived with someone for two years, that was 48 years since it ended.

Sexual intercourse and intimacy is something I could have done without. I have had in my wild years and wonderful lovers. Really wonderful lovers. Fabulous experiences. There is one in particular I met up many years later and we could have easily taken up where we left off. But neither of us was prepared to go there, we acknowledged that. He was so incredibly special. I have never heard a lovership described in the way I would describe us. All the steamy sex in the world doesn't cover it. To have had that to then go into intimacy with someone who was not going to be anything like that - nah! Unless someone is going to be as extraordinary - nah! Unlikely to happen. I have those memories. My body has those memories.

The word 'sex' never came up when I was younger. The act called sex never came up. It didn't exist. It was not a good thing or a bad thing. I didn't have any taboos; that's not a bad thing. Sex in my religion is a celebration of God. It's not a sin. I didn't have the negativity related to sex and I feel for women who did - what a terrible handicap.

Most clothing that is aimed at older women is drab. I don't want to see that - it makes me feel drab and depressed. A woman can dye her hair all she likes but if she is wearing drab colours she is saying - look away, don't look at me. If we wear things that make people look away, then don't complain you are invisible.

Women of all ages need to learn to take up space. Men are allowed to sit with their legs apart and take up two seats on a train and women are supposed to fit into a tiny space. Codswallop. Fuck that! It's basic to being a human being - take up space.

Some older men do beige and beige and beige, but their clothing is not made drab to invisibilize them. Women's physical movement, particularly if they have clutch bag or purse tucked in their side - their movements become smaller and smaller and smaller. When you are forced to live in a small space, you become smaller. You withdraw. It takes a lot then to expand. It's hard to combat. We need to get the message out there that you do not have to become this invisible little old lady. There is no vitality in the clothing made for older women.

The workshop was very beneficial. It gave me the opportunity to not be alone with my body stuff. To be with a group of women who have all experienced all aspects of what I have experienced - that was empowering in itself. I looked at all those questions and felt the feelings in a space where there was support. I felt it was empowering and enabling.

I called my Body Map – Happy Freedom. I have been married twice, and both relationships were very controlling. The second marriage was the reason I retired early to a rural community. It was controlling. It is so good to finally get rid of him. I am free. I love it.

My second husband said to a very good friend of mine, “How do I change her? How do I get her to do what I want her to do?” My friend told him he needed to understand that I am a strong woman, and he won’t be able to control me.

There is nothing holding me back. The freedom is shown in the map in the balloons and the butterflies. They are free. I love to party. It’s my birthday soon and we are going out to dinner. I am 79 and I don’t care - it’s just another year.

The grass at my feet is about being grounded. The rose petals are there because flowers are beautiful. I find beauty in flowers. A lovely bunch of flowers on the dining room table makes me happy. There are flowers on my ankles. They don’t mean anything, I just thought they were pretty.

The photograph that sits under my Body Map shows hands. I chose that because I am a worker. I think you are as good as your team, and we, the team I work with, are wonderful. I work for a voluntary organisation that promotes older women’s health. We are very much working together as a team.

The bird on my chest is freeing and the heart shows that I am a heart person. I care for people. The flowers on my breast are flowers, no other meaning.

There was no information on sexual rights. I was an active person and everything I was doing I didn’t have that mother figure or support person.

I brought the picture of the reproductive system from home. I had a hysterectomy at a very early age. It was probably endometriosis. Fortunately, I’d had children by then. Now the organisations we work with do training in endometriosis. There is so much more information now.

My mother left us when I was 11, and that is a young age to go into puberty and all those things without a mother.

My grandmother guided me through those things. She had old fashioned ideas. There was no information on sexual rights. I was an active person and everything I was doing I didn’t have that mother figure or support person. My grandmother was absolutely gorgeous, but old-fashioned ideas. Anyway, I survived.

My dad was my mentor. He said I was allowed to do anything, but I must be a lady. I wasn’t allowed to ride a pushbike. There are things women could do and things women couldn’t do. He was an excellent mentor.

My first marriage failed after 12 years, and I had to raise two children and go back to work. I walked away with \$13.00 and two children. I am a survivor. I don’t hold anything negative to him.

I'm glad my second husband has moved away from here. He was a worry. We had mediation and the mediator was worried he would kill me. The mediator wanted me to change the locks on my house. I had already done that. My daughter set up a sophisticated monitoring system for the house as well.

I went to the police, but they didn't take it seriously like they do now. I told the police the texts he was sending me, saying that if I was dead, he would get everything. The police officer asked me how many of those texts I had received, I said there was around 12. He told me to come back when I have hundreds.

