

DRAFT DOCUMENT

The [un]Silencing of Older Women



This draft document has been developed for the #Embalden2024 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.embaldenfestival.com/embalden2024.html>

The [un]Silencing of Older Women. A Life Stages
Approach for the National Plan to End Violence Against
Women and their Children

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Forewords TBC

Background

Violence against women is in epidemic proportions in Australia. One in three women have experienced physical violence, one in five have experienced sexual violence (since the age of 15), and a woman is killed by an intimate partner every 10 days. Data also shows that for women, family violence is a significant risk factor for disease, the leading driver of homelessness and the most prevalent type of homicide. The estimated economic cost is \$26 billion a year.

The prevalence of violence against women is also apparent in a New South Wales study which found that nearly 1 in 10 men have faced legal action for domestic and family violence¹.

Violence against women occurs across the lifespan. Old age is not a protective factor against family violence, rather older women may continue to experience family violence across their life span – and encounter new risk factors and perpetrators in their old age.

Global data shows 23% of women aged 60 years+ have experienced physical or intimate partner violence.² Elder abuse is mostly perpetrated by family members and victim/survivors are more likely to be women,³ with 68 million older women (or 1 in 6), experiencing elder abuse world-wide.⁴

Violence against older women is referred to throughout this document as DFSV, or Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence. The acronym is used through the Rapid Review report⁵ and sexual violence included to reflect the serious nature of this form of family violence.⁶ This acronym is powerful in the context of working with older women – given the silencing around their sexual assault.

Older women living in residential aged care may be sexually assaulted by family members visiting the institution, or while they are on a home visit⁷ or by other residents, staff and intruders.

The processes for reporting sexual assault in residential aged care were introduced in 2004, when the Department of Health launched a scheme for the compulsory reporting of incidents, including sexual assault⁸. There were 'limited circumstances' for reporting, which meant that sexual assault was not reported if the perpetrator was cognitively impaired.

A critique of the compulsory reporting approach was that data was collected, but it was not clear that it was being utilised to inform strategies for prevention. This gap and the limited circumstances approach have arguably contributed to the

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/sep/17/nearly-one-in-10-nsw-men-have-faced-legal-action-for-domestic-and-family-violence-study-finds>

² <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/376338/9789240090996-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

³ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/22-01_prevalence-of-elder-abuse.pdf

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29333977/>

⁵ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/womens-safety/rapid-review-prevention-approaches>

⁶ <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/national-risk-assessment-principles-for-domestic-and-family-violence/read-quick-reference-guide/>

⁷ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_MAPGuidelines.pdf

⁸ <https://www.gen-agedcaredata.gov.au/Resources/Reports-and-publications/2020/September/Report-on-the-operation-of-the-Aged-Care-Act>

conceptualising the sexual assault of older women as a lesser crime – or no crime at all. For example, recent research identified that in 58% of sexual assaults, staff in residential aged care reported there were no negative impacts on the resident⁹. This is a myth.

The Royal Commission into Quality and Safety in Aged Care¹⁰ estimated there are 50 sexual assaults in residential aged care each week and called this a disgrace and source of national shame.

The pace of reform escalated following The Aged Care Royal Commission. A Serious Incident Response Scheme (SIRS)¹¹ was launched in residential aged care in 2021, requiring that all sexual assaults are reported. To accompany the introduction of SIRS, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission (ACQSC) released a fact sheet on sexual assault.¹² A further significant reform occurred in 2021 with the funding of the #ReadyToListen project to prevent sexual assault in residential aged care.

Sexual assault of older women also occurs in their own homes, retirement villages and wherever older women live. One factor contributing to sexual assault is marital rape immunity laws. 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.¹³ A cultural tone was set and women who challenged this dynamic were labelled vindictive.¹⁴

Marital rape immunity laws still exist in many countries,¹⁵ but were reformed in the 1980s in Australia.¹⁶ The legacies of these laws continue to shape perceptions of sexual consent, sexual rights and responsibility - particularly for older women.¹⁷

The myths that old age is protective factor against sexual assault, that sexual assault is less harmful to older women and that talking about sexual assault only makes it worse – are barriers to disclosure, prevention and recovery for older women.¹⁸

The failure of all sectors to adequately confront the problem of the sexual assault of older women has enabled this form of family violence to continue largely without prevention strategies – thereby contributing to the silencing of older women.

The problem of violence against older women is escalating, in 2024 the Australian Prime Minister labelled the rise of homicides of women and children a national crisis.¹⁹ The rise in homicides includes older women. In 2023 there were 28 older women (aged 55 plus) who were victims of family and domestic violence homicides and related offences, compared with 14 a decade earlier.²⁰

⁹ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/prevalence-study-for-a-serious-incident-response-scheme-sirs>

¹⁰ <https://www.royalcommission.gov.au/aged-care>

¹¹ <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/consumers/serious-incident-response-scheme#compulsory%20reporting>

¹² <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/sirs-unlawful-sexual-contact-or-inappropriate-sexual-conduct-fact-sheet-june-2021.pdf>

¹³ https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1699006/37_3_7.pdf

¹⁴ <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/marital-rape/>

¹⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/book/26404/chapter-abstract/194774379?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

¹⁶ <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/>

¹⁷ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/rights.html>

¹⁸ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_MAPGuidelines.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/no-more-national-rally-against-gender-based-violence-march>

²⁰ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/recorded-crime-victims/latest-release#data-downloads>

The Australian Government's commitment to ending gender based violence includes a National Plan to coordinate efforts across all levels of government. The 2022-2032 National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children²¹ explicitly references older women - for the first time. The Plan takes a life stages approach, recognising that women have different needs at different points in their lives. It also notes violence experienced by older women occurs in non-family or domestic settings as well as violence in institutions.

