



Seniors
Rights
Victoria



ELDER ABUSE, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

#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, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

This discussion paper explores the ways gender and sexual identity can affect an individual's experience of elder abuse, mistreatment and disrespect. It also includes a discussion of the often under recognised crime of sexual assault of older women.

As Australia's population ages and the number of older people increases, elder abuse is expected to become a larger problem, affecting an increasing number of the population.

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 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.

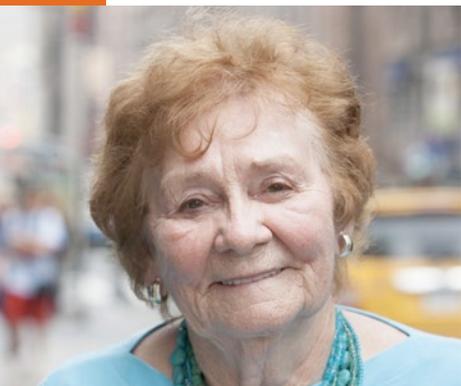
Ageism, and the way older people can be marginalised and less valued within society, is considered the underlying social condition that leads to elder abuse. This can lead to intergenerational abuse where an older family member is devalued or seen to be vulnerable and consequently mistreated and taken advantage of by their children, grandchildren or others.

Intergenerational abuse within the family is thought to be the most common form of elder abuse; it accounts for three-quarters of the calls to Seniors Rights Victoria, while intimate partner violence accounts for approximately 11 per cent of calls.¹

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

WHAT ROLE DOES GENDER PLAY IN ELDER ABUSE?

While any older person can be a victim of elder abuse, a person's gender or sexual identity and related sexism, homophobia and transphobia may exacerbate their experience of violence. Research indicates women are more often victims of elder abuse than men, and this is disproportionate to the number of older women in the community.² Data collected by helplines in Australia indicates that approximately 70 per cent of elder abuse victims are women.³



Violence against women is the most common form of family violence, with women more likely than men to experience violence at the hands of their partner or a family member.⁴ Gender inequality and the way it is expressed in society has been identified as the social condition underlying violence against women.⁵ As older women are subject to both ageism and gender inequality, they may be more likely to experience elder abuse than men.

The number of elder abuse incidents reported (to helplines, services or authorities) may not accurately reflect how often elder abuse is occurring in the community to people of any gender. Older people experiencing abuse may be reluctant to report it for many reasons including:

- dynamics of power and control
- feelings of shame
- feelings of responsibility for the perpetrator's actions
- believing it is a private or family problem
- fear of consequences and retribution
- the desire to protect other family members
- worry about what effect reporting may have on the perpetrator
- not knowing help is available or what rights they have.

While reporting data in Australia suggests elder abuse disproportionately affects women, some research suggests no significant difference in the rates at which older men and women experience abuse, particularly in relation to intergenerational abuse rather than violence perpetrated by a spouse or partner.⁶ Future research in Australia needs to provide more accurate prevalence data, and improve our understanding of the interrelationships of gender of victim, perpetrator and type of abuse.

WHAT OTHER PERSONAL ASPECTS PLAY A ROLE?

Gender is only one of many aspects of a person's identity that may place them at higher risk or shape their experience of violence. Characteristics such as age, ethnicity and cultural identity, disability, language skills, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, gender identity and religion must also be considered when understanding a person's experience of elder abuse or family violence because the interrelation of these aspects of a person's identity can result in a person experiencing overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. There is also some evidence to indicate people who have experienced any type of violence when younger are more likely to be exposed to elder abuse.⁷

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be influenced by their cultural or generational cohorts' attitudes to gender and family responsibilities, which may make them less likely to seek help and more likely to normalise some forms of violence. Additionally, response and services may not be culturally acceptable or available in their preferred language, and some people may be reluctant to seek help if they fear racism or discrimination.

Some people, such as women with a disability, and Aboriginal populations, are subjected to higher levels of violence than other members of the population. The impact of colonisation, dispossession and oppression affects 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.⁸

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.



DO OLDER WOMEN EXPERIENCE INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE?

As well as intergenerational abuse, research suggests that some abuse experienced by older women is intimate partner violence, which can be the continuation of an abusive relationship, the result of a new relationship, or a change in dynamics of an existing relationship.

