



PREVENTING ELDER ABUSE

#EmpowerOlderPeople



ABOUT SENIORS RIGHTS VICTORIA

Established in 2008, Seniors Rights Victoria is the key state-wide service dedicated to stopping elder abuse. It is a program of Council on The Ageing Victoria (COTA) and supported by the Victorian Government. Operating under the principle of empowering older people, Seniors Rights Victoria provides information, support, advice, casework and education to help prevent and respond to elder abuse and safeguard older peoples' rights, dignity and independence. Services include a helpline, specialist legal services, short-term support and advocacy for individuals, and professional and community education. Seniors Rights Victoria also participates in elder abuse policy development and law reform, and works to raise awareness of elder abuse.

PREVENTING ELDER ABUSE

This discussion paper describes activities that help prevent elder abuse from occurring, as well as actions that enable people to detect and respond to elder abuse in order to inhibit reoccurrences and prevent long-term harm.

Addressing an issue as complex as elder abuse requires prevention activities at an individual, community and societal level. This includes activities on a prevention continuum such as empowering people to protect themselves and their rights, intervening in individual cases to prevent further abuse, and working towards systemic societal change to change behaviours and attitudes and to decrease opportunities for elder abuse to occur within the community, including within structures and institutions (e.g. banks).

The Victorian Government's approach to preventing elder abuse is based on empowering older people, consistent with the human right to live life free from violence and abuse, in line with the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. This results in a combination of service responses and legal interventions, which protect the independence, dignity and safety of older adults. This discussion paper will consider activities across three different levels:

- **primary prevention** – addresses the ways elder abuse can be prevented from occurring in the first place by identifying the underlying causes and acting across the whole population to change the attitudes and behaviours that allow these underlying factors to exist. This work focuses on whole of population initiatives that address the *primary underlying drivers of violence*.
- **secondary prevention or early intervention** – aims to 'change the trajectory' for older people at higher than average risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence. The focus here is on picking up early signs of abuse and stopping those incidents from escalating.

Further information can be found in [With Respect to Age](#), the Victorian Government Elder Abuse Practice Guide.

- **tertiary prevention** – focuses on responding and supporting people who experience violence and in holding perpetrators to account. The focus of this activity is to stop *recurrence* of violence where it exists.¹ Tertiary prevention responses include **crisis response activities** – focusing on the immediate needs of those experiencing elder abuse, such as the provision of social supports and legal and health services; and **longer term support** – assisting survivors of elder abuse through activities such as counselling, and support for housing, health and wellbeing.

Primary prevention work complements work undertaken in the response and early intervention area (what is called secondary and tertiary prevention) but is different as it is designed to stop violence before it starts by addressing its deep seated drivers and working on the universal level.

Further information can be found in [*Free from Violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women*](#), available on the [Victorian Government](#) website.



WHAT IS INTERGENERATIONAL ELDER ABUSE?

Elder abuse is a form of family violence and while it can include intimate partner violence, the majority of elder abuse is intergenerational and perpetrated by an adult son or daughter against their parent.²

The unique dynamics of parent–child relationships can have an effect on help-seeking behaviour and intervention options. Parents may feel a sense of responsibility and self-blame regarding the actions of the child they have brought up, and they may not wish to disclose the violence and act to stop the abuse if it means destroying the relationship or losing access to grandchildren. Older people may fear the consequences of acting, including losing or damaging family relationships (with the perpetrator and others) and retribution from the perpetrator. They may also worry about what will happen to the perpetrator who is often their child. They may also be ashamed or embarrassed about the situation and worry that people will judge them. Some cultural groups have an expectation of intergenerational living where adults remain living at home or older people live with married children. Concern that addressing elder abuse would result in a change to a family’s living arrangements may dissuade some people from seeking help.



Another important issue is the two-way care provided between parents and children. Care needs change over the life course with parents providing extensive care for children when they are young, and adult children often being expected to provide care for ageing parents. In addition, both parents and children provide care – in the form of financial, emotional and housing support; childcare; and assistance with daily tasks – for each other throughout their lives. Family conflict can arise as care roles, expectations and needs change over time.