I feel for women who are in a worse situation than I was. There are women who had a home and now they are renting. Most women leave their male partner when there is family violence. Why should the women leave the perpetrator? They walk away with nothing.

Women who leave abusive male partners can be given a pack of emergency supplies from a women's refuge, but where do they live? Most of the hotels around here are full of women who have nowhere else to go. It's ridiculous. We hear these stories so often.

One of the other women in our group disclosed family violence and sexual assault and I showed her compassion. She was so grateful. She has bought so many other women into our group that are in a similar position to herself.

What's important is being able to understand and not judge.

What's important is being able to understand and not judge. It's fine for people to say – you need to leave, but where do you go to? Why should it be the woman that has to run?

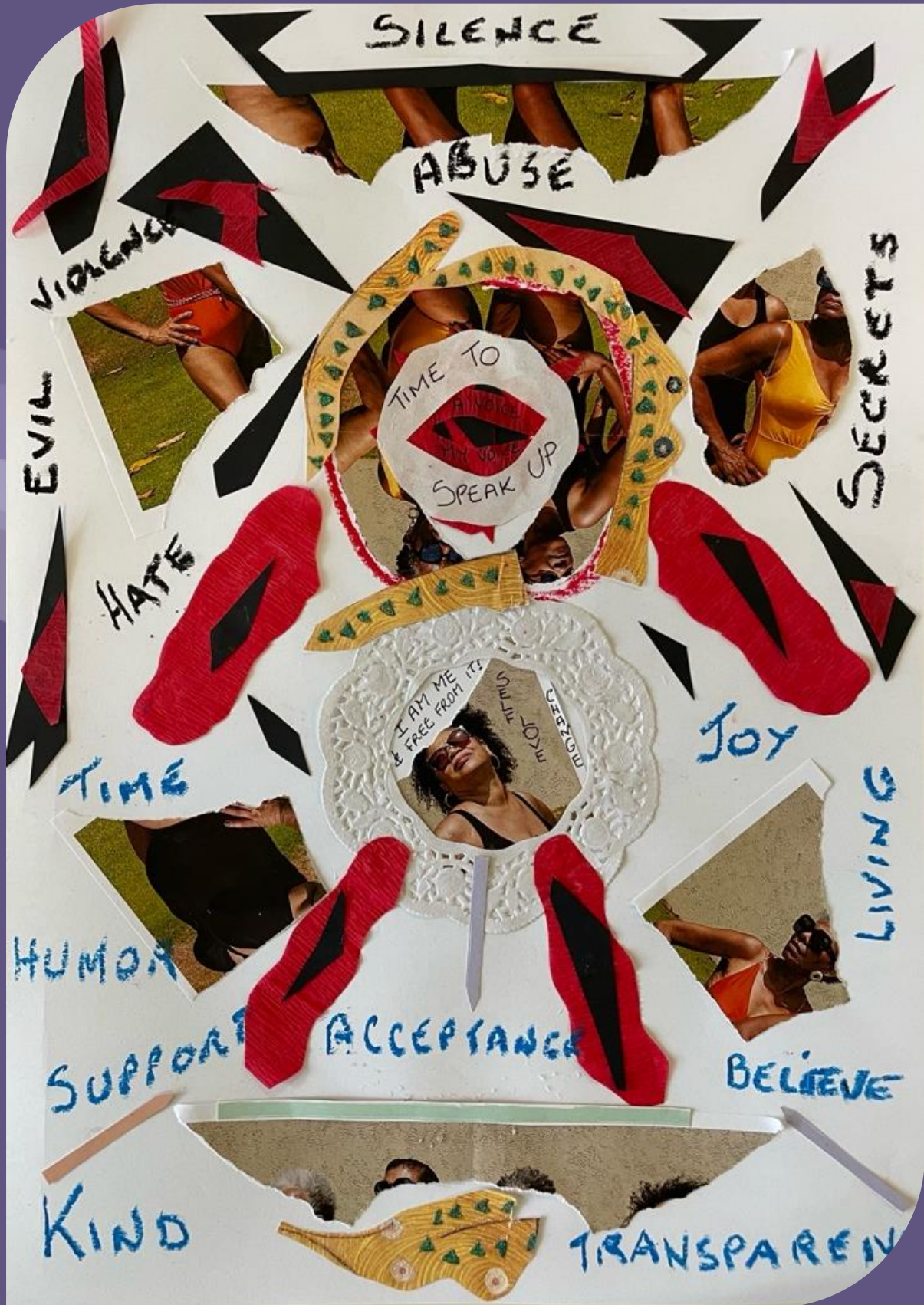
I now have a life friend from one of the other workshop participants. I saw her at an event recently and she came bounding up. She felt safe approaching me and opening up.