While older women report lower rates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence than younger women, they experience similar levels of verbal and psychological abuse, and controlling and limiting behaviour.⁹ Ageing does not necessarily inhibit perpetrators: while many male perpetrators of intimate partner violence change their behaviours as they age, moving away from physical violence but maintaining or increasing levels of coercion, financial exploitation and verbal threats,¹⁰ older women can experience physical and sexual violence well into later life.

Generational expectations about gender roles and marriage may influence whether older women experiencing abuse feel able to seek help. Older women may not feel comfortable seeking assistance from specialist family violence services that focus on younger women and children, while sometimes service providers may not be aware of how older age can influence a woman's experience of violence.

DO OLDER WOMEN EXPERIENCE SEXUAL ASSAULT?

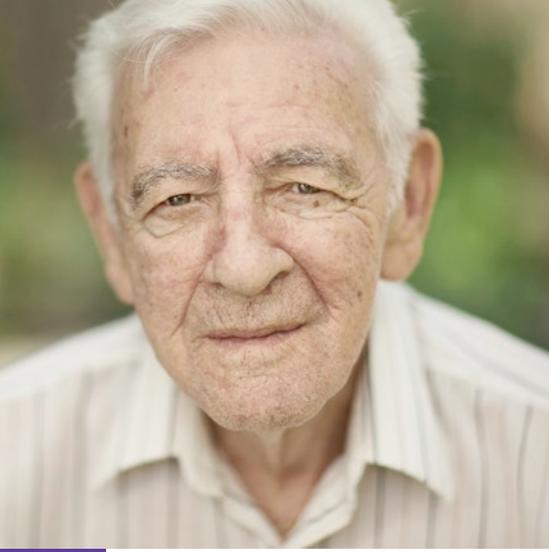
Sexual assault of women, particularly older women, often goes unrecognised and underreported. This is partly attributed to ageist attitudes that marginalise older women and frame them as 'sexless'. While reporting within the community is low, mandated reporting processes in Australian aged care settings regarding physical and sexual assault demonstrate that older women do experience sexual assault. In 2015–16, there were 396 reports in Australian aged care settings of alleged or suspected unlawful sexual contact (and 44 reports of unlawful sexual contact alongside unreasonable use of force allegations).¹¹ The physical effects of sexual assault on older women can be severe, resulting in an increased need for health services, and poorer overall health and life expectancy.¹²

Research in the report Norma's Project suggests there are a number of situational risk factors in care settings (including residential care) that contribute to sexual assault including:

- decreased likelihood of assaults being detected and responded to
- lack of formal follow-up due to lack of mechanisms in place
- barriers to disclosure due to cognitive or communicative impairment, mental illness, physical disability, delays in police investigations; and
- limitations in the judicial system with regard to 'evidence'.¹³

The onset of dementia can cause sexual disinhibition, sexual demand and hypersexual behaviour and as a result older women can experience sexual assault from their husband or partner with cognitive impairment.

See [Norma's Project: A Research Study into the Sexual Assault of Older Women in Australia](#) by the [Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society](#) for more information.



HOW DOES ELDER ABUSE AFFECT OLDER MEN?

Approximately one-third of Seniors Rights Victoria clients who experience elder abuse are men, however, it is thought that the abuse of older men is underreported. Stereotypes such as the man being the provider and protector of the family, and social and cultural norms that require men to show strength and resilience can dissuade men from acknowledging, seeking help or reporting abuse. Even when men do report abuse, there are not always adequate services to support them. While older women can seek support through family violence services and crisis accommodation, many of these are women-only services so these options are not always open to older men experiencing abuse, or to trans and gender diverse people.

Social isolation can increase a person's vulnerability to abuse and research has shown that older men are more likely to be socially isolated than older women.¹⁴ Isolated people may not have supportive friends and family to turn to, or they may be abused by the people they depend on for care.



DO LGBTI OLDER PEOPLE EXPERIENCE ELDER ABUSE?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse and intersex (LGBTI) older people experience the same risk factors for abuse as the wider population. In addition, the Royal Commission found that LGBTI communities experience unique forms of family violence, and can be negatively affected by the way family, friends, professionals and service providers treat them on the basis of their sex, gender identity and sexuality.