The Federal Government's Rapid Review of Evidence Based Approaches to prevent gender based violence²² calls for communities that experience marginalisation to be prioritised. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and women who are refugee, migrant; living with disabilities; LGBTIQ+, older, and living regional /remote.

This inclusion is to be applauded. There now remains an opportunity to clarify what a life stages approach means and how older women will be included. There is also a need to understand the silencing of older women as context for a life stages approach.

The silencing of older women

Many people know something of the history of gender inequality in Australia, and the important efforts to promote equality for women. However, the appreciation of history rarely extends to an understanding of the impacts of gender inequality on the lives of older women who have lived most of their lives without rights, redress or support. These inequalities were highlighted in interviews for the Older Women's Map, developed for the #ReadyToListen project. Older women interviewed for the Map reflected on the sexual rights of older women:

I reckon there are a lot of older women who have internalised that they don't have sexual rights and think that this is just the way it is. If someone has lived most of their life with marital rape, it goes in your head that this is how it is and even though the law has changed it would take something big to make that mind-set go away in the men and in the women as well.²³ (Patricia)

We are conditioned to be compliant with our social and cultural expectations. So, it's up to me as a woman to make my marriage work in spite of the fact that I might be married to an absolute dickhead. Men never get the blame for breaking up a marriage. He can have the affair, but it's the wife's fault he has an affair. Maybe she wasn't giving him enough sex. Maybe she should have had a son. Maybe she should have cooked better. If you'd have been a good girl ... No matter how consciously or cognitively you push it back ... it pops up in those dark moments. ... I felt like a piece of meat.²⁴ (Kirin)

We need to understand the lived experience of gender inequality for older women as context for contemporary policy, strategies and services to prevent and respond to

²¹ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>

²² <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>

²³ The Cost, by Patricia. Older Women's MAP, forthcoming

²⁴ The Phoenix, by Kirin. Older Women's MAP forthcoming

violence against older women – and how ageism exacerbates the inequalities. We must ask:

- How do we combat ageism as a barrier to gender equality in communities, groups, families, services and policy?
- How do we empower older women?
- How do we let older women know that they have the right to be free from family violence?
- How do we let older women know there are services to assist them?
- How do we ensure services are ready to support older women experiencing family violence?
- How do we let older men know cultural expectations and laws on sexual consent have changed?
- How do we promote cultural norms of respect for older women in families?
- How do we hold perpetrators to account?
- How do ensure all levels of government include older women in their funding and service delivery to reflect priority group status?

The answers to these questions form the foundation of this resource, documenting a life stages approach to preventing violence against older women.

This document has been developed to help end the silencing of older women who are at risk of or are experiencing family violence. It was developed for the Embolden2024 National Event on The [un]Silencing of Older Women.²⁵

The document will be presented at Embolden in October 2024 and delegates will be invited to provide feedback to improve the document. The final version will be launched on November 25th, 2024 to mark the start of 16 Days of Activism to End Violence Against Women and their Children.

How to use this resource

This resource brings a life stages focus on older women to the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children. It links the experiences and needs of older women to key components of the Plan, including the focus areas for action, the theory of change, the outcomes framework and the first action plan. It begins by exploring risk factors and priority groups of older women. Approaches to change are then explored before outlining the focus areas for action, the importance of measuring outcomes for older women and links to further resources.

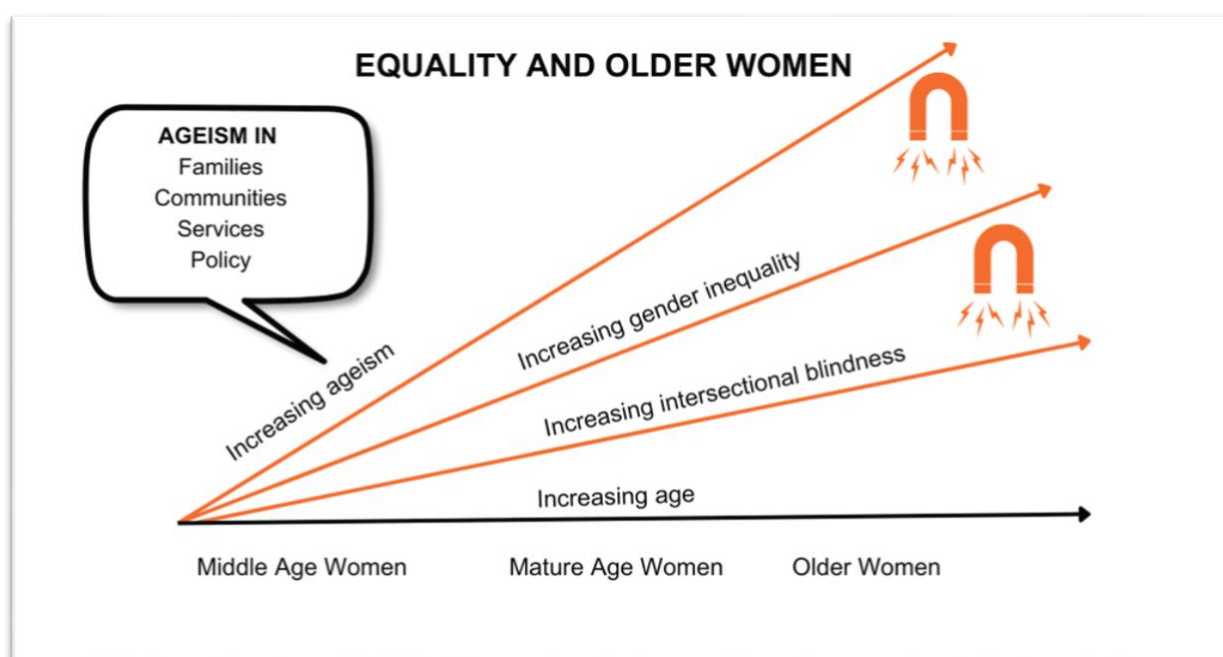
²⁵ <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/embolden2024.html>

Risk factors

Older women face a series of unique risk factors, some specific to old age, and others evolving with age. In this section we explore those factors and outline the evidence related to priority groups – to influence primary prevention, early intervention, responses, healing and recovery for older women.

