



Family Digest 47

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Older Women and Gender Based Violence

“Older women face greater risk of physical and psychological abuse due to discriminatory societal attitudes and the non-realization of the human rights of women. Some harmful traditional and customary practices result in abuse and violence directed at older women, often exacerbated by poverty and lack of access to legal protection.”¹

Late last month the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) welcomed the arrest of six suspects in connection with the killing of mostly older women from Zingqolweni village in the Cacadu area of the Eastern Cape.² The six men accused are linked to the murders of at least 11 older women.³ Many of the victims had been stabbed. These arrests came some months after a chain of deaths had sparked fears of a serial killer. The community has been dubbed ‘The Village of Death’, with 22 older people in the area having been killed between December 2020 and July 2021.⁴ Most of the fatalities are of women living alone or with their grandchildren.

The heinous story of this village reminds us that “gender-based violence exists across the life course and that intervention and prevention efforts must target all age groups, including women who are older”.⁵ Attacks on older persons, the majority of whom are women, are not new in the Eastern Cape. In 2017 Social Development MEC Nancy Sihlwayi explained the superstitions that some held about older women. “When she’s old she loses some complexion, she loses shape and because she has become disfigured there is a belief that she is now a person who kills under the science that is not known by many people [witchcraft].”⁶

The older people of the area are relocating to safer villages in other parts of the province as the number of suspected witchcraft killings have continued to escalate over recent months. However, the Department of Social Development believes that education about Alzheimer’s and dementia among the community could be part of the solution.⁷ The femicides of older women have frequently been attributed to mental illness.⁸

Older women’s fear of victimization and crime as well as “reluctance to reach out to police or other support agencies provide additional layers of complexity. Vulnerabilities such as the increased isolation of older women, and the potential risk posed by partners, family members or caregivers experiencing serious mental health problems, need to be considered and included in education and training for health and social service providers who work with older adults”.⁹ Furthermore, there is a need to understand how older women are impacted by certain norms, harmful traditional practices

and stereotypical gender roles.¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Lusikisiki, a small rural Eastern Cape town, is the rape capital of South Africa.¹¹ Gender-based violence in the Eastern Cape is commonplace. The CGE has been liaising with various stakeholders such as South African Police Services and the Department of Social Development and Community Safety “in order to help bring calm and ensure through the efforts of law enforcement agencies that the perpetrators are brought to book”.¹²

Below please find further information on this topic in these links:

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/eastern-cape-village-elders-flee-from-suspected-witchcraft-murder-hotspot/>

<https://www.enca.com/south-africa/elderly-women-terrorised-in-escape-village-over-witchcraft-claims>

<https://mg.co.za/news/2022-03-28-spectre-of-eldercide-haunts-eastern-cape-village-of-death/>

<https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/e-cape-woman-91-raped-murdered-another-75-attacked-b0b5d469-5902-4603-a2cb-04742e0ca1d3>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-03-23-elderly-woman-found-murdered-in-eastern-cape-village/>

<https://www.enca.com/south-africa/two-elderly-women-murdered-in-eastern-cape>

https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-19/index.html

https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/ageing/vawg_brief_on_older_women.pdf

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¹ https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/ageing/vawg_brief_on_older_women.pdf

² <https://ewn.co.za/2022/03/31/>

³ <https://mg.co.za/news/2022-03-28-spectre-of-eldercide-haunts-eastern-cape-village-of-death/>

⁴ <https://www.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/Local/Komani-Karoo/big-reward-offered-for-info-on-murders-of-elderly-20210926>

⁵ https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-19/index.html

⁶ <https://www.enca.com/south-africa/elderly-women-terrorised-in-escape-village-over-witchcraft-claims>

⁷ <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/eastern-cape-village-elders-flee-from-suspected-witchcraft-murder-hotspot/>

⁸ https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-19/index.html

⁹ https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-19/index.html

¹⁰ https://www.vawlearningnetwork.ca/our-work/issuebased_newsletters/issue-19/index.html

¹¹ <https://www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/2022-03-15-why-is-lusikisiki-the-rape-capital-of-south-africa/>

¹² <https://allafrica.com/stories/202203310300.html>