Because of prevailing attitudes of heteronormativity and histories of experiences of discrimination, criminalisation and abuse, some older LGBTI Australians continue to hide or modify their sexuality or affirmed gender identity in order to avoid upsetting family members, carers, service providers or others who may hold homophobic or transphobic views.¹⁵ The possibility of facing discrimination and harassment when help-seeking, or when accessing aged care and other health services, may also lead to people hiding this part of their identity or remaining silent about the ways they are being treated.

Some older LGBTI people may be estranged from family and friends who do not respect or acknowledge their gender identity or sexuality, and this can lead to high rates of social isolation or a lack of support, increasingly vulnerability to abuse. As older LGBTI people age or develop disabilities, their capacity to assert themselves with family can

be diminished; this can result in family members restricting the older person's gender expression and not allowing them to be their affirmed gender, or to maintain their chosen relationships or friendships.¹⁶ The strong community links that some older LGBTI people have, however, can be a source of support.

CONCLUSION

Gender inequality and power imbalances between men and women are not as prominent a driver of elder abuse as they are of intimate partner violence. However, an individual's gender identity and sexual orientation will influence their experience of violence, their familial relationships, their help-seeking behaviours and the services available to them. Little research has been undertaken of the gender of perpetrators of intergenerational abuse, and how this might influence behaviours and outcomes. It is clear that further research needs to be done on the ways gender of both the victim and the perpetrator can affect situations of elder abuse.

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.

<u>Seniors Rights Victoria</u>	1300 368 821
<u>Switchboard</u>	1800 184 527
<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

Seniors Rights Victoria also has a number of resources for older people, including help sheets and guides for future planning, and tip sheets for service providers. They can be accessed at seniorsrights.org.au

ENDNOTES

- 1 National Ageing Research Institute (NARI) in partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) (2015) Profile of elder abuse in Victoria.
- 2 NARI and SRV (2015) op.cit.; Ruijia Chen and Xin Qi Dong (2017) Risk factors of Elder Abuse in Elder Abuse: Research, Practice and Policy, Springer, 93–107; Simone Lacher, Albert Wettstein, Olover Senn, Thomas Rosemann, Susann Hasler (2016) Types of abuse and risk factors associated with elder abuse, *Swiss Medical Weekly*, 146, w14273; Naughton et al. (2010) Abuse and Neglect of Older People in Ireland, National Centre for the Protection of Older People.
- 3 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.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Our Watch, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS) and VicHealth (2015) Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia.
- 6 Yongjie Yon, Christopher Mikton, Zachary Gassoumis and Kathleen Wilber (2017) Elder abuse prevalence in community settings: a systematic review and meta-analysis, *Lancet Global Health*, 5, e147–56; Mark Johannesen and Dina LoGiudice (2013) Elder abuse: a systematic review of risk factors in community-dwelling elders, *Age and Ageing*, 42 (3), 292–298.
- 7 Heidi Stökl, Charlotte Watts and Bridget Penhale (2012) Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women in Germany, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(13):2545–64.
- 8 Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Address to the 2012 AAG Elder Abuse and Neglect Conference, Alice Springs.
- 9 Cailin Crockett, Bonnie Brandl and Firoza Chic Dabby (2015) Survivors in the Margins: the invisibility of violence against older women, *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*, 27 (4–5), 291–302; Heidi Stökl and Bridget Penhale (2015) Intimate partner violence and its association with physical and mental health symptoms among older women in Germany, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30 (17), 3089–3111.
- 10 Crockett et al. *ibid.*
- 11 Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health (2016) 2015–16 Report on the Operation of the Aged Care Act 1997.
- 12 Crockett et al. op. cit.
- 13 Rosemary Mann, Philomena Horsley, Catherine Barrett and Jean Tinney, Norma’s Project, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, 2014.
- 14 Brian Beach and Sally-Marie Bamford (2014) Isolation: the emerging crisis for older men, Report for Independent Age, UK.
- 15 Catherine Barrett (2016) Submission to Australian Law Reform Commission Inquiry into Elder Abuse.
- 16 *ibid.*



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A service of: **COTA** 
VICTORIA
for older Australians



We gratefully acknowledge the Victorian Government for supporting the ongoing work of Seniors Rights Victoria.