

Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins

This story was documented for the #Embolden2023 Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins. A full report on Congress is available at celebrateageing.com/margins

Congress is an initiative of Celebrate Ageing Ltd. Thankyou to our 2023 Congress Principal Partner, Elder Rights Advocacy and our other partners, the Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Older Person's Advocacy Network (OPAN), Australian Association of Gerontology, ADA Australia, The Older Women's Network NSW, QueerSpace Drummond St and Council on the Ageing.

Older women paying the price by Yumi Lee, CEO Older Women's Network NSW

I have the enormous privilege of working for an organisation which is committed to ensuring that older women can age with dignity – this means having safe, accessible, affordable, long-term housing; having access to nutritious food to support healthy ageing; and having access to enough money to pay for life's necessities such as utility and medical bills. Just as important as all this is being able to live in safety, and in the communities of their choosing.

Sadly, based on ABS data, research and backed up by the type of calls we receive from older women seeking help, we know that this is a pipe dream for too many. There are not many options available for older women who want to leave a violent relationship because there is just not enough affordable housing out there for them.

I recall one particularly tragic case of an older woman who turned up in our office with all her earthly belongings stuffed into a carry-on cabin luggage. She wanted help with housing as she was living with her son who was violent. After spending 4 hours on the phone, our staff admitted defeat and she had to return that afternoon to living with that violent son because there was no housing suitable for her. This is what the statistics cannot tell us – the human stories of older women who have been forgotten in the design of policies and the funding of infrastructure.

Unfortunately, it has been so easy to blame these older women for their homelessness. "She married the wrong man", "She made the wrong life choices", "She didn't save up enough money". "She should have just stayed and not left" – these are common refrains from people who don't understand that actually, it is a systems failure that we do not have enough public/social/affordable housing which is to blame for older women becoming homeless.

Older women today are paying the price for decades of gender inequality which have resulted in poor savings, little superannuation and low pension payments. This is why many are falling into poverty and homelessness.

Over the past couple of years, my organisation has been working closely with Dr Catherine Barrett, the founder of Embolden and Celebrate Ageing, on raising awareness and calling for action to end the sexual assault of older women in aged care. Thanks to the Older Persons Advocacy Network, we have all worked together to develop resources for aged care providers to recognise, respond and prevent the sexual assaults in aged care.

When I am invited to speak about the work that OWN is doing, I am often met with surprise and disgust that older women in aged care are being sexually assaulted. Older women using walking frames certainly don't fit the stereotype of a rape victim, which of course makes it so much easier for perpetrators to seek them out. Also, their health conditions may mean that they find it hard to speak up.

There are certain triggers which are guaranteed to make my blood boil and that includes the many times when the justice system fails. It includes the occasion when police concluded that an older woman who reported sexual assault was 'having rape fantasies' and therefore should not be believed.

There is also the occasion when a judge expressed incredulity that an aged care worker would want to sexually assault an aged care resident because "he had a wife at home". Ageism and sexism make powerful bedfellows.

The darkness of the work we do as an organisation is balanced by the incredible energy, wisdom and commitment of the older women I see on a daily basis. Some of them perform in our Theatre Group. They sing, dance and act out the human stories of these statistics of issues I mentioned above in ways which reach the heart like numbers never can.

I take my inspiration from older women like Beverly Baker, the chair of OWN NSW and National President, whose vitality and passion for eradicating (I use that word advisedly where Beverly is concerned!) injustice remain undimmed despite decades of continuous advocacy.

As someone who is just a couple of years short of my magical sixth decade, I recall when I was growing up in Malaysia and Singapore that being an older woman meant being over 50. That is when you get conferred 'Aunty' status and viewed differently - sometimes positively, and sometimes negatively. I would love to live in a world where being an older woman is celebrated and something to aspire to.

I see these amazing older women whose lives have been filled with challenges and pain, and yet, their hope and positive vibes make them such a pleasure to be with. They live their lives with meaning and joy. I want to be them when I am as old as they are.

What is one thing people can do now? Embrace the power you have to bring about change by joining with other like-minded people to act now for all the things you care about – whether it is climate change, injustice, ageism, sexism, etc. We are always stronger together and more powerful together. And if you're an older woman, join us!

Web: www.ownnsw.org.au