We begin by exploring the impacts of ageism and a lifetime of gender inequality, and how these two factors intersect. As shown in Figure 1, we propose that as ageism increases, so do gender inequalities for older women and a failure to take intersectional characteristics into account. We also explore differences in victim-perpetrator relationships as women age and other at risk groups and issues.

Figure 1: The relationship between ageism and gender equality



Ageism

Ageism has devastating impacts on older people - and the health care system, the workplace, the economy and our culture. Global research shows 1 in 2 people are ageist²⁶ and ageism accounts for \$1 in every \$7 spent on health care in USA alone.²⁷ Ageism is a significant risk factor for elder abuse and the main reason for elder abuse being a low global priority.²⁸ Ageism is a deeply embedded, frequently unseen, often underestimated and a generally recalcitrant form of prejudice and discrimination.

²⁶ <https://www.who.int/health-topics/ageism>

²⁷ <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/60/1/174/5166947>

²⁸ <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

Older women experience a particularly caustic form of ageism – entangled with sexism and misogyny. Research for #TheBiscuitTin project²⁹ explored representations of older women in popular culture and found three key themes, with older women commonly represented as:

- **Grannies:** fussy, irritating, evil villains³⁰
- **Cougars:** mocking older women's bodies, sexual predators of younger men
- **Greedy old bags:** disagreeable, unpleasant, bad tempered, selfish.

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 disempower older women experiencing family violence and exacerbate gender inequalities.

Ageism has been identified as a root cause of marginalisation and is exacerbated by other forms of oppression that are not recognised due to the ageist myth that older people are a homogenous group. This includes racism, ableism, sexism, metrocentricity, classism and queerphobia.³¹

Ageism is also a barrier to the inclusion of older women in policies, strategies, research and services related to prevention, intervention, responses and recovery from family violence.

A lifetime of gender inequality

Too often, older women who experience violence are silenced. The silencing is rooted in a life time of inequalities for older women, including limited property rights,³² a ban on working in the public service after they were married,³³ inability to secure a bank loan without a male guarantor,³⁴ or a passport without a husband's authorisation.³⁵ Marital separation was complicated these limitations on women and by laws that required a woman to prove that her husband's behaviour warranted divorce.³⁶ Women who separated may not have had access to child support,³⁷ and had little or no superannuation.³⁸ But perhaps the most telling inequality relates to marital rape immunity laws.³⁹

The experience of living through these inequalities has eroded the confidence of many older women and shaped their sense of entitlement. This may result in older women holding themselves responsible to make abusive relationships work.

The corrosive impacts of a living a lifetime of gender inequality have been exacerbated by the ageist omission of older women from family violence policy, strategy, research, activism, advocacy, service provision and funding.

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

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

³¹ https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979_copvm_report_onl.pdf

³² <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUJlGendLaw/2009/6.pdf>

³³ <https://www.vwt.org.au/gender-equality-timeline-australia/>

³⁴ <https://timeline.awava.org.au/archives/1286#:~:text=Following%20a%20campaign%20from%20women's,without%20requiring%20a%20male%20guarantor>

³⁵ https://web.archive.org/web/20060614171552/http://www.passports.gov.au/Web/passport_history.aspx

³⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-11/history-no-fault-divorce-and-family-law-in-australia/11931556>

³⁷ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/history-of-the-child-support-scheme>

³⁸ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Women%27s%20economic%20security%20in%20retirement.pdf>

³⁹ https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1699006/37_3_7.pdf

Older women are less likely to be believed if they report sexual assault⁴⁰ 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.^{41,42} Barriers such as the lack of information, support, and finances can increase vulnerability and reduce the likelihood of disclosure⁴³ and legal justice.⁴⁴

Much of the gender equality we have today can be credited to feminists who are now older women. These older women may now find their right to gender equality once again diminished, this time due to their age.

Victim-perpetrator relationships

As women age the demographic of perpetrators of violence and abuse against them broadens. For example, 1 in 4 four Australian women experience violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.⁴⁵ In contrast elder abuse research shows perpetrators are predominately adult children, partners of adult children and grandchildren.^{46,47}

Perpetration by adult children and grandchildren raises unique barriers to prevention, early responses and support. Older women may put aside their own needs to protect the adult child they love – or be motivated to protect the adult child to ensure the wellbeing of their grandchildren.⁴⁸

At risk groups and issues

Fifteen at risk groups of older women have been identified. The following section presents evidence of risk and the challenges older women face.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

Family violence against First Nation's people must be understood as a cause and effect of the social disadvantage and trauma of colonisation.⁴⁹ The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (2018–19) showed 67% of First Nations people aged 15 and over who had experienced physical harm in the 12 months before the survey reported the perpetrator was a family member.⁵⁰

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50+ make up 2% of the population, 17% of hospitalisations for non-fatal assault, 11% victims of family and domestic violence assault and 5% of victims of homicide. Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women caring for family and may be unwilling to access services due to the history of institutional violence, child removal and dispossession.⁵¹

⁴⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/advance-article/doi/10.1093/geront/gnab144/6381181>

