

DRAFT DOCUMENT

The [un]Silencing of Older Women

This draft document has been developed for the #Embolder2024 event on the [un]Silencing of Older Women. It is intended to generate discussion – and improvements to the document. Please check the following links:

- Confidential feedback through survey monkey here:
- Check the webpage for the final version (released 25th Nov, 2024):
<https://www.embolderfestival.com/embolder2024.html>



The [un]Silencing of Older Women - a Gender Lens for Elder Abuse

October 2024

Catherine Barrett, Anna Gilbard, Debra Nicholl, Geoff Rowe and Yumi Lee.

Policies that are developed without consideration of gender, or which are considered ‘gender-neutral’ or ‘gender-blind’ policies, assume that gender is not a factor in how a particular issue affects people. However, existing inequality as well as gender norms and stereotypes can mean policy changes which may appear gender neutral can have disproportionate or different impacts on people because of their gender.¹

Extract from: Including Gender. An APS Guide to Gender Analysis and Gender Impact Assessment. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024).

Introduction

The abuse of older people is a significant global issue, with abuse experienced by 1 in 6 people aged 60+ who live in the community,² and higher rates in institutions.³ Prevalence rates in Australia are similar, with over half a million older people reporting elder abuse in 2020 alone,⁴ and significant under reporting expected.⁵

In response to the problem of elder abuse, a National Plan⁶ was launched in 2019 by the Council of Attorneys-General. All governments in Australia agreed to develop the Plan, which outlined forms of elder abuse, the problem of ageism and areas for action. Five years later an evaluation of the Plan⁷ called for further work to focus on prevention, the voices of older people with lived experience, the needs of diverse communities and older people with disabilities.

The World Health Organisation notes that ageism is a significant risk factor for elder abuse and the main reason for elder abuse being a low global priority.⁸

For older women, ageism and gender inequalities are bound together to create heightened risk of elder abuse. As ageism increases with age – so to do the gender inequalities older women face.⁹ But to date a gender lens has not been applied to the prevention of elder abuse.

The quote above from the *Including Gender* report outlines the commitment of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to putting gender equality at the heart of policy and decision making.¹⁰ The report also notes that gender analysis provides a foundation for ensuring policy making supports an equitable society. Gender analysis is a critical factor in policy and services responding to elder abuse.

¹ https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment_0.pdf

² <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

³ <https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/article/29/1/58/5033581?guestAccessKey=482da8b7-f9f4-4205-811d-0dd9788cddb1&login=false>

⁴ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁵ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁶ <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/publications/national-plan-respond-abuse-older-australians-elder-abuse-2019-2023>

⁷ https://aifs.gov.au/research_programs/elder-abuse-research/evaluation-national-plan-respond-abuse-older-australians

⁸ <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

⁹ Older Women and a Life Stages Approach to Preventing Violence Against Women and Their Children. forthcoming

¹⁰ https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment_0.pdf

The gendered nature of elder abuse is emphasised by the World Health Organisation,¹¹ in their call for a gender-specific approach to elder abuse,

A gender-specific approach includes recognition of and response to the different specific risks and vulnerabilities of women and of men¹² in relation to abuse of older people and takes into account the interaction of gender with ageism in the context of abuse of older people. The approach includes recognition that gender norms, socialization, roles, differential power relations and differential access to and control over resources contribute to differences in vulnerability and susceptibility to abuse of older people and to how such abuse is experienced, how help is sought and how services are accessed. (p. 10)

Ageing is a gendered experience and the absence of a gender lens to elder abuse contributes to the silencing of older women.¹³ Elder abuse responses must be informed by a gender lens,¹⁴ to broaden the focus from the relationship between the older woman and perpetrator, to systemic inequalities.¹⁵

A gender specific approach also requires an intersectional lens or an understanding of the hierarchies of privilege or disadvantage including age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, socioeconomic status, religion, language, geographical location, disability status, migration status, gender identity and sexual orientation.¹⁶

This document addresses the gap in gender analysis of elder abuse responses. It focuses particularly on gender inequality and older women. This focus recognises the inequalities experienced by older women (see page 6) and further resource development should document a gender lens for older men and trans and gender diverse people.

The document was developed for the #Embolder2024 event on The [un]Silencing of Older Women.¹⁷ Delegates were invited to provide feedback on the draft resource (update this document following feedback).

The resource begins by outlining an approach to gender analysis and exploring the gender inequalities for older women that need to be considered in responding to elder abuse. A framework is then provided for prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing for older women experiencing elder abuse.

How to use this resource

The document outlines an approach to gender analysis for elder abuse responses and applies the lens to the lives of older women. It is hoped groups and services working to prevent elder abuse will utilise the approach to explore the experiences of women, men and trans and gender diverse people in their catchment.

