



ELDER ABUSE AS  
FAMILY VIOLENCE

*#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 draws on 10 years of practice to inform elder abuse policy development and law reform, and works to raise awareness of elder abuse.

# ELDER ABUSE AS FAMILY VIOLENCE

*This discussion paper explains how elder abuse is a form of family violence, and draws attention to its unique causes and characteristics.*

In recent years elder abuse has increasingly been recognised as a form of family violence, a view confirmed by the findings of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016 and the subsequent state-wide program of reform which continues today. This means that service providers increasingly need to understand the unique causes and characteristics of elder abuse and the experiences of older people.

An [Elder Abuse Response Toolkit](#) is provided on the [Seniors Rights Victoria](#) website for service providers wanting more information on how to respond.

By understanding the nature of elder abuse within the family, and within other relationships of trust, it is hoped that family violence service providers and those working with older people will be better equipped to recognise and respond to elder abuse.

## WHAT IS FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Family violence occurs when a perpetrator exercises power and control over another person and behaves in a way to cause humiliation, harm and distress. Family violence can include psychological, physical, social and sexual abuse, as well as financial exploitation. The term 'family' is used broadly and includes family units, extended family and family-like and unpaid carer relationships across all genders and sexualities. The most common form of family violence is intimate partner violence by men against women, and gender inequality is considered the underlying social condition or driver of violence against women.

Further information can be found in [Ending Family Violence: Victoria's plan for change](#), available on the Victorian Government website

# WHAT IS ELDER ABUSE?

Elder abuse is any form of violence or mistreatment that causes harm to an older person, and occurs within a relationship of trust. Elder abuse can include acts of psychological, financial, physical, social and sexual abuse, as well as neglect. Some older people may describe this type of behaviour as disrespect or mistreatment, rather than abuse or violence.

Elder abuse can happen in many contexts, including the home and residential aged care.

As elder abuse most often occurs within the family or a domestic setting, it is recognised as a form of family violence under the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)*. Elder abuse is often intergenerational and perpetrated by an adult child against their parent.<sup>1</sup> Some older women also experience violence in later life as a result of continuing intimate partner violence, or within a new relationship.

Some examples of elder abuse include:

- threatening and coercive behaviour
- forcing an older person to hand over money or an asset, or misusing their funds
- physical assault
- preventing contact with family and friends
- limiting a person's choices or placing pressure on them regarding decisions they make
- neglecting to provide a person with appropriate health or personal care
- inheritance impatience - the sense of entitlement to an older person's assets or resources.

Elder abuse does not include disputes over consumer rights or criminal acts by strangers.

“He was screaming, yelling, and he said that he would bring men [to hurt me]. Even now I am scared.”

*Sofia, 68.*

“I was virtually a prisoner ... I had no money ... they took control over my money ... I could take no-one to the house.”

*Elaine, 67.*

Many more examples of elder abuse can be found in the Victorian Government Elder Abuse Practice Guide *With Respect to Age*, available on the [Victorian Government](#) website.



## WHAT CAUSES ELDER ABUSE?

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 it 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. Adult children can feel a sense of entitlement to their parents' finances. When older people are regarded 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 the imbalance of power between women and men is a driver of family violence. Similar to other forms of family violence, women are more likely to experience elder abuse than men. In addition, some older women experience violence at the hands of their long-term partner or in a new relationship. While women comprise a higher proportion of the older population than men, this alone does not explain the disparity. The intersection of ageism and gender inequality may make older women at higher risk of abuse. In addition, older men may be less likely to report abuse, and they may also be socially isolated and unaware of the help available to them.<sup>2</sup>

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

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.



“I think it was just getting on top of me, you know? I couldn’t cope, I didn’t know what to do, didn’t know where to turn ... you know?”

*Peggy, 76.*

## WHAT EFFECT DOES ELDER ABUSE HAVE?

Abuse and mistreatment of any kind can have a profound and detrimental effect on a person. As well as causing feelings of stress and anxiety, elder abuse has been shown to lead to an increased risk of depression and thoughts of suicide, and can increase the risk of ill health and early death.<sup>3</sup> It can also mean an increase in hospital visits or early admittance to residential care.<sup>4</sup> When elder abuse results in homelessness and poverty, it can make it more difficult for the older person to cope with illness and disability. People who experience elder abuse often require health, legal and social support services, as well as short and long-term housing options.