I didn't really think the workshop was "Wow, this is fantastic". I couldn't get into it. I had to think about it from a training perspective – a professional perspective, so I kept focused on what we were achieving. I go with my heart, I put me into it. But I could not equate it with delivering training resources.

I think the way you went about the workshops was very thoughtful. It was a small group and that was good. You were able to give individual assistance and some of the ladies needed assistance.

One of the women has told me since that she thought we didn't know how much the workshop helped her. It enabled her to move on in her life. She was holding back a lot of stuff. There were issues that were pushing people away from her. She told me the workshop helped. That meant a hell of a lot.

I am Free



On my Body Map, the red and black are the dark secrets and the suffering. You tell them and tell them, and they do nothing. They don't help. When I got married, he was such a happy man. But then by me putting on makeup, he thought I was having an affair. When he saw the lipstick, he hit me so hard I didn't know what was happening. I still preferred to be with him instead of my mother.

The legs are there in the map because we walk knowing what is happening and not saying anything about the abuse. You simply walk. You survive.

Here when you are finally free of the silence, you are finally thinking you are free and then you should speak up. The heads at the bottom of the Map are the ones who are there, and they are listening.

I wear a watch that doesn't work because it shows me that he no longer controls me. It can be 11 am and he can do nothing to me. There is no violence, no tears. I could now be one minute late and nothing bad happens to me.

To me, speaking up and not being ashamed is my power. Even though it is very hurtful to remember what I went through, speaking up is my power

To me, speaking up and not being ashamed is my power. Even though it is very hurtful to remember what I went through, speaking up is my power – that's the voice in the middle of the map.

A lot of people come to me and tell me their domestic violence issues. In my workplace especially. The blue words are my positive things.

The doily says that I am finally free from the violence and the silence. I had to turn 63 to be free. The women in bathers show that because I have breasts and a vagina, men will be looking at my body. These private parts mean sometimes you cannot be yourself because you will be seen as a sexual object. But they are here because now I am not frightened to show my body. These women are freely enjoying their bodies.

By tearing the paper for the Body Map, I want to show the freedom from having to be perfect and the freedom from abuse.

As a migrant, it is the silence and shame and the fact that you are not able to rely on authorities at home that are corrupt as well. When my grandmother disclosed that her husband was a perpetrator of sexual abuse, no one knew. When I spoke out, they said I was misbehaving.

My mother told me that she didn't like me because I looked like her mother-in-law. My father had affairs because he was a rich man. She told me she only remembered me when it rained, and she had left me on the balcony. I was a hairy child, and she didn't like that.

When my family went on holidays, I couldn't go because I had a sun allergy. I had to stay with the servants on my own. The servants told me to make sure not to be alone with my grandfather. I didn't know why. Before that my uncle tried to abuse me three times. I told my dad, and I was asked to sleep somewhere else.

When I came to Australia, someone told me they found my grandfather was involved in sexual assault and they called the police. They told him to go to the doctor and if he had treatment, there would be no consequences. I found out because the police gave my grandmother a document about it, and she asked me to read it. She used me as an interpreter.

My grandfather always hated me because I never went on holidays, and he would visit, and I would lock my door because I didn't like him. We didn't have a good relationship. He once tried to touch me, and I was so angry, and he never tried to touch me again.

Then my grandmother told us about her abuse. After she had the baby there was no time or respect for her and she had to have sex with him. She was 80 years old, and she had been abused all that time by him. She never disclosed to her children. Their children didn't know.

She was 80 years old, and she had been abused all that time by him. She never disclosed to her children. Their children didn't know.

My mother severed contact because she worked in childcare, and she blamed me. My grandmother told her doctor what her husband was doing. I had to translate for her. She was so ashamed. My mother didn't want this family secret to be shared. She was taught that silence was the best. But I didn't agree and one day we had a family BBQ, and I told my family everything and they hated me.

After the BBQ my cousin told me that my uncle touched her. She wouldn't tell anyone because she was worried that they wouldn't believe her. So once again I was on my own. I learned that silence, fear and shame were part of a dark secret in the family.

When I got married, I found that more families had the same issues. I said to myself, "What can we do?" Men have to have sex, it's best if I do it. We thought that was the right thing to do, to have sex because the men had to have sex. We didn't know we had rights.

The service providers don't tell us we have rights. They need to tell us so that we can tell them what is happening in our lives, and we don't have to feel ashamed. The older women shouldn't believe that because the priest said it is okay, that it is okay. This is what they are being taught. The service providers have to tell us we have rights.