¹¹ <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

¹² A gender lens must acknowledge the unique risks, vulnerabilities and inequalities experienced by older Trans and Gender Diverse people

¹³ <https://assets.ourwatch.org.au/assets/Key-frameworks/Preventing-Intimate-Partner-Violence-Older-Women-AA.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://whe.org.au/why-we-need-to-keep-the-gender-focus-on-elder-abuse/>

¹⁵ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237400086_A_Feminist_Perspective_on_Gender_and_Elder_Abuse_A_Review_of_the_Literature

¹⁶ <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

¹⁷ <https://www.embolderfestival.com/embolder2024.html>

A Gender Lens for Older Women

In the context of elder abuse, a gender lens involves gender analysis for the purposes of understanding the relationships between genders (women, men, trans and gender diverse people), their gender-specific experiences and needs, their relationship to power and their access to resources – to promote equitable and effective elder abuse responses.

A gender lens for older women begins with gender analysis or clarifying the inequalities for older women, collecting and reviewing data, planning to include gender in response to elder abuse and promoting systemic reforms. In the following section a gender analysis tool outlines this process as it applies to older women. Then, the gender inequalities and gendered responses to elder abuse of older women are outlined.

Gender analysis

The following Gender Analysis Tool has been adapted from the European Institute for Gender Equality.¹⁸ It has seven key steps and is utilised here to analyse gender relating to older women and could be adapted for men and Trans and Gender Diverse people – and for a broad range of services.

Step 1: Clarify gender inequalities and intersectionality

- Identify the gendered nature of inequalities experienced by older women to clarify risk factors, vulnerabilities and access to resources
- Check historical and contemporary inequalities
- Identify inequalities experienced by older women from marginalised groups
- Build meaningful connections with marginalised groups and seek feedback on their experiences and resourcing.

Step 2: Collect data

- Develop innovative data collection methods to reach older women who are disempowered and at high risk of elder abuse
- Engage older women to co-lead data collection and responses to the data
- Utilise language older women relate to (ask older women for feedback)
- Ensure data collection methods reach marginalised groups of older women
- Meet with older women to build relationships of trust
- Draw on partnerships with older women and groups/services working with older women to help promote awareness of the importance of the data to shaping service responses and funding
- Consider data collection on older women's knowledge and use of services
- Gather information on intersectional characteristics.

Step 3: Review data

- Analyse data and share in disaggregated format, i.e.: by gender
- Compare differences for older women to data for all genders
- Identify underlying causes of gender differences for older women

¹⁸ https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/mh0319271enn_002.pdf

- Review data with older women and marginalised groups to ask for their reflections on what the data means
- Reflect on low rates of participation by marginalised groups - as a need to build better relationships – rather than equate low rates of reporting with low prevalence
- Publish data summary by gender to help raise awareness of gender inequalities.

Step 4: Develop a plan

- Develop a plan to respond to elder abuse that considers gender differences at the point of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing
- Identify any ageist/sexist assumptions about older women and trauma recovery (particularly sexual assault)
- Consider opportunities to improve older women’s knowledge and use of services
- Consult marginalised groups of older women to help shape the plan.

Step 5: Implement plan

- Work with older women and groups and services for older women to promote gender equality through empowerment (information, opportunities, advocacy, activism)
- Engage key stakeholders across all genders to raise awareness and shift power imbalances.

Step 6: Evaluate plan

- Recheck data to measure improvements, particularly in knowledge and use of services
- Invite older women to provide feedback on activities – what worked and what improvements could be made.

Step 7: Promote systemic change

- Identify opportunities to embed changes promoting gender equality in policy to ensure priority and funding
- Identify opportunities to advocate for gender equality for older women with others.

Gendered inequalities

Older women have experienced a lifetime of inequalities, including limited property rights,¹⁹ a ban on working in the public service after they were married,²⁰ refusal to secure a bank loan without a male guarantor,²¹ or a passport without a husband’s authorisation.²² Marital separation was complicated by these limitations and by laws that required a woman to prove her husband’s behaviour warranted divorce.²³

¹⁹ <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUJIGendLaw/2009/6.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.vwt.org.au/gender-equality-timeline-australia/>

²¹ <https://timeline.awava.org.au/archives/1286#:~:text=Following%20a%20campaign%20from%20women's,without%20requiring%20a%20male%20guarantor>

²² https://web.archive.org/web/20060614171552/http://www.passports.gov.au/Web/passport_history.aspx

²³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-11/history-no-fault-divorce-and-family-law-in-australia/11931556>

Women who separated may not have had access to child support,²⁴ and little or no superannuation.²⁵