Understanding intergenerational relationships and how family dynamics can influence an abusive situation is necessary in preventing and responding to elder abuse.



For further information on how ageism relates to elder abuse, see [Challenging Ageism](#), available on the [COTA Victoria](#) website.

WHAT ARE THE DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE?

Social conditions that lead to family violence and elder abuse are sometimes referred to as 'drivers' or 'causes' of violence. Ageism, and the way people are treated differently as they age, is a driver of elder abuse. Negative

attitudes associated with ageing mean that later life can be seen as a time of decline, loss and vulnerability. Ageism results in older people being marginalised and afforded less power and social status. When older people are less visible and viewed as less valuable, unable to make decisions for themselves, and a burden on resources it can result in social and cultural norms where elder abuse is tolerated.

Gender inequality and discrimination create environments where women are less valued by society, and afforded fewer opportunities and resources. This results in social and cultural norms where violence against women is tolerated. The intersection of ageism and gender inequality can mean that older women have an increased likelihood of experiencing family violence as elder abuse.

For further information on how gender relates to elder abuse see the *Elder Abuse and Gender* discussion paper, available on the [Seniors Rights Victoria](#) website.

HOW CAN ELDER ABUSE BE PREVENTED BY ADDRESSING AGEISM?

By working to combat ageism we are also working to prevent elder abuse. Primary prevention activities such as community capacity building campaigns and social policy that aim to foster more positive attitudes to ageing will create a society that values and protects older people, upholds their rights and respects their decisions – a society in which elder abuse is less likely to occur. Evidence on how to deliver primary prevention would suggest that awareness raising on its own about ageism, social, political and economic discrimination and disadvantage as well as the gendered drivers of abuse are not enough. Changing attitudes and behaviour towards abuse requires a multi-pronged approach to address the social norm, structures and practices are crucial for ending elder abuse.

Primary prevention activities that address gender inequality and create a society that actively discourages family violence and all forms of violence against women can also decrease occurrences of elder abuse against women.

Primary prevention activities at a community and societal level include:

- Promoting the rights of older people and their right to make decisions for themselves
- Promoting the rights of people with cognitive impairment to make decisions for themselves with appropriate support
- Supporting older people to participate in all aspects of society by creating age-friendly communities
- Challenging negative media stereotypes and representations of older people as a burden on others
- Encouraging individuals to question their own attitudes that may lead to ageist assumptions
- Fostering positive intergenerational relationships
- Education about the gendered nature family violence

For further information on ageism see [Challenging Ageism](#) by COTA Victoria and [Seniors Rights Victoria](#)

HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY PREVENT ELDER ABUSE?

Elder abuse can also be prevented from occurring or reoccurring by supporting the community to uphold the rights of older people, and recognise and respond to elder abuse when it occurs.

In addition, the risk of experiencing family violence can be compounded by factors such as gender, ethnicity and cultural identity, disability, language skills, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, religion or age. Described by the term 'intersectionality', the interrelation of these aspects of a person's identity can result in a person experiencing overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation, which need to be considered when understanding a person's experience of elder abuse.

Community prevention activities include:

- Educating the community about elder abuse and the rights of older people
- Ensuring those who work with or encounter older people (including banking staff, lawyers, health professionals, aged care staff and police) are aware of the nature of elder abuse, and how to detect and respond to elder abuse
- Providing accessible ways for people to safeguard their rights and protect their assets (such as wills, powers of attorney, written agreements on financial arrangements with children or caregivers, etc.)



WHAT FACTORS INCREASE THE RISK OF ELDER ABUSE?