If older women believe it will be okay and so they don't do anything, they let it go; then it becomes a big, dark secret. My issue has been that I have this big, dark secret. If I see a man becoming closer, I get so scared.

Silence and shame is the way they manage to keep it in the family. That is why non-English speaking people don't talk.

In the family when there is taking advantage and grabbing breasts, the family don't see it as abuse, they see it as loving. But it's not. It's abuse. That is taking advantage of a person that is lonely, and they need that hug and it's not really a hug. Seeing what is happening and not doing anything makes it harder because you are the trouble.

It's sad. When you told us we could come and talk about this, I was so grateful. I wanted to say it as it is because it happens. And at least you listened, and you know it happens. It doesn't stop because we are older women, it is happening to every age.

It is important that I make a difference because in my family, if I don't speak out the secret will remain a secret. My uncles when they heard about my grandfather, they threw their hands in the air and said they didn't want to hear it.

I got married because I didn't have a good relationship with my mother. I told her that I could not understand how she could expect me to be a doctor or a lawyer when she wasn't. She just got married to my father who was a rich man so she wouldn't have to worry about money.

When I spoke out and told my mother what I felt, she didn't like that. Then because I looked like my grandmother, she didn't like me and so I left home. I travelled to New York, and I was at the Statue of Liberty, and I asked a young man for directions, and we started dating. He was funny and I didn't know that he was using drugs. In his view, everything was possible, nothing was wrong with the world. But with my mother, everything was wrong with the world. My mother was never proud of me. He was. So, I married him.

When my husband found out I didn't pick up the children, he tore my clothes and took me into the street. I wet myself. No one did anything about it.

He was an abusive man. I missed picking up kids from school and so they had to take the bus. When my husband found out I didn't pick up the children, he tore my clothes and took me into the street. I wet myself. No one did anything about it. He went and looked for the girls. He thought I was having an affair with my boss. He always controlled me; I could not be one minute late because he thought I was having an affair.

My mother made it worse. When she called, if she heard my husband's voice she would hang up. He would then hit me so hard because he thought I was having an affair. I told her to stop calling without leaving a message and why, but she didn't believe me.

I left him and moved in with my mother for three months. My mother said he is going to put me in prison because he is claiming social security payments, and I was working in social security. I didn't have money to pay my rent. Never did he give me money for the rent.

The abuse continued and all my family left me, and they felt ashamed. My family couldn't believe that I would find a partner like him to be the father of my children. I went to the church and said that I needed their help, but they didn't help.

The only gift he gave me was my two daughters. They witness a lot of violence. They don't want to marry, because they see what marriage can be like. They have educated me, and they have told me what a feminist is. So, I got involved in Reclaim the Night. They made me realise why I was doing the things I was doing. When I finally said 'enough is enough', it was the best thing I could do. Many people told me to leave him, but who is going to pay for the food for my children?

People tell me I should leave him, but they don't tell me how I can. Now it is different. Now I can speak up. When Rosie Batty spoke, I spoke. It is different now. We can speak about this. Before we couldn't. I have been brave for a long time, but no one was listening.

To me the workshop was valuable. What I felt was for the very first time was I was with women who were able to speak the truth. Finally, you have women who say this happened to me and I don't have to suffer it on my own. I related to the suffering and silence the other women talked about. I don't remember a lot about what was said but I have found some friends from the workshop. I felt peace. Joy. Freedom to say what happened to us. Now I am me.

Flower power



I started my Body Map with my arms crossed in front of me to show blocking contact from other people. This is a protection because my life experience is that people take advantage if you let them in. Generally, I don't trust anyone.

The black hearts are the people that have not contributed to my life in a positive way. One is my mother. She was a cruel, vindictive woman. She was kind and thoughtful though when she belted us - she said she only did it where there was fat on our bodies, so no one would see the bruises. She told us that we could say anything to anyone because they would take us away and if we thought it was bad here, it would be worse if we were taken away. We knew there was no one else who was going to look after us.

I did the doily and glitter across my genitals, because that was the only way I could make them happy.

The other black hearts are the relationships I have had that have not been successful. I got left when I was eight months pregnant with my son. I didn't know I was having an affair. I thought we were in love. The black hearts are the men who have been controlling and manipulative. I did the doily and glitter across my genitals, because that was the only way I could make them happy. If I could give them what they wanted, I could get some love in return.