⁴¹ https://cnpea.ca/images/eldersexualassault_revised_literature_review_final_submitted_august_23_2018.pdf

⁴² <https://repository.law.umich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1222&context=mjgl>

⁴³ <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315641751-8/sexual-assault-older-women-bianca-fileborn-catherine-barrett-karen-roberto>

⁴⁴ https://www.ngocooa-ny.org/recent-documents-of-interest/a_76_157_ie-report-on-older.pdf

⁴⁵ <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/report-rapid-review-prevention-approaches-end-gender-based-violence>

⁴⁶ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%932022.pdf>

⁴⁷ <https://ageingdisabilitycommission.nsw.gov.au/documents/tools-and-resources-for-community/dashboard-data/ADC-data-2021-2022.pdf>

⁴⁸ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%932022.pdf>

⁴⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people#assault>

⁵⁰ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people#assault>

⁵¹ <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/resource/preventing-intimate-partner-violence-against-older-women/>

LGBTIQ+

There are higher rates of family violence in LGBTIQ+ communities, with one survey finding 60% had experienced violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.⁵² Transgender people experience four times the rate of sexual assault than the general community⁵³ and may have difficulty accessing response services due to transphobia.

Older LGBTIQ+ people experience family violence in unique ways, including restrictions to queerness,⁵⁴ and may be unwilling to report sexual assault to services they fear are Queerphobic.⁵⁵ Trans and gender diverse people may be particularly vulnerable due to their visibility.⁵⁶

Migrant and refugee women

Older women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience vulnerability to family and sexual violence due to temporary and dependent visa status, language barriers, and/or lack of community support and networks; these factors are also a barrier to seeking help.⁵⁷ Access to services, entitlements and financial means is critical for migrant and refugee women who may be isolated in their communities with little support and fear of system intervention.⁵⁸

For older women, culture has an impact on the way elder abuse is perceived, and issues include isolation, language barriers,⁵⁹ visa restrictions⁶⁰ and adult children bringing parents from overseas in return for childcare and financial support.⁶¹ Older women may experience barriers to services due to language barriers or may originate from countries where marital rape immunity still exists.⁶²

Carers

There are 758,000 older people who are unpaid carers - 67% of them are women,⁶³ who are twice as likely to report low wellbeing than the broader community.⁶⁴ Older women caring for a partner living with dementia may be a risk of sexual and other violence,⁶⁵ from a partner who has brain changes that can result in sexual disinhibition,⁶⁶ hypersexuality⁶⁷ and lost ability to negotiate sexual consent.⁶⁸ Barriers to seeking support for this type of family violence include spousal loyalty and a misconception that little can be done to stop the sexual violence.⁶⁹

Older women may also be vulnerable to violence and abuse from a person they are dependent upon for care. Factors associated with family abuse include dependence

⁵² https://www.latrobe.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1185885/Private-Lives-3.pdf

⁵³ https://www.kirby.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/ATGD-Sexual-Health-Survey-Report_2018.pdf

⁵⁴ <https://www.aag.asn.au/common/Uploaded%20files/AAG/2022/Archive/LGBTI%20Files/Disrespecting-LGBTI-identity-summary-report.pdf>

⁵⁵ <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/sexual-violence-and-gay-lesbian-bisexual-trans-intersex-and-queer#footnote-001>

⁵⁶ <https://alicesgarage.net/wp-content/uploads/The-Kinfolk-Report.pdf>

⁵⁷ [https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/cald#:~:text=Almost%20%20in%20%20\(24,2021\).](https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/population-groups/cald#:~:text=Almost%20%20in%20%20(24,2021).)

⁵⁸ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>

⁵⁹ <https://www.advocare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Elder-Abuse-in-Culturally-and-Linguistically-Diverse-Communities-Developing-best-practice-updatedlogo.pdf>

⁶⁰ [ibid](#)

⁶¹ <https://cotavic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Older-Victorians-from-migrant-and-refugee-backgrounds.pdf>

⁶² <https://academic.oup.com/book/26404/chapter-abstract/194774379?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

⁶³ https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/English_DSS-Discussion-Paper-signed.pdf

⁶⁴ <https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2023-CWS-Report.pdf>

⁶⁵ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_DementiaMAP.pdf

⁶⁶ <https://baycrest.echoontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/7-Resource.pdf>

⁶⁷ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/advances-in-psychiatric-treatment/article/hypersexuality-in-dementia/E2CFB1E9F2791BBCAE15F9580388BD19>

⁶⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3596201/>

⁶⁹ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_DementiaMAP.pdf

of the perpetrator on the victim and resentment of the older person and the caregiving role and lack of empathy and understanding toward the older person.⁷⁰

Older women may also be at heightened risk when the provision of care is financially motivated and perpetrators are struggling to meet their care needs – and while carer stress is not a primary cause of elder abuse, it can increase risk.⁷¹

Alcohol and other drugs

Alcohol and other drug use is a factor in violence against women and their children,⁷² with 60% of males who killed a female intimate partner engaged in problematic drug and/or alcohol use in the lead-up to, or at the time of, the homicide.⁷³ Elder abuse data also shows a correlation between sexual assault and alcohol use.⁷⁴

Older people who drink alcohol are more likely to be male and more likely than younger people to drink daily and exceed guidelines for alcohol consumption – with the proportion of older people doing so increasing with age.⁷⁵ Data from one elder abuse call centre found 14% of perpetrators had substance misuse issues.⁷⁶

Co-housing

Housing dependence involving an adult child, and an older person is strongly associated with elder abuse.⁷⁷ The proportion of cases in which victims and perpetrators cohabit has increased by 74.2% over the past four years.⁷⁸

These perpetrators are reported to have a range of issues including mental health problems (almost one third) and financial problems (nearly one in five). The most common problems associated with financial abuse were financial problems experienced by the perpetrator. Mental health issues were the most commonly reported problems for physical and psychological abuse.