While ageism is the driver of elder abuse, the likelihood of it occurring or reoccurring is also influenced by a number of factors. Men, women and people that identify as gender diverse can experience elder abuse differently. For all women experiencing violence particular expressions of gender inequality consistently predict high rates of violence against women. Whilst there are key drivers of elder abuse there are also other factors which on their own do not predict abuse but they can play a role in the frequency or severity of the violence, and the behavioural choices a perpetrator makes.³

Reinforcing factors that may affect an older person include:

- social isolation and a lack of support
- poor physical or mental health
- cognitive impairment, including dementia
- disability or reliance on others for support with daily living
- family conflict and disagreement

Reinforcing factors that may affect a person choosing to perpetrate elder abuse include:

- lack of social support
- dependence on the older person for emotional support, financial help, housing and other assistance
- poor mental health
- substance abuse
- caregiver feeling stressed and unsupported

Elder abuse can also be affected by the context in which it occurs. Changes to family dynamics (such as when an older person requires extra assistance, an adult child moves back in with a parent, or an older person moves in with a child and their family) can increase family conflict or make people vulnerable to opportunistic behaviours by family members or other people in a position of trust.

HOW CAN ELDER ABUSE BE PREVENTED BY ADDRESSING REINFORCING FACTORS?

Addressing these reinforcing factors alongside the drivers of ageism and gender inequality helps to prevent elder abuse.

Primary prevention activities at an individual level for the older person include:

- Assisting the older person to participate and socialise in their community and not feel isolated
- Supporting the older person's physical and mental health needs as they age
- Allowing older people with cognitive impairment to remain mentally, physically and socially active
- Aiding people to live as they wish as they age, and to access support services as required
- Encouraging open and transparent family discussion, particularly regarding future planning, financial arrangements and care needs

- Considering a person's ethnicity, disability, language skills, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion to ensure the strategy is appropriate

Activities to stop the perpetration and recurrence of elder abuse include:

- Encouraging the perpetrator to access services that can support their mental, physical and emotional needs
- Supporting a person's help-seeking behaviours regarding drug and alcohol abuse
- Facilitating alternative housing options
- Educating caregivers in non-abusive behaviours and conflict resolution
- Providing respite and support for caregivers

CONCLUSION

Preventing elder abuse from occurring requires addressing a wide array of factors for the individual and for the community. Organisations and services providers in the areas of elder abuse, family violence, aged care, community and health settings need to work together to detect and respond to elder abuse, alongside governments, law enforcement, legal services, financial institutions and any industries that provide support and services to older people.

USEFUL RESOURCES

If you or someone you know is experiencing elder abuse, contact the Seniors Rights Victoria free and confidential helpline on 1300 368 821. If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services on 000.

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| <u>Seniors Rights Victoria</u> | 1300 368 821 |
| <u>Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre</u> | 1800 015 188 |
| <u>Men’s Referral Service</u> | 1300 766 491 |
| <u>Victims of Crime Helpline</u> | 1800 819 817 |

There are a number of things older people can do to protect their rights and feel safe as they age. Seniors Rights Victoria have the following help sheets available at www.seniorsrights.org.au:

- [Decision Making and Your Rights](#)
- [Plan For Your Safety](#)
- [Adult Children at Home](#)
- [Gifts, Loans and Debts](#)

Care For Your Assets is a guide for people considering moving in with family as they get older. It covers topics such as making a family agreement, Centrelink and taxation implications and where to go for more information and advice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Our Watch (2014) Policy Brief: Key terms, definitions and statistics.
- 2 National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) in partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) (2015) Profile of elder abuse in Victoria.
- 3 Karl Pillemer, David Burnes, Catherine Riffin and Mark S. Lachs (2016) Elder Abuse: Global Situation, Risk Factors, and Prevention Strategies, *Gerontologist*, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 194–205.; Ruijia Chen and Xinqi Dong (2017) “Risk Factors of Elder Abuse” in Xinqi Dong (Ed.) *Elder Abuse: Research, Practice and Policy*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 93–107; Mark Johannesen and Dina LoGiudice (2013) Elder abuse: a systematic review of risk factors in community-dwelling elders, *Age and Ageing*, 42: 292–298.



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