

Summarising the evidence

ELDER ABUSE

Context brief



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



To what extent will addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women help prevent elder abuse?

This brief is part of a suite of resources produced as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. Visit the [project page](#) for the accompanying research summary, information about the scope and aims of the project and how it was conducted.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

This context brief is a companion document to the *Summarising the evidence* research summary by Stevens, Kaspiew and Carson² which examines the prevalence, perpetration and dynamics of violence against older people, often referred to as elder abuse. Respect Victoria have used the findings in that summary, as well as other academic and practice literature, to explore how far existing approaches to preventing men's violence against women take us towards better understanding how to prevent abuse of older people.

The research summary highlights that ageism is a common form of structural discrimination that informs how and why violence perpetrated against older people occurs. We ask how considering ageism alongside and intersecting with the gendered drivers of men's violence against women might inform more nuanced approaches to the primary prevention of violence against people aged over 65.

THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*¹ identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

These drivers are each addressed with actions to prevent violence against women. These actions challenge the social contexts that allow violence to occur and help to address reinforcing factors that make violence more likely (explained in more detail below). The essential actions to address the gendered drivers are:

- challenge condoning of violence against women
- promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes
- support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – are an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. This work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how power and control are used and abused.

Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* also identifies further factors that can serve to reinforce violence against women. These do not predict violence against women on their own, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

Change the story emphasises that other forms of structural oppression intersect with gendered inequality to shape how and why men's violence against women occurs. However, more work is needed to understand how they combine to shape the drivers of different forms of gendered and family violence and the way they are experienced across our communities.

The following evidence guides and frameworks have begun to explore these intersections, mapping shared and distinct drivers across different communities and developing tailored prevention approaches:

- *Changing the picture: a national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children* which looks at how the gendered drivers play out as they intersect with colonialism for Aboriginal women³
- *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities* which looks at how violence against women with disability is shaped by the intersection of ableism and the gendered drivers⁶
- *Pride in prevention* which looks at the role of heteronormativity and cisnormativity alongside rigid gender roles in driving violence against LGBTIQ+ persons^{7,8}
- *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women* which considers how intersections between the gendered drivers and other forms of structural oppression can be addressed to prevent violence against women who are from immigrant and refugee communities.⁹

Understanding the impact of different sources of oppression will also help us refine and expand upon the known actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, creating safer communities for everyone.

What is elder abuse?

Violence against older people, also referred to as elder abuse, describes various types of violence perpetrated against people 65 and older by another family member or carer. It includes intimate partner violence, as well as abuse perpetrated by adult children, other relatives, neighbours or carers. It includes single acts and patterns of abuse and threats or neglect that cause harm or distress.³

*The National Elder Abuse Perpetration Study (NEAPS)*³ found that 14.8% of Australians have experienced abuse since the age of 65, indicating a significant public health issue.^{2,3} Findings from NEAPS indicate that women and men are victimised to a similar extent. However, there are clear, gendered patterns to this violence. Men are more likely to perpetrate abuse than women, particularly physical, sexual and financial abuse. Women are more likely to report being victimised by physical abuse and significantly more likely to report sexual abuse. None of the men surveyed in NEAPS reported experiencing sexual abuse.³

Alongside gender, age-based discrimination – or ageism – plays a significant factor in violence perpetrated against older people.^{2,4} Aged-based discrimination is illegal but widespread, and ageist beliefs can mean friends, family members or neighbours fail to recognise that older people are being abused, or even excuse or endorse some types of abuse. This is compounded for older women who also experience gender inequality.^{5,6} Ageism generally has been identified by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety as a systemic problem that must be addressed.⁷

Other examples of ageism include:

- failing to respect someone's autonomy or dignity because of their age
- stereotyping older people as weak, infirm, slow or unintelligent
- seeing older people as asexual, unattractive or not worthy of love and intimacy
- derogatory comments or jokes at the expense of older people
- paternalistic, controlling behaviours.

Where might addressing the gendered drivers help prevent violence perpetrated against older people?

Addressing the gendered drivers is likely to have an impact on the experience of older women at risk of intimate partner violence or sexual assault. *Change the story* highlights that older women might experience violence perpetrated by a range of people known to them. For some, this violence is a continuation of a long-term pattern of intimate partner or familial abuse. Any factor that limits women's access to resources, independence, or social and economic power, or reduces their perceived worth or social status increases the risk of abuse for older women.¹

Actions to address older women's economic inequality and support their financial and social independence are likely to help prevent abuse.⁸ For example, achieving pay equality and ending unfair financial policies, hiring practices, and divorce settlements will increase the likelihood of women's ability to live more independently later in life. This is in line with recommendations from *Change the story*, which highlights the importance of a life stage approach to prevention that considers the changing experiences of women as they age.¹

Efforts to address rigid gender stereotypes and dominant forms of masculinity may benefit men over 65 experiencing abuse by challenging the notion that a man's masculinity relies on his autonomy, self-sufficiency and independence. At a broader level this will undermine ageist and ableist notions that a person's value is based on how productive and capable they are. At an individual level it may encourage more help seeking amongst men.^{9,10} This is important for older men who have experienced sexual assault; the fact that none of the men surveyed by NEAPS reported sexual assault^{2,3} may indicate reluctance to disclose they had been victimised.