Additionally, 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 were immune from rape prosecution.²⁶ A cultural tone was set and women who challenged this dynamic were labelled vindictive.²⁷ Marital rape immunity laws still exist in many countries,²⁸ but were reformed in the 1980s in Australia.²⁹ The legacies of these laws continue to shape perceptions of sexual consent, sexual rights and responsibility - particularly for older women.³⁰

As older women age, they face new inequalities - related to a particularly caustic form of ageism, entangled with sexism and misogyny. Research for #TheBiscuitTin project³¹ explored representations of older women in popular culture and found three key themes, presenting older women as:

- **Grannies:** fussy, irritating, evil villains³²
- **Cougars:** mocking older women's bodies and sexuality
- **Greedy old bags:** disagreeable, unpleasant, bad tempered, selfish women.

The ageism experienced by older women is so deeply embedded as a cultural norm that it is often overlooked, or assumed to be harmless. On the contrary, ageist/sexist attitudes towards older women are disempowering and exacerbate gender inequalities.

Ageism is as a root cause of marginalisation and is exacerbated by other forms of oppression (racism, ableism, sexism, metrocentricity, classism and queerphobia), that are not recognised due to the ageist myth that older people are a homogenous group.³³

Ageism is also a barrier to the inclusion of older women in policies, strategies, research and services responding to elder abuse. Inequalities for older women include:

- Older women are the lowest income earning family group³⁴
- 34% of single older women live in poverty³⁵
- 60% of older women leave paid work with no super,³⁶ and women with super have 28% less than men³⁷
- 60% of older women rely entirely on old age pension³⁸

²⁴ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/history-of-the-child-support-scheme>

²⁵ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Women%27s%20economic%20security%20in%20retirement.pdf>

²⁶ https://law.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1699006/37_3_7.pdf

²⁷ <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/marital-rape/>

²⁸ <https://academic.oup.com/book/26404/chapter-abstract/194774379?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

²⁹ <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/family-violence-a-national-legal-response-alrc-report-114/24-sexual-assault-and-family-violence-2/history-of-activism-and-legal-change/>

³⁰ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/rights.html>

³¹ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/biscuittin.html>

³² <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

³³ https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979_copvm_report_onl.pdf

³⁴ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf

³⁵ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf

³⁶ <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

³⁷ <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/au/pdf/2021/addressing-gender-superannuation-gap.pdf>

³⁸ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/Economic_security_for_women_in_retirement/Report/c09

- 40% increase in homelessness for older women³⁹
- Older women are more likely to experience workplace discrimination⁴⁰
- 758,000 older people are unpaid carers - 67% of them are women,⁴¹ who are twice as likely to report low wellbeing than the broader community⁴²
- Older women are more likely to be victims of sexual assault.⁴³

Older women are also more likely to experience elder abuse – although the extent of this difference is unclear. A recent survey of older people identified a slightly higher prevalence for older women (14%) than men (13%),⁴⁴ but call centre data shows more significant differences, 67-72% are older women.^{45,46,47,48}

Some forms of elder abuse are more prevalent for older women,⁴⁹ and social and gender norms strongly influence older women's responses to and experiences of elder abuse.⁵⁰ These norms may influence older women's decisions to stay in relationships to provide care for an abusive spouse, and reinforce shame and social isolation.⁵¹ Social expectations can also influence the reluctance of older women to report adult children or grandchildren who are perpetrators of elder abuse.⁵²

For effective prevention of elder abuse, the social context and inequalities for older women must be considered. The focus on the relationship between older women and their perpetrators must be broadened to include the underlying causes and the inequalities to be addressed through systemic reforms.⁵³

Marginalisation and intersectionality

There is a misconception that older women are not diverse. However, older women who are marginalised include those who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, LGBTIQ+, migrants or refugees, older women living with dementia or disability, living a family member who has alcohol or substance abuse, older women who are isolated, unemployed, carers or experiencing financial hardship, older women who are homeless or living in co-housing, institutional care or rural and remote locations.

The evidence relating these layers of intersectionality for older women are summarised in *Older Women and a Life Stages Approach to Preventing Violence Against Women and their Children*.⁵⁴

Prevention and responses

The following section outlines considerations for a gendered response to the elder abuse of older women. It draws on the responses framework outlined in *The National*

³⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/older-clients>

⁴⁰ <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/safety-and-security-older-women>

⁴¹ https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/English_DSS-Discussion-Paper-signed.pdf

⁴² <https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2023-CWS-Report.pdf>

⁴³ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/prevalence.html>

⁴⁴ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EAPU-Year-in-Review-2023.pdf>

⁴⁶ https://media.accessiblecms.com.au/uploads/seniors-rights-service/2020/08/Summary-Report_Profile-of-Elder-Abuse-in-Victoria_Final.pdf

⁴⁷ <https://www.nari.net.au/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=1d415420-bc6f-465e-bf66-d41a80e37835>

⁴⁸ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/fm98-rkrchr_0.pdf

⁴⁹ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁵⁰ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7514024/>

⁵¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7514024/>

⁵² <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/EAPU-Year-in-Review-2023.pdf>

⁵³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237400086_A_Feminist_Perspective_on_Gender_and_Elder_Abuse_A_Review_of_the_Literature

⁵⁴ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/embolden2024.html>

Plan to End Violence Against Women and Their Children,⁵⁵ or four priority or focus areas of prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing.