Dementia

There are over 400,000 people living with dementia in Australia – 257,000+ are women.⁷⁹ People living with dementia experience social prejudice that can leave them feeling isolated and stigmatised.⁸⁰ Too often, people living with dementia are viewed as less than human and there is a general failure to promote their human rights.⁸¹

Women living with dementia are vulnerable to family violence at home and in institutions.⁸² Older women living with dementia are less likely to have their sexual assault cases substantiated than older women without dementia.⁸³ Failure to

⁷⁰ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁷¹ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%9322.pdf>

⁷² <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032>

⁷³ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>

⁷⁴ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁷⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/priority-populations/older-people#alcohol>

⁷⁶ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%9322.pdf>

⁷⁷ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁷⁸ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%9322.pdf>

⁷⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/dementia/dementia-in-aus/contents/population-health-impacts-of-dementia/prevalence-of-dementia>

⁸⁰ <https://www.dementia.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/Dementia-Social-Stigma-Report-2017.pdf>

⁸¹ Kate Swaffer on Dementia and Human Rights at: https://media.accessiblecms.com.au/uploads/opan/2022/06/RTL_9DementiaMAPfinal.pdf

⁸² https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_DementiaMAP.pdf

⁸³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5028134/>

address the obstacles to justice for people living with dementia may be driven by the myth that sexual assault of people living with dementia is not harmful.⁸⁴

Disability

Women with disability are twice as likely to report sexual violence over their lifetime than women without disability.⁸⁵ Higher rates of disability are associated with increasing age and older people with a disability are twice as likely to experience elder abuse and three times more likely to experience neglect, predominately by adult children or intimate partner.⁸⁶

Data from an elder abuse call centre identified victims were dependent on a perpetrator of abuse in 37% of cases; and perpetrators were dependent on victims in 23% of cases.⁸⁷

Unemployment

Financial dependence can trap women in abusive relationships.⁸⁸ This risk factor can be increased for older women who experience financial hardship and are more likely to experience workplace discrimination⁸⁹ and to be excluded from the workplace as they age.⁹⁰

Financial hardship

Low socio-economic status is associated with a greater risk of elder abuse overall, and especially financial, sexual and psychological abuse.⁹¹ Older women are the lowest income earning family group, with 34% of single older women live in poverty,⁹² and 60% of older women relying entirely on old age pension.⁹³ Sixty percent of older women leave paid work with no super,⁹⁴ women with super have 28% less than men.⁹⁵

Homelessness

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women,⁹⁶ and homelessness for older women grew almost 40% between 2011-2021.⁹⁷ There are currently over 400,000 older women at risk of homelessness – making them the fastest growing cohort of homeless.⁹⁸ Owning a home with debt or being in rented accommodation (including public housing) are associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing psychological abuse and neglect.⁹⁹ The fear of homelessness may trap older women in abusive relationships.

Institutional care

Older women living in residential aged care homes are vulnerable to family violence during visits by family members or during visits home. While resources and

⁸⁴ <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/216550.pdf>

⁸⁵ <https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/research-groups/centre-for-health-policy/disability-and-health-unit/the-nature-and-extent-of-disability-violence-in-australia>

⁸⁶ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁸⁷ <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-Queensland-Year-in-Review-2021%E2%80%9322.pdf>

⁸⁸ <https://theconversation.com/our-research-shows-a-strong-link-between-unemployment-and-domestic-violence-what-does-this-mean-for-income-support-228409>

⁸⁹ <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/safety-and-security-older-women>

⁹⁰ <https://mckellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Women-in-work-A-story-of-exclusion.pdf>

⁹¹ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

⁹² https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf

⁹³ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/Economic_security_for_women_in_retirement/Report/c09

⁹⁴ <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

⁹⁵ <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

⁹⁶ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>

⁹⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/older-clients>

⁹⁸ <https://www.older tenants.org.au/resource-themes/older-women>

⁹⁹ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

education have recently been implemented to respond to the 40-50 sexual assaults reported in residential aged care each week,¹⁰⁰ there is still a significant lack of information on prevention and responses to family violence.

Home care providers have a pivotal role to play in the provision of information and support for older women experiencing family violence and sexual assault at home.¹⁰¹ However, building capacity of service providers in this regard has not yet taken place.

Incarcerated women

From Day 1 of Embolden it was apparent we need to consider the voices of incarcerated older women who experience family violence. We need more time to review the evidence.

Isolation

Users of violence may prey on points of diversity to further abuse – this includes isolation of First Nation's Women, and women from migrant and rural communities.¹⁰² One in five older Australians are socially isolated,¹⁰³ with contributing factors including family conflict, financial stress, disability, insecure housing, low self-esteem and caring responsibilities.¹⁰⁴ Older women who are separated or divorced being more likely to experience elder abuse.¹⁰⁵

Rural and Remote locations

There are higher rates of violence in rural and remote communities than the capital cities (21% versus 15% since the age of 15).¹⁰⁶ Older people living in rural and regional communities have higher rates of social isolation and loneliness,¹⁰⁷ levels of disease and injury, and poorer health outcomes compared with people living in metropolitan areas.¹⁰⁸ These factors increase older women's vulnerability to family violence and sexual assault.¹⁰⁹ Older women in rural and remote communities face additional challenges, such as rural conservatism, and limited services.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁰ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_MAPGuidelines.pdf

¹⁰¹ <https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/finalreport.pdf>

¹⁰² <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-the-prevention-potential>

¹⁰³ <https://www.ariaa.org.au/knowledge-implementation-hub/social-isolation>

¹⁰⁴ <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/social-isolation-factors-dynamics-and-effects-isolation-older-people>

¹⁰⁵ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

¹⁰⁶ <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/domestic-and-family-violence-regional-rural-and-remote>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10225733/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australians/contents/population-groups-of-interest/regional-remote-communities>

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/partyline/article/are-you-ready-listen>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/partyline/article/are-you-ready-listen>

Change theory – Social Ecological Model

The National Plan presents a Social Ecological Model as a theory of change to end violence against women and their children.¹¹¹ Social Ecological Models are widely valued in the context of understanding and preventing violence against women.¹¹² They can help to ensure prevention strategies target all causes and risk factors, by working with all leverage points across society.