Future directions for preventing violence against older people

Understanding the impact of ageism

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that challenging ageism, alongside the gendered drivers of violence, is important to prevent violence perpetrated against older people. However, more work needs to be done to understand which aspects of ageism are more likely to drive violence, identify examples of promising practice, and to build and test conceptual frameworks that ensure the effectiveness of new interventions. Existing prevention programs and campaigns focussing on respectful family relationships should promote positive attitudes towards older people as part of their strategies. Investment in comprehensive evaluation of projects that test these approaches is key to improving evidence in this field.

Understanding patterns of perpetration

There is limited evidence on the unique ways that some forms of abuse are perpetrated against and experienced by persons over 65. For example, the ways that loneliness and isolation experienced by older people can see them targeted by and more vulnerable to online and financial scams, and the ways this vulnerability may be shaped by gender.

Understanding rigid gender stereotypes and women's abuse of older people

There is a need for further investigation of the role rigid gender stereotypes play in informing women's risk of abusing older people in their care. Perpetrating abuse against older people is never excusable and the majority of those who provide care to older people do not perpetrate abuse. However, carer stress can be a risk factor for violence perpetrated against older people.² Gendered expectations around caring duties, rooted in stereotypes of women as 'natural carers' and prioritising of men as income earners, coupled with a lack of institutional, family and community support, may contribute to resentment and financial insecurity for carers.⁸ These can increase the likelihood of violence against older people.

Deeper recognition of the impact of colonisation

Recent studies and consultations with Aboriginal Community Controlled family violence services indicate that violence perpetrated against older people is a considerable concern in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.^{2,11} Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons over 65 are disproportionately affected by elder abuse, particularly financial abuse.¹² Further research exploring the intersections of colonialism, gender, intergenerational trauma and ageism is required, along with better understanding the complex context of financial abuse in this community.¹¹

Understanding the impact of cisnormativity and heteronormativity

There is very limited survey, qualitative research or evaluative data relating to LGBTIQ+ persons and communities in experiences of violence perpetrated against older people, or family violence more broadly. This affects the perception of how prevalent this abuse is, and influences the ability and willingness of older LGBTIQ+ people to report abuse and seek assistance.¹⁰ Addressing violence

against older LGBTIQ+ people requires better understanding of the role that heteronormativity and cisnormativity play in driving this violence.

Greater attention to the impact of racism

NEAPS identified that racism plays a role in driving violence against older people in family and community care settings for culturally and linguistically minoritised persons.³ Further research is required on how the intersection of ageism, racism and sexism drives elder abuse, especially in under-studied settings like aged and disability care.

Greater attention to the intersections between ableism and ageism

Many older people are also disabled. Ableism, like ageism, discriminates against anyone who is unable to meet social norms regarding bodily and cognitive ability.¹³ *Changing the landscape* builds on *Change the story* to provide a framework for the primary prevention of violence against women with disability.^{1,13} It is closely informed by the social model of disability and emphasises the importance of supporting autonomy, dignity and participation.¹³ Further work is required to understand the specific ableist drivers of violence perpetrated against older people and whether primary prevention to reduce violence against women with disability may also benefit older women or older people more broadly.

Understanding abuse against older people in care settings

Findings captured in the evidence review and summary prepared for this project focused on abuse in family and community care environments. Further work should look more closely at abuse occurring in residential aged care and disability care settings. Consideration should be given to how the aged and disability care sector can be understood as a primary prevention setting where social and cultural norms and values are produced and reinforced. *Change the story* notes that violence against women with disability and against older women is often minimised and relabelled in institutional settings.^{1,13} Inquiries into these sectors have found norms that undervalue older people and ignore their diverse needs.⁷ Professional carers also play a pivotal role in modelling attitudes and behaviour that centre dignity and respect for older people.

References

1. Our Watch. Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2021.
2. Stevens E, Kaspiew R, Carson R. Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer. Melbourne: Respect Victoria; 2023.
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6. Hightower J, Smith MJ, Hightower HC. Hearing the voices of abused older women. *J Gerontol Soc Work*. 2006;46(3-4):205-27.
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12. Brijnath B, O'Halloran K, Lock K, Feldman P, Claff L, Dow B. Primary prevention of family violence among older people living in Victoria. Melbourne, Australia: Respect Victoria; 2021.
13. Our Watch & Women with Disabilities Victoria. Changing the landscape. A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities. Melbourne: Our Watch; 2022.

Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiew & R Carson)

Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

Suggested citation:

Respect Victoria. Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse. Melbourne: Respect Victoria; 2023.



Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.