

Elderly women deserve their age of respect



When some men put 'gender goggles' on, let's hope all men start to open their eyes.

11/12/2014

KATHLEEN BRASHER

Something remarkable is afoot. The Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, Ken Lay, and the Chief of the Australian Army, Lieutenant-General David Morrison, are talking publicly about male attitudes towards women. On the Victoria Police website, Lay suggests that "our culture is filled with men who hold an indecent sense of entitlement towards women".

Lay and Morrison are both middle-aged men in charge of organisations with masculine cultures. They are not your typical feminists. Although many men treat women respectfully, these men go one step further by viewing social issues through "gender goggles". It is a giant step.

Gender goggles are illuminating. They bring into clear focus the fact that a person's gender influences attitudes and behaviours towards them. Gender goggles highlight issues for women such as discrimination, human rights abuses, domestic violence, rape, glass ceilings, inadequate childcare, political under-representation, bullying and financial disadvantage such as unfair pay and unequal super-annuation.

Unlike rose-coloured glasses and beer goggles that provide optimistic

perceptions, gender goggles are not a frivolous fashion accessory. Lay's gender goggles enable him to see that some people perceive women as "less valuable than men". This perception applies to women of all ages, including older women.

When gender goggles are applied to older women, particularly women who have not been the family's breadwinner, they may show the humiliation of financial elder abuse. Studies confirm financial abuse is the most common, and fastest-growing, type of abuse of older women.

Research shows that women over the age of 80 are most at risk of financial elder abuse. This research found that adult sons are the most common perpetrators. Some adult sons assume that money that was once "mum and dad's money" is now their money, even though their mothers are alive and well. They make assumptions that devalue the rights of their mothers.

There have been several high-profile trust fund disputes in which sons have sued their mothers. A former pupil of a private boys' school in Sydney sued his mother after the family estate was left to his mother rather than to him. This "old boy" was castigated by the judge for having a "highly developed and unhealthy sense of entitlement".



According to the Office of the Public Advocate, older women are more likely to be declared legally incapable than older men. This may be due to the fact women live longer than men. It may also suggest that older men are revered while older women are infantilised. This was certainly the case in Julie's family.

Julie is a middle-aged woman with five older brothers. With unseemly haste, a few days after her father's death, a GP was asked to declare Julie's elderly mother legally incapable. That she was bewildered, grieving and in the first weeks of widowhood after 50 years of marriage did not seem to have been taken into account.

After Julie's mother was declared legally incapable, the youngest son was assigned to be her financial power of attorney. Tony's job was to manage his mother's estate in her best interest. Determining what was

in his mother's best interest was contested. Was it in their mother's best interest to keep money in the bank and continue to pay tax? Or should the children receive an early inheritance? Questions such as these divided Julie's siblings.

The eldest son, Christopher, organised frequent financial family planning meetings. Christopher was planning his own retirement and unashamedly cast his eyes towards the Bank of Mum rather than towards his own financial planning. Julie questioned why these meetings were not convened before her father's death, particularly when their father's cognitive status was diminishing. Her question fell on deaf ears.

Tony prepared a financial spreadsheet describing "mum's assets", sharing this spreadsheet among his siblings. Would a financial spreadsheet with "dad's assets" have

been shared in the same way if their mother had died first? Of course not.

Then came the zinger: Julie was told that her mother's monthly expenses were excessive. Julie's sister-in-law explained to her: "Your brothers are worried about their inheritance. What's wrong with that?" Gobsmaacking stuff.

Julie went into full feminist flight to show her brothers, their wives and anyone else who would listen exactly what was wrong. She defended her mother's right to spend her own money. Julie argued that their father would have wanted his wife to have as much lemon squash, cheddar cheese, milk chocolate and shortbread biscuits as she wanted.

Two brothers supported her; the other three bunkered down, ensconced in their men's club with others who shared their views. These brothers refused to engage with Julie. They dismissed her views as offensive, describing her as mad and bad, as powerful men often do.

Julie's gender goggles gave her clarity. On every issue, she asked her brothers a simple question: "Would you have treated our father like this?" But her three older brothers had stopped listening years ago.

Perhaps Julie's brothers will listen to the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police and the chief of the Australian Army talking about men's sense of entitlement. Men with gender goggles may be easier on their ears.

Dr Kathleen Brasher is a manager at COTA Victoria. COTA was formerly the Council of the Ageing.