



**Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against
women and girls on violence against older women
10 April 2026**

Australian Feminists for Women's Rights (AF4WR) is an incorporated association of feminists from all over Australia campaigning for women's sex-based rights protections, within a broader context of social and economic justice for all. We have members of all ages from women in their early to mid 20s to women in their late 80s. We use the term 'woman' here to mean 'adult of female sex'.

Manifestations, perpetrators and causes of violence (Part A, Q 1–3)

Like other forms of violence against women, violence against older women is a societal issue which is largely experienced within interpersonal relationships and within the family. It is part of women's lifetime experience of misogynist violence and resulting inequality between men and women. It is also linked to ageist beliefs that see older women as having very little value once they have transitioned through their childbearing years and become viewed as an economic burden and in the way. This is particularly the case because our society values capitalism and the value of everything is measured by its economic worth. Therefore, only those older women who are seen to have 'purchasing power' are respected in the form of transactional relationships, whereas other older women assumed to be no longer contributing financially to the economy (even if they are in less obvious ways, for example as unpaid carers for their grandchildren) are deemed to be a burden, not valued or respected, and exposed to abuse and violence.

When violence occurs in old age, not only is it a crushing experience at the time but the flow-on ramifications from, for example, financial abuse, sexual assaults, and psychological abuse can become life-threatening. Added to this violence against older women from individuals is the violence and neglect experienced when they interact with the health system due to sexist and ageist beliefs that give rise to discrimination against older women. For example, medical knowledge about health problems among older people is often generated from studies of men's health and it is only relatively recently that the specificities of women's experience of significant health issues (such as heart attacks), or of health issues that women are more likely to experience, have come under scrutiny. Moreover, medical practitioners can adopt a paternalistic attitude to older women which at worst may manifest as withholding of information about diagnosis and treatment and at best as talking down to women as if they were small children or mentally incompetent.

For older women, there is a lifetime of learned submission to male dominion that equips girls and women with an innate, almost unconscious ability, to 'know their place' (lower than men in the power matrix) and to avoid, whenever possible, likely backlash from boys and men if they step out of line or seek equal treatment. One might hope that some progress in law and societal attitudes can change this framework for future generations of women but Australian statistics on various forms of violence against girls and women including abuse of young girls within the family, sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, misogyny in public life and indeed femicide, tend to encourage pessimism about future outcomes for women as they age.

This pessimism is exacerbated by recent studies of both [teenage boys](#) and [young adult males](#) of the so-called Gen Z, who are apparently *more* misogynist than their elders rather than less, thus bucking what had been a somewhat encouraging trend.

Often older women hand over their financial security to their children under an informal arrangement (or indeed a formal one) believing they will be cared for either by the children or by paid services to the home, but instead find they are neglected. These types of abuse or violence have been termed elder abuse, although that term masks the fact that the elders being abused are more likely to be women, not only because of the aforementioned lifetime misogyny but also because [women, who live longer than men, are the majority of the elderly](#). In 2022, older people comprised some 4.4 million people or just over 17% of the then Australian population, with projections of 21-23% by 2066. The majority of these people are women. Among the 85-plus group, there are two women for every one man (Australian Institute for Health and Welfare 2024).

Specific forms of violence, gaps and barriers and government monitoring (Part A, Q 4–8 & Part B)

There has been increased focus in recent years on elder abuse in both family and institutional settings through a number of national inquiries, with the COVID-19 pandemic shining a particularly strong light on the situation of older Australians. In the following paragraphs, we reference, among others, the [2021 Report of the national Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety](#) (RCACQS), focusing on the institutional setting; the [2021 National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study](#) (NEAPS), conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and focusing on family and community settings; and the [2025 Report of the Senate Inquiry into Aged Care Service Delivery](#). The legal profession is also becoming increasingly involved, as this recent [Australian Law Society Journal article](#) suggests (Yang 2025), although it is noteworthy that most landmark cases that have made it to state higher courts in recent years have concerned financial abuse rather than psychological abuse, sexual violence or neglect.

These reports show that, in the words of the Royal Commission report, ‘substandard care and abuse pervades the Australian aged care system’ (RCACQS 2021, p. 68), and that some 14.8% of older Australians have experienced financial, physical, sexual or psychological abuse or neglect at the hands of family members or others personally close to them, with the overwhelming majority of the abuse being psychological (NEAPS 2021, p. 33). In addition to the 5,718 allegations of assault in aged care during 2019–20 under the mandatory reporting requirements of the Aged Care Act, a ‘study conducted by consultancy firm KPMG for the Australian Department of Health estimated that, in the same year, a further 27,000 to 39,000 alleged assaults occurred that were exempt from mandatory reporting because they were resident-on-resident incidents’ (RCACQS 2021, p. 68). The abuse reported to the Royal Commission was both physical and sexual, and occurred at the hands of both staff members and other residents, with aged care providers failing to protect residents from this abuse. The Commission concluded that *‘this is a disgrace and should be a source of national shame’* (RCACQS 2021, p. 68, emphasis added). As the majority of aged care residents are women, this also