I only ever have gratuitous sex since my last relationship. I am not going to get hurt again. I only want to have a nice time, I enjoy that. All these men say to me that they are worried that I am going to fall in love with them. They all thought they were that great. But they weren't and I didn't fall in love with them. I have had quite long-term sexual relationships over decades, and it doesn't bother me that they carry on with other partnerships, as long as they have safe sex. I never want another emotional relationship ever again.

There are some people who have genuinely loved me: family members and other people who are kind and loving and not demanding or unkind.

I have done my heart red because I want to be loved, and I like to give love. The main focus of my love is my granddaughter - my son's daughter. My son hasn't had anything to do with the mother of my granddaughter for a long time. She is evil and controlling and manipulative. My son won't have anything to do with her. So, I have been the go-between. She does to my granddaughter what my mum did to me.

On the Body Map, the bird across my mouth was to show that she was so vile that I learned not to say anything, because she needed to feel she was in control and had the power. That's what she wanted. I wanted access to my granddaughter, and to do that I had to say nothing. It's not always men who are abusive.

The other things I drew on my Body Map represent an accident I had and the severe damage to me when I was hit by a car that ran a red light. It really did shift my life. The driver lied to police about what she had done. She was young and pretty and crying and she didn't get a fine. All that damage to me and nothing happened to her.

My other scars are the keyhole surgery I had because one of my partners refused to have sex with me until I had tubal ligation. The things you do for love! A year later I ended up having a hysterectomy anyway - that's the dark scar across my belly. When I had the hysterectomy, I was sharing a hospital room with a woman who had big staples across her belly from her hysterectomy. But my scar was neat because the surgeon said he thought I would look great in a bikini for some time yet. What a nice person. The other scar is from when I had my appendix removed. I have a substantial collection of scars.

I was in a shop, and I saw a hibiscus flower and I thought if I can't go to Queensland and see hibiscus flowers, I'll wear one in my hair.

My power in the Body Map is shown by the flower in my hair. I started wearing a flower in my hair after I met someone, another failed relationship. We were going on a boating holiday, and then he decided he wasn't going and just cancelled the trip. I was very disappointed. Then I was in a shop, and I saw a hibiscus flower and I thought if I can't go to Queensland and see hibiscus flowers, I'll wear one in my hair.

The other way of showing my power is I am still standing. I am not prone. My other power is my love for my granddaughter.

The two people sitting between legs represent my relationship with my son. We walk together a lot. He is not well. He lives in an altered reality. When we talk, I have to pretend that his reality is the true reality. In the past I have tried to tell him that what he is saying isn't real, and he lost it. His reality is very real to him. I have to go along with him.

My son has a medical condition. He thinks the doctors made it up. I have a difficult relationship with him. He is an only child. I love him. He would do anything for me. He does a lot of walking - it helps calm him. He loves helping people. His daughter is the same. She has a good heart. He is her dad. He has been an absent parent because he just can't deal with her mother, which has meant I had to.

My son has a permanent place to live now. He was mentally ill and now he has a diagnosis and a place to live. From time to time, I go to his place. He used to live with me. He had a breakdown caused by chemical imbalance in his brain. He lived in my lounge room. It was the start of his demise. He was really not well. He was in my lounge room for four years. I bought a click clack bed for him for the lounge room and there is a TV in there. He was there for four years, and I was still working full time and looking after my granddaughter. He was so awful and so bad. He would make a meal and the whole kitchen was awash with dirty dishes, and he couldn't clean up.

It stank here. My house stank. I couldn't have anyone visit. It got to the point where I just wasn't coping. So, I got a Texta, and I wrote over every mirrored surface in the house "I just can't take it anymore." I wrote over all the mirrors and glass and reflective surfaces. I couldn't cope anymore, and I didn't know what do.

When my son saw what I had written he said, 'Mum, you are scaring me. I think you are crazy and I'm moving out.' He moved from boarding house to boarding house and one he was in burned to the ground. He has it in his head that the police are after him for it; even though the police have charged someone.

It wasn't a pleasant atmosphere. No one lives in a boarding house by choice. People there have no other options. He has felt the police are after him. I can't convince him otherwise and he thinks they follow him 24/7 and that he is monitored and that my car is monitored. He thinks the police listen to his life by live feed 24 hours a day.

Now he has permanent accommodation and a definitive diagnosis. But it took 14 years of struggling and sort of homelessness. A boarding house is next best thing to being on the street.

When he moved out, it was absolutely life changing for me. For four and a half years the place wasn't my own. I felt a bit sorry for him because the places he lived were a bit dodgy. But it was lovely to get my place back.

People are so easy with advice. If I share my issues with someone, I don't need advice. Don't tell me what I need to do. If I fall over, I know I need a band aid. Do you think I got to this age by being stupid?