To assist in promoting effective approaches to change, this section begins by outlining a Social Ecological Model for Preventing Violence Against Older Women. A critical lens is taken to consider power, promote reflection and guide informed action.^{113,114} As Figure 1 below shows, five levels of focus for preventing and improving responses to violence against older women are presented. These levels are explored in the following section.

Figure 2: Social Ecological Model for Preventing Violence Against Older Women



Individual level

The impacts of the history older women have lived must be acknowledged. Many older women have spent much of the lives without the rights, services, language, awareness, campaigns and sense equality we have today. Older women's knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs are shaped by historical inequalities. They are also shaped by our ageist world, and the message that they are of less value because of their age. Approaches to change must consider the oppression of older women and seek opportunities for older women to be empowered and heard. Key questions include:

¹¹¹ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence#toc>

¹¹² https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/social-determinants-of-health/who_2022_plv_strategy_2022-2026_finalfile.pdf?sfvrsn=c819ff54_3

¹¹³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0091732X18821132>

¹¹⁴ <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203058848/curriculum-product-praxis-shirley-grundy-university-new-england-usa>

- What impact does a lifetime of gender inequality have on older women's experiences of violence?
- What influence does internalised ageism have on older women's willingness to seek help when they experience violence?
- What do older women know about their right to be free from violence?
- What do older women know about the services that can support them?

Family level

Promoting respectful family relationships is particularly important for older women who need family support to navigate ageing and morbidity. For some older women, leaving a violent relationship means being faced with limited service access and accommodation options, no income and the loss of valued contact with children and grandchildren.

While family relationships are important to ageing well at home - research shows family members are the most prevalent perpetrators of the abuse and violence older women experience.¹¹⁵ This may include sexual assault and other forms of violence from a partner living with dementia or abuse from adult children in crisis who have returned to the family home. There is a need to provide older women with the option for family mediation and support to navigate family complexities. Key questions include:

- What family/carer/giver dynamics contribute to older women's vulnerability to violence?
- What work is needed to support older women supporting adult children with mental health, drug and alcohol or cost of living issues?
- How could support services support older women by working with adult children with complex needs who are living with the older woman?

Community level

Across societies there is a need to identify and stop the attitudes and behaviours that condone abuse and violence - and the ageist/sexist mocking of older women. The contributions and achievements of older women must be valued and respected. Key questions include:

- How do ageism and sexism intersect to marginalize and silence older women?
- How do societal norms that devalue and silence women as they age, lead to an increased vulnerability to violence?
- What economic inequalities do older women face and how does financial insecurity and dependence contribute to the vulnerability of older women to violence and abuse?
- What primary prevention campaigns are being utilised to educate society about the rights of older women and violence prevention?

¹¹⁵ <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-summary-report>

Service level

Services to prevent violence against women must be inclusive of older women. This entails explicit inclusion such as outreach to older women, referring to older women in descriptors of services, utilising images of older women to promote services, disaggregating data collection (recognising there are many generations of older women), educating service on older women's experiences and needs and including older women in service planning and strategy. Key questions include:

- What power imbalances exist in institutions that contribute to older women's vulnerability to violence?
- What reforms are required in the justice system to enable access and justice for older women?
- How do power imbalances in services contribute to older women's vulnerability to violence?
- What policies do services (GP, acute, subacute, rehab etc) have on preventing violence against the older women who access their services?

Policy level

The experiences and needs of older women need to be included in all relevant plans, particularly the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children. Older women are now included as a priority group in the Rapid Review of the National Plan – and this must follow through to funded projects, services and other initiatives. A gender lens is critical to the prevention of elder abuse. The inclusion of older women and its impacts must be measured. Key questions include:

- How can we ensure older women are included beyond definitional statements?
- What changes need to be made to policies, funding, strategies now that older women have been identified as a priority group?
- Can funding include KPIs related to older women to ensure their inclusion?
- How can we better understand the intersecting forms of oppression older women experience and utilise this information to shape policy, funding and services?
- What changes are required to housing policies to ensure older women at risk of violence are supported?
- How can elder abuse policy take a gender lens?

Focus areas for action

The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Their Children¹¹⁶ includes four priority or focus areas for action, i.e.: prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing. The following section outlines key issues related to older women in each of these priority areas and then presents considerations and suggested strategies. It also draws on the recommendations from the Rapid Review of Prevention based approaches.¹¹⁷

Prevention

Prevention is about stopping the violence against older women before it starts – or addressing the underlying drivers. This includes changing the social conditions (ageism and gender inequality) that give rise to violence against older women and reforming the institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence.

Comprehensive prevention of violence against older women takes a whole of society approach. It aims to influence laws, policies and the practices and behaviours of organisations, groups and individuals. Changing attitudes, norms and behaviours towards older women is critical to preventing violence. It acknowledges the importance of challenging the ageist views that condone disrespect, abuse and violence against older women.