## WHO EXPERIENCES ELDER ABUSE?

Any older person can experience elder abuse. This includes people of any gender and those living alone, with others, or in aged care.

While there is no comprehensive data available for the prevalence of elder abuse in Australia, it is estimated that up to 14 per cent of older people may be experiencing abuse.<sup>5</sup> Similar to other forms of family violence it is likely that much elder abuse goes unreported, so the actual prevalence within the community is likely to be higher.

The risk of experiencing family violence can be compounded by factors such as gender, ethnicity and cultural identity, disability, cognitive impairment, 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 overlying forms of discrimination and marginalisation, which need to be considered when understanding a person's experience of elder abuse.

Some people, such as women with a disability, and Aboriginal populations, are subjected to higher levels of violence than other members of the population, and societal structures often discriminate against and marginalise them. In addition, the impact of colonisation, dispossession and oppression may affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the way elders are treated or seek help, and requires a response that prioritises cultural recognition and safety.<sup>6</sup>



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.



“Just imagine for my son and daughter, I take responsible, too. If they are in trouble, I am in trouble. I’m in trouble, she’s [wife] in trouble ... If the parents love the kids, it will destroy them too.”

Alex, 80.

## WHAT FACTORS INCREASE THE RISK OF ELDER ABUSE?

Research has shown that there are a range of factors that can increase an older person’s likelihood of experiencing elder abuse. While these factors do not on their own predict abuse, they can play a role in the frequency or severity of the violence.<sup>7</sup>

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
- trauma or past abuse.

There are a number of reinforcing factors that can play a role in a person perpetrating elder abuse. While these factors do not lead a person to become abusive, they can have an influence on the situation.

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

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

# HOW IS ELDER ABUSE SIMILAR TO OTHER FORMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?

Elder abuse is a form of family violence and the consequences for the older person and their family can be just as detrimental as violence against younger women and children.

## HOW IS ELDER ABUSE SIMILAR TO OTHER FORMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?

<b>CONTEXT</b>	Most elder abuse occurs within the family.
	Elder abuse can be physical, psychological, financial, social and sexual abuse, with two or more types often co-occurring.
	The majority of people who experience abuse are women.
	Intimate partner violence occurring in a new relationship or within an ongoing relationship, can be classified as elder abuse if the victim is an older person. Approximately 11% of elder abuse cases reported to Australian helplines involve intimate partner violence. <sup>8</sup>
<b>DRIVERS</b>	Elder abuse is linked to inequity and discrimination against people due to personal attributes such as age, gender, cultural background and sexuality. This behaviour has long been tolerated by the wider community, allowing violence to occur.

	Elder abuse and family violence may involve overt or subtle exploitation of power imbalances and may consist of isolated incidents or patterns of abuse over a period of time.
	Risk factors include having a disability, social isolation, family conflict, a co-dependent relationship with the perpetrator, or the victim feeling they are reliant on the perpetrator for care, housing or income.
<b>HELP-SEEKING</b>	People may be reluctant to seek help because they see the abuse as a family matter. They may feel ashamed or embarrassed about the situation and worry that others will judge them, including family and community members.
	People who experience elder abuse may be reluctant to seek help because they fear consequences, including retribution from the perpetrator, or losing or damaging family relationships (with the perpetrator and others). They may also worry about what the consequences will be for the perpetrator.
	Indigenous people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have little knowledge about and access to help-seeking services, and the attitudes of their cultural and generational cohort may affect whether they are likely to seek help to leave the relationship.

# HOW IS ELDER ABUSE DIFFERENT TO OTHER FORMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?

While elder abuse is a form of family violence, it does have some unique characteristics that must be considered in relation to prevention and intervention. Importantly, the definition of ‘family violence’ in the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic)* involves violent behaviour by a person towards a ‘family member’ of that person. For the purposes of the Act, the definition of ‘family member’ extends beyond intimate partners and relatives and includes:

*... any other person whom the relevant person regards or regarded as being like a family member if it is or was reasonable to regard the other person as being like a family member having regard to the circumstances of the relationship.*

## HOW IS ELDER ABUSE DIFFERENT TO OTHER FORMS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE?

### CONTEXT

Elder abuse can occur outside of the family context (for example, in aged care) and be perpetrated by friends and non-family members trusted by the older person, and it may include abusive behaviour by staff and other residents.