In the Body Mapping workshops, we came to introduce each other. I chose a photograph of a flower growing through concrete. Even though my life is hard, it is not solid hard. There is still enough soil for the flowers to germinate. That is my positivity. If I wasn't positive, I wouldn't have gone to the Body Mapping workshop. I have strength and purpose.

Even though my life is hard, it is not solid hard. There is still enough soil for the flowers to germinate.

I didn't really know what to expect from the workshop, but I knew I had enough happen in my life that it would be interesting. It's not like I had a charmed life and nothing happened. But despite the difficulties, there are silver linings. My son's dysfunctional relationship has meant that I have a close bond with my granddaughter. If it was otherwise, I might just have been a visiting grandmother.

I did enjoy the small group. They were really interesting group of women. I was a bit disconcerted that two women I know socially turned up. There is a risk that if I say something, it will put people off. Neither of these women said much in the workshop. They didn't participate much at all. And so, because I'm sharing all of my experiences in my Body Map - once again my arms come up across my body. I was worried they just listened without sharing themselves. That didn't sit well with me.

They were entitled to say nothing, but I felt vulnerable because I shared everything, and they shared nothing. I felt exposed.

I really loved the Body Mapping exercise, and I really loved seeing how differently people interpreted it. You said we didn't need templates because we were creative, and you were right. It's mind blowing how different people are. It was interesting what people did with them.

I feel better for having done the Body Mapping workshop. It was a marvellous experience. It really was. As a healing thing, it is an amazing activity. Putting things on the page was a way of seeing it and moving on.

I love being a woman



There were three parts to the wallpaper of my Body Map. The images on the left and right were one image that I cut in half and put either side of the central image. The image in the middle is so lovely and safe, there is a grandmother and child. I really love the safety that is there. The child is so at peace in the safety there. The grandmother is also at peace. It reminds me that feeling when I had as a child.

I love children and I didn't have any of my own, so my nieces and nephews were so precious. At Christmas, there could be a whole extended gathering of family and for me the kids were the most fun. Giving them piggyback rides and doing magic tricks with them. But I don't have that in my life now, there is no contact with children.

I have a niece and nephew, and I don't get to see them now because they are grown up and live far away and I really miss contact with them. I love kids so much. So, my Body Map shows the little girl as someone loving, but it also represents what is lost. I am a grandma kind of person. The image of the grandmother and child is so warm and loving. It represents what I yearn for and miss and love.

My mum loved kids and worked with them. My dad loved kids as well, so I think my love of children was influenced by them. When I was growing up, the neighbours' kids were like my mother's grandchildren. She loved them, and they loved her. When mum went into an aged care home, she didn't have contact with children anymore and she really missed that.

Sometimes I have to camouflage myself for my physical and sexual safety. I get threatened and I have experienced violence. It's transphobic.

When I came out as a woman eight years ago and stopped hiding – it changed people's perceptions of me with children. It changed a lot of things.

Sometimes I have to camouflage myself for my physical and sexual safety. I get threatened and I have experienced violence. It's transphobic.

Before I stopped hiding who I am, I used to go to all kinds of kids events. I used to get dressed as a clown and the kids loved it. That's all stopped now. I was a kid's camp leader for 30 years and it was run by a religious organisation, and I got reported for being in a dress at a party. The person that reported me said I shouldn't be around kids.

When I got reported, I was called in to speak with one of the organisation's leaders and I told them I was transgender. He didn't have a go at me ideologically, thankfully. But he said that when other people found out, there would be a campaign against me and people would say, how dare they have someone like me at a camp for children. They said they couldn't have someone like me around kids. They were worried there would be a big kerfuffle. I was so gentle and kind with kids.

I was on the national executive for a Red Tent Women's Group. Their promotional material was inclusive - anyone who identified as a woman was welcome.

When I was elected to the executive, the organisation shared a photograph of me on social media and later I got an email from the president asking me to call her. Their post about my election had gone viral through anti-trans groups around the world. It accelerated so fast and within days, 100,000 or more people had left comments on the post, most of them were really cruel. They had to put volunteers on to manage the response 24 hours a day and so I volunteered. It broke me watching it. It was extreme cruelty. Then the online trolls figured out who I was in the real world, and that got scary. In the religious world there are people who are accepting and others who are vehemently opposed to trans people. I was scared of that for me and the organisation. It became difficult for the organisation, so I left.

So many chances are gone.