Prevention

Prevention is about stopping the abuse older women experience, before it starts. It requires changing the social conditions that give rise to the abuse and reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote abuse. It also requires a whole of society approach to influencing laws, policies and the practices and behaviours of organisations, groups and individuals. It acknowledges the importance of challenging the ageist views that condone disrespect and abuse against older women. Considerations include the following:

- Acknowledging the unique and caustic form of ageism experienced by older women at the intersection of ageism and sexism
- Acknowledging the historical inequalities for older women and the contemporary legacies
- Implementing strategies to combat the ageism experienced by older women
- Empowering older women through social connection and information
- Creating safe and supported spaces for older women to talk about their experiences and needs
- Joining or supporting the #OlderWomenCount program,⁵⁶ currently the only national program aimed at changing attitudes, norms and behaviours towards older women.

Early intervention

Early intervention (also known as secondary prevention) aims to support older women who are at high risk of abuse, stop the abuse from escalating, protect the older women from harm and prevent the abuse from reoccurring. Considerations include the following:

- Understanding victim/survivors of sexual abuse are some of the least likely to seek help⁵⁷ and need to be given opportunities to disclose
- Older women may fear the consequences of disclosure, including retaliation, abandonment, institutionalisation, ostracization⁵⁸
- Older women may be reluctant to disclose due to shame and embarrassment, self-blame and low self-esteem⁵⁹
- Fear of authority may be a barrier to reporting for marginalized groups of older women
- Collaboration between family violence, sexual assault, women's health, older persons and elder abuse services may lead to improved outcomes for older women
- Start by believing older women who disclose violence or abuse, particularly older women living with dementia. Some older women may not be able to communicate their experiences in narratives that have beginning, middle, end because of their distress, shame and/or dementia

⁵⁵ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>

⁵⁶ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/olderwomenscount.html>

⁵⁷ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁵⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334391483_Help-Seeking_Behavior_in_Victims_of_Elder_Abuse_A_Systematic_Review

⁵⁹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524838019860616>

Response

A comprehensive and person-centred approach is essential for holding perpetrators to account, helping to keep older women safe and reducing the reoccurrence of abuse. Responses to address existing abuse (also known as tertiary prevention) can include crisis counselling, financial services, housing or medical assistance, police and justice responses (e.g.: family law services). These services can help to prevent the reoccurrence of abuse by holding perpetrators to account and supporting older women. Considerations include the following:

- Safety planning templates for older women can be developed in consultation with a broad range of response services and localised to meet the unique needs of individual older women
- Education is required for police and the justice system to understand the experiences and needs of older women
- Independent third person initiatives⁶⁰ must be offered to older women

Recovery and healing

Older women who are victim/survivors of abuse experience a range of physical impacts as well as trauma-related mental health issues, financial hardship and social isolation. Recovery is an essential component of the holistic approach that is often missing. It recognises that older women need additional supports to recover and heal.

Recovery can help to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and support older women to recover from the financial, social, psychological, emotional and physical impacts of abuse. It must be acknowledged the older women recover and heal in different ways and that some older women may have few options other than to continue living with the perpetrator. This may require whole of family support to recover. Considerations include the following:

- Older women constitute a very small proportion of women accessing family violence and sexual assault services
- Few sexual assault victim/survivors in residential aged care are given information on sexual assault service,⁶¹ this is unsurprising given one study showed in 58% of incidents staff reported there was no harm to the victim/survivor⁶²
- Victims/survivors with dementia experience trauma; the suggestion that victims/survivors ‘won’t be distressed or won’t remember’ is not an acceptable justification for sexual assault, nor for inaction to prevent sexual assault. Sexual assault is no less serious because the victim/survivor has dementia⁶³
- Education should be given to service providers to better understand the importance of sexual assault and family violence services to the healing and recovery of older women.

⁶⁰ <https://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/opa-volunteers/independent-third-persons>

⁶¹ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_SexualAssaultServices.pdf

⁶² <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/prevalence-study-for-a-serious-incident-response-scheme-sirs?language=en>

⁶³ *ibid*