Elder abuse is most often intergenerational (perpetrated by an adult child or other family member against a parent), while family violence is most often intimate partner violence (perpetrated by a partner or ex-partner). Approximately 67 per cent of abuse reported to Seniors Rights Victoria is perpetrated by a son or daughter of the older person.<sup>9</sup>

Older men comprise a significant number of victims of elder abuse (approximately 30 per cent of cases reported to Australian helplines<sup>10</sup>).

	Neglect of a person's care needs including inadequate provision of housing or food, over- or under-medication, or being abandoned are all examples of elder abuse.
	Elder abuse can include an older person experiencing cognitive decline who exhibits abusive behaviours toward an older carer or partner.
<b>DRIVERS</b>	The underlying social condition of elder abuse is ageism, whereas the underlying social condition of most family violence is gender inequality.
	Some people who provide care to older people feel stressed or overwhelmed and may not have the resources to cope with the needs of the older person. This may contribute to abusive behaviours such as threats, shouting or restraining a person against their will.
<b>HELP-SEEKING</b>	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 act to stop the abuse if it means destroying the relationship or losing access to grandchildren.
	While people can separate or divorce to end intimate partner violence, this is often not an option when a person's child is the perpetrator of the abuse. Intergenerational living is an expectation of many cultural groups and people may be reluctant to seek help if it means a change in living arrangements.
	Older people experiencing abuse may have other health or age-related support needs to be considered by any intervention approaches.

## CONCLUSION

Considering Australia's ageing population, violence against older people, including intergenerational abuse and intimate partner violence, is an increasing concern. While elder abuse is a form of family violence and the reforms in this area will assist older women and men, many of the prevention and intervention measures needed to address the issue must also consider the particular contexts within which elder abuse occurs, and the particular needs and desires of older people.

At present, elder abuse prevention measures are mainly focused on empowering older people to protect their rights. This includes encouraging the use of written agreements such as Enduring Powers of Attorneys (where an individual can appoint another person to make decisions on their behalf) and Assets for Care contracts (where a person can offer their financial assets in return for care and accommodation), as well as the use of family meetings or mediation to prevent conflict from resulting in abuse. However, care must be taken to ensure that these types of written agreements do not enable abuse of the older person. Addressing the drivers of elder abuse, including ageism and gender inequality, will further assist in prevention.

## 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.

[Seniors Rights Victoria](#) **1300 368 821**

[Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre](#) **1800 015 188**

[Men's Referral Service](#) **1300 766 491**

[Victims of Crime Helpline](#) **1800 819 817**

## FOR INFORMATION ON AGEISM

- *Challenging Ageism (2016)* COTA Victoria
- *Stereotypes of Older Australians research report (2013)* Australian Human Rights Commission

## FOR INFORMATION ON ELDER ABUSE

- Seniors Rights Victoria website
- *With Respect to Age (2009)* State of Victoria, Department of Human Services
- *Elder Abuse: Understanding issues, frameworks and responses (2016)* Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Elder Abuse—A National Legal Response (ALRC Report 131)
- The Victorian Government delivers online elder abuse prevention professional education, which can be accessed at [elderabuseprevention.e3learning.com.au](http://elderabuseprevention.e3learning.com.au)

## FOR INFORMATION ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

- Victorian Government Family Violence website
- *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change (2016)* Victorian Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet
- *Free from Violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women (2017)* Victorian Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 National Ageing Research Institute in partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria (2015) Profile of elder abuse in Victoria.
- 2 Brian Beach and Sally-Marie Bamford (2014) Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men, Report for Independent Age, UK.
- 3 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.
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- 5 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.
- 6 Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Address to the 2012 AAG Elder Abuse and Neglect Conference, Alice Springs.
- 7 Pillemer et al., 2016, *op. cit.*; Chen and Dong, 2017, *op. cit.*; Mark Johannesen and Dina LoGiudice (2013) Elder abuse: a systematic review of risk factors in community-dwelling elders, *Age and Ageing*, 42: 292–298.
- 8 NARI and SRV (2015) *op. cit.*; Ceallaigh Spike (2015) The EAPU Helpline: Results of an investigation of five years of call data, Elder Abuse Prevention Unit, Queensland; NSW Elder Abuse Helpline and Resource Unit (2016) Annual Report 2015–2016, NSW EAHRU.
- 9 NARI and SRV (2015) *op. cit.*
- 10 NARI and SRV (2015) *op. cit.*; Spike (2015) *op. cit.*; NSW EAHRU (2016) *op. cit.*



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