Considerations

- The #OlderWomenCount program¹¹⁸ is currently the only national program aimed at changing attitudes, norms and behaviours towards older women
- Ageism must be acknowledged as contributing to the silencing and oppression of older women.

Suggested strategies

- Explicitly include older women in initiatives to promote gender equality
- Explicitly include older women in initiatives to combat gender-based violence
- Create safe and welcoming spaces across all services, for older women to report family violence concerns
- Utilise a gender lens in service planning and delivery on elder abuse
- Strategies to combat ageism must address the unique forms of ageism experienced by older women
- Strategies to promote gender equality in the workplace must include responses to ageism
- Employment programs must target older women
- Older women must be given access to family mediation services
- Older women must be included in support for preventing homelessness
- Men's behaviour change programs need to reach older men
- Dementia services need to provide information on family violence
- Advertising standards must protect older women from vilification

¹¹⁶ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/womens-safety/rapid-review-prevention-approaches>

¹¹⁸ <https://www.celebrateageing.com/olderwomenscount.html>

- Media companies must be held to account against standards of respectful coverage of older women.

Rapid review recommendations

The following section considers the application of the Rapid Review's recommendations to prevention of violence against older women.

Principles

The following principles underpin the application of the Rapid Review's recommendations to the experiences and needs of older women:

- Include Elders in the important work prioritising the experiences and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders
- Ensure ageism is included in intersectional approaches to prevention, to recognise the exacerbation of violence and abuse of older women due to ageism
- Embed implementation science to bridge the gap between research and practice on prevention of violence against older women and prioritise funding of research on the experiences and needs of older women to build the evidence base
- Collect more data to address gaps in our understanding of older women's experiences of domestic, family and sexual violence. Ensure data is disaggregated and made public
- Continually inspect, understand and adapt to the emerging and changing role of technology as it relates to older women.

The prevention potential

The Commonwealth, state and territory Governments to expand approaches to prevention to acknowledge the global evidence base and the gaps relating to older women that need to be filled. This should include:

- An independent review and expansion of Change The Story beyond primary prevention, with a focus on accommodating the evolving global evidence base around the prevention of violence across early intervention, response and recovery; and to ensure the inclusion of older women
- Establishing a five-year co-funded Prevention Innovation Fund recognising older women as a priority group and understanding what works better in an Australian context and at a community level.

Prevention through people

- The Commonwealth Government, state and territories, to develop a national, coordinated and co-designed approach to engaging with men and boys – including older men, and on healthy masculinities and violence prevention. This should include:
 - Adopting a strengths-based national definition and measurement methodology for healthy masculinities, including older men, to guide future campaigns and/or program implementation
 - Developing or expanding DFSV-informed program responses across sectors, focusing on healthy relationships and masculinities throughout

- men’s life transitions, including school leavers, new fathers, separation/relationship breakdown, recent migration, recent unemployment, ageing^{119,120} and disability¹²¹
 - Developing a national response, attuned to the experiences of men and boys, responding to the rise of online misogyny (including the misogyny directed to older women¹²²) and radicalisation through targeted investment in research to understand relevant risk factors and the extent of harm; collaboration with specialist frontline educators; and a focus on evidence-based tech-industry regulation
- The Commonwealth to undertake further structural reforms to strengthen women’s economic equality – and include older women, in recognition of the interconnectedness between lack of economic security and vulnerability to DFSV. This should include:
 - Consideration that older women are the lowest income earning family group, with 34% of single older women live in poverty,¹²³ and 60% of older women relying entirely on old age pension.¹²⁴ Sixty percent of older women leave paid work with no super,¹²⁵ women with super have 28% less than men¹²⁶
 - strengthening workplace health and safety laws to complement the positive duty on employers to prevent workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and harassment – and the ageist discrimination older women face in the workplace¹²⁷ and their exclusion from the workplace as they age.¹²⁸
 - Making Escaping Violence Payments¹²⁹ accessible to older women experiencing violence from adult children or grandchildren
- Initiatives to expand the evidence base on how to build capability of family and friends to identify and respond to domestic and family violence must include older women
- and remote areas, as well as delivery virtually.

Prevention through response

- The needs analysis of unmet demand in crisis response, recovery and healing must explicitly include older women
- Specialist crisis accommodation must be inclusive of older women
- Linkages between DSFV and homelessness sectors must include older women and include consultation with services for older people
- Activation of the health system and workforce as a key prevention lever must include the services accessed by older women and those who perpetrate violence against them
- Ensuring men’s behaviour change programs include behaviour towards older women and are inclusive of older men

¹¹⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/deaths-by-suicide-in-australia/suicide-deaths-over-time>

¹²⁰ <https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/suicide-rates-reveal-the-silent-suffering-of-austr>

¹²¹ https://youtu.be/pEZFlaj-dTk?si=_YM-I4civl1cHUPf

¹²² <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

¹²³ https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf

¹²⁴ https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Economics/Economic_security_for_women_in_retirement/Report/c09

¹²⁵ <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

¹²⁶ <https://officeforwomen.sa.gov.au/womens-policy/womens-employment-and-economic-status/superannuation>

¹²⁷ <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/safety-and-security-older-women>

¹²⁸ <https://mckellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Women-in-work-A-story-of-exclusion.pdf>

¹²⁹ <https://www.unitingvictas.org.au/services/family-services/family-violence-services/escaping-violence-payment/>

- Responses to better manage risk of homicide respond to the increased levels of matricide and homicide of older women
- Risk assessment and management principles must be inclusive of older women
- Expand the capability of the specialist DFSV workforce to respond to older women
- The strategy for capability uplift across intersecting workforces must encompass services for older women

Prevention through systems and industries

- The audit of how DFSV perpetrators weaponize government systems should include systems accessed by older women
- The work with industries that are well positioned to prevent and reduce DFSV should ensure the inclusion of older women in the work with media and pornography – and should include regulation of video games representing ‘grannies’ as evil matriarchs¹³⁰

Prevention through learning and data

- A clearinghouse should include information on older women and where gaps exist this must be understood as research and funding priorities – rather than the absence of data indicating the absence of a problem for older women
- The practice of aggregating data to include older women must stop
- Improving data on older women must be a priority
- Death review processes should include ..