When I used to drive somewhere, I would drive for a while and then get changed into a dress, so I wasn't seen by someone I know. Then I started getting changed when I was at home. I told my neighbour I was trans. She was very welcoming. But her mother saw me getting into the car as a woman and told me that she loved and accepted me and delighted in me, 'but not him.' I was never quite sure who she meant - maybe her son or son in law could not accept me? I never asked. She told me 'he' said 'all your dressing up in clowning and as a woman means that I am a sick pervert and I should not be around kids.'

That scared me. I live in a street with lots of kids and I was so scared. It's not safe for me to have contact with children because I'm judged by others. That hurts. That really hurts. Those women in the middle of my Body Map are about love and care, but there is a dark side to it.

In the middle of the Body Map, there is so much peace, safety, love, snuggling. I don't dwell too much on the other.

On the left side of the wallpaper, it is very deathly. The skull reminds me a couple of years ago I did artwork on a big chasm with a cliff on either side. The left side was crumbling, and I was falling. There were so many things happening that were overwhelming and terrifying. I didn't know how long I could hang on for.

On the right-hand side there were trees and birds, and it was really lovely – and I stopped falling.

I told someone in town about the chasm and cliffs. It was someone I was close to, and I told him I was going to go over the cliff if I had any more hits. One of the guys in town had suicided and I didn't want to be like him. I needed a bridge over the chasm. The person I spoke to said he would be there to help me bridge to the other side.

I was in a share house that was abusive. Terrible.

There were so many things happening that were overwhelming and terrifying. I didn't know how long I could hang on for.

I went through homelessness.

The projects I used to do with kids and youth were in the Church that build community and was healing and fun. They have all stopped. Financially it's got tougher and tougher to find rent and pay for food.

That's a very, very scary part of my life and I haven't come off that cliff to the other side yet. Sometimes I am magically on the right side of the chasm, but then I am back on the left. There is a lot of healing and recovery to get me to the right side.

There are so many people cuddling in the image. They are together. It reminds me when I went to a Festival and there was a Cuddle Puddle, and I just loved it. I used to be able to afford workshops where there was lots of cuddles and touch. I'm not in a relationship and I long to be touched. There was touch positivity and sex positivity previously, but it's not around anymore. I am hungry for that.

I'm a sexual being that yearns, and hungers and has always been in relationships. But because of my physical health and circumstances, I don't have capacity to have a relationship. And adding 'Trans' to that makes it even more difficult. If there were a couple of women who were interested in a non-conventional relationship, that could have my needs met. It is part of who I am as a human.

Around the edge of the paper, I put the sparkles. It's lovely that they sparkle in the dark side and form a bridge over to the light side. They represent happiness. I have moments of happiness. The green represents life, there are moments over the last couple of years when I had to choose to live. The red represents the women's groups I used to love to be in. I used to travel four hours each way to get there.

When we shared our stories, the other women were crying when I shared mine. I was also crying. The love and acceptance from that group of women was amazing.

When I first went to the woman's group and I got to the front door, the person at the door said: "Are you lost?" She wasn't sure I belonged. Some of the members were a little puzzled. Then the organiser and gatekeeper introduced me to the rest of the group and told them that I was welcome. When we shared our stories, the other women were crying when I shared mine. I was also crying. The love and acceptance from that group of women was amazing. I go every week, and it takes me eight hours round trip. They see me for who I am.

The gold on the Body Mapping wallpaper is about the money I desperately need to have secure rental and to get healthier. I need to get my teeth done. I have no top teeth.

The little girl looking out is me, and that's where I connect to the Body Mapping paper. I need to have people look me in the eyes. I love heart and soul connection.

She isn't scared. She is feeling the love connection. She is safe and nurtured in all the cuddling and snuggling and tough. She is saying "big me - I love you and I am content and safe". That is wonderful because I have moments of being content and safe, but it is not the norm.

Sometimes I feel like my body is an empty shell and I feel so vulnerable. When I feel my womanly self, I feel strong. The pink feather is my spine. It is the heart of me. It holds me up. Since coming out, I have had many sufferings, not just related to being trans. When I look at the Body Map, the first thing I see is the pink feather, that's my strength.

Being connected to the woman in me is my strength or superpower. It's what makes me come alive. It makes me think of all the people who are against trans. If they could feel what it is like to be the woman I am and what happens to my wellness when I am me – they might understand. If I diminish my wellness, I get anxious and depressed. But if I tap into her, I just shine.

Being connected to the woman in me is my strength or superpower. It's what makes me come alive.

If I am in a place when I have to use all my energy to manage my microaggressions, I don't thrive and shine. But when I am somewhere I am safe, I shine.

There is green in my body because I am choosing life. There are lots of hearts, not just where my heart would be, but there are hearts and love everywhere.