Early intervention

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

Considerations

- Secrecy is a significant issue for older women with 6 in 10 older people not seeking support for elder abuse¹³¹
- Older people experiencing abuse are least likely to see support for neglect and sexual abuse¹³²
- Barriers to seeking help include fear of the consequences such as retaliation, abandonment, institutionalisation or ostracization¹³³ as well as shame and embarrassment, self-blame and low self-esteem¹³⁴
- Older women experiencing violence or abuse by adult children may fear losing the relationship with their child or grandchildren
- Fear of authority may be a barrier to reporting for marginalized groups
- Social isolation on the part of the victim, and a broad social network on the part of the perpetrator are associated with lower help seeking¹³⁵

¹³⁰ <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

¹³¹ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

¹³² https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

¹³³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334391483_Help-Seeking_Behavior_in_Victims_of_Elder_Abuse_A_Systematic_Review

¹³⁴ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524838019860616>

¹³⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30329112/>

- Older women who are socially isolated may not have the confidence or support to seek early intervention
- Escaping Violence Payments¹³⁶ are only available to older women experiencing intimate partner violence, and are not accessible to older women experiencing violence from adult children or grandchildren
- Women's refuges may not be physically accessible or safe for older women.

Suggested strategies

- Educate the age care sector about early warning signs of family violence, including sexual assault, and how to open conversations with older women
- Educate the family violence sector about the experiences and needs of older women
- Promote communication and collaboration between aged care, elder abuse, family violence and sexual assault services
- Promote outreach between family violence/ sexual assault services and older women e.g.: hosting events or groups for older women, providing older women with information about services
- Initiate conversations with older women, give them permission to speak about what they are experiencing and what they need
- Let older women know they are in 'the driver's seat', or that discussing their experiences will not result in forced separation from family members
- Start by believing older women who report family violence or sexual assault, 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
- Identify support options for older women e.g.: residential respite for the older woman or the perpetrator (if appropriate), or increased day care/activities
- Provide older woman opportunities to access activities and supports that are reduce social isolation and empower older women¹³⁷
- Hold perpetrators to account.

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 violence.

Responses to address existing violence (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 violence by holding perpetrators to account and supporting older women.

¹³⁶ <https://www.unitingvictas.org.au/services/family-services/family-violence-services/escaping-violence-payment/>

¹³⁷ https://www.opalinstitute.org/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/someone_in_her_corner_educational_resourcefinal.pdf

Considerations

- Older people experiencing abuse are least likely to seek support for neglect and sexual abuse and the reliance on criminal justice responses for sexual abuse is almost absent¹³⁸
- Older women living with dementia are too often discounted as historians
- Older women may be unable to extricate themselves from their adult child who is a perpetrator of violence and has complex needs.

Strategies

- Education is required for police and the justice system to understand the experiences and needs of older women
- Dementia education and policies are required for police and the justice system to ensure they understand how to work with older women living with dementia
- Independent third person initiatives¹³⁹ must be offered to older women
- A dual integrated response model may be useful to support adult children who are perpetrators of violence – to move out of their mother’s home.

Recovery and healing

Older women who are victim/survivors of violence 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 under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Their Children. 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 violence. 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

- 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,¹⁴⁰ this is unsurprising given research showing that in 58% of incidents staff reported there was no harm to the victim/survivor¹⁴¹
- Women with dementia may present behaviour cues of distress following sexual assault, rather than verbal disclosures¹⁴²
- 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 dementia¹⁴³

¹³⁸ https://aifs.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/2021_national_elder_abuse_prevalence_study_final_report_0.pdf

¹³⁹ <https://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/opa-volunteers/independent-third-persons>

¹⁴⁰ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_SexualAssaultServices.pdf

¹⁴¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/prevalence-study-for-a-serious-incident-response-scheme-sirs?language=en>

¹⁴² <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/216550.pdf>

¹⁴³ *ibid*

- Victim/survivors with dementia may be unable to speak but still have emotional memory¹⁴⁴
- Little attention has been paid to the healing and recovery needs of older women – further research is required.

Strategies

- Provide information to aged care service providers on the importance of sexual assault and family violence services to the healing and recovery of older women
- Conduct research on best practice approaches to healing and recovery for older women and for victim/survivors living with dementia
- Document safety planning templates for the healing and recovery of older women
- Build relationships between family violence/sexual assault and aged care service providers
- Conduct outreach to older women and ask them how to support their recovery
- Ensure resources to promote women’s recovery are inclusive of older women.

Measurement and outcomes

The Activities Addendum to the National Plan¹⁴⁵ outlines 52 pages of activities (17,500 words) – but only mentions older women in two places (related to Housing Australian Future Fund i.e.: p. 49 and 51). In our ageist world – the failure to explicitly include older women will result in silence and silencing.

Strategies to prevent violence against older women must be developed, funded, implemented and evaluated. Key performance indicators for funded organisations and groups could include measures of the inclusion of older women.

¹⁴⁴ https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/cdn-production.opan.org.au/uploads/2023/11/RTL2023_DementiaMAP.pdf

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence#fapaa>

Further resources

1. tbc

DRAFT