I have a flower in my brain, to reflect the soft thinking brain. I know they are stereotypes, but they represent how I see the world. I love that part about me.

Sometimes if I am in a group of men, they will say they don't understand women; but I do. I understand women who don't understand men and I understand men who don't understand women. That's one of the gifts of being a trans person, who came out later. There are gifts to being transgender. Where people see problems and what is wrong with us, I ask them to see the gifts in us. We can see the world in different ways. We have such beautiful, beautiful souls. If people just see me through an ideology, they miss seeing me.

When I see myself in the mirror, I feel sad. It's not the internal picture of me that I have. My body has let me down. If I could take something to make me a man, I wouldn't take it. I love being a woman. I love being safe and accepted and seen as part of the spectrum of how people share themselves in the world.

I think there are strong messages that someone like me is not legitimate. That this is not real. Our experiences are denied. We are told we are wrong. I am told I am a man in a dress and a sick pervert. I am told I am not real. There is denial of trans women being allowed to consider ourselves women.

I saw an advert for a paint and sip women's group, and I asked the art therapist if I could come. She said it was not appropriate for me to be there, because there will be children there. She suggested I could come to an LGBTIQ event instead, as though I only belong to one group. That really hurt.

As an older woman, there are more places I am not allowed to be in. I know that. Groups tend to be much more gendered. If I could afford to be in a retirement village, would I be embraced as one of the girls? I would want to.

The Body Mapping workshop was an absolutely useful group. I love anything creative and experiential. I have had art therapy and it has been so healing. I thrive and come alive. By getting me to do things, I go deeper inside me. The workshops were valuing of my body and being. My body is so contested. To have my body be valued and to have a safe place to express and to be heard was important. I love to hear other people, to listen to people open up to what is inside. That's real living.

What the Body Maps tell us older women want service providers and frontline workers to know

1) Welcome is not “nice to have” — it is the threshold for disclosure.

Women repeatedly describe arriving at services with their “guard up,” anticipating discrimination, and needing warmth **from the very beginning**—not later, once trust has been “earned.”

The reception experience matters: if the front desk is cold or disrespectful, older women will not return.

Women were explicit that **being personally welcomed** signals safety, including for older trans women, because staff modelling welcome shapes how everyone else behaves.

2) Respect, dignity, and non-judgement are the “clinical intervention.”

Women asked providers to approach older women with care and respect—specifically **not to look down on them**—and to recognise that older women’s reactions are meaningful communication.

They emphasised that kindness in tone and demeanour, “seeing the person first,” and building rapport are what make it possible to speak about what is happening.

3) Older women need you to assume complexity — and let the story be told in full context.

The Body Maps show that women’s narratives may be “meandering” but are purposeful: they are testing whether the listener is safe, whether they are valued, and whether their voice will be respected.

The stories insist on context (what life was like, what shaped them, what they lost, what they survived) rather than being reduced to a “case summary.”

4) Services must actively provide rights information and choices — because many women grew up without either.

Women were direct: “service providers don’t tell us we have rights,” and they linked this to shame, silence, and cultural/religious permission structures that normalise harm.

The takeaway is that rights education is not an add-on; it is enabling infrastructure for disclosure and help-seeking.

5) Silence is learned; invisibility is enforced — and services can either reproduce it or interrupt it.

Women describe being trained into silence (“when you have that pushed on you, you learn to be silent”) and wanting to be invisible because speaking up attracts punishment or misinterpretation.

They also describe the “veil” that makes women only partly visible and call for older women to be **fully visible** if change is to occur.

The implication for frontline practice: do not reward compliance, quietness, or “good presentation” as signs someone is fine.

6) Group connection and peer solidarity are protective factors — isolation amplifies risk.

Women emphasised the power of being with other women (“with one other older woman, good. Two... great. Three, better”), and that collective spaces reduce fear and build confidence. The workshops created the conditions for openness (“no shame of sharing”) and reciprocal trust.

7) The body holds history; healing is not only cognitive — it is embodied and identity-based.

Body Maps repeatedly locate strength, boundary-setting, and voice in the body: women name the need to reconnect with an “inner younger lass” and to feel the power still within them.

They remind us that “the body keeps the score” — carrying both painful memory and “fabulous stuff” that can be brought forward in recovery.

8) Intersectionality is not theoretical — it determines safety.

Women describe barriers linked to migration, shame, and past experiences of corrupt/unsafe authorities, including being disbelieved when speaking out.

Others describe neurodiversity and sensory triggers, and the lifelong harm of needs going unrecognised.

These accounts demand that services design for difference (culture, gender diversity, disability, neurodiversity) rather than expecting women to “fit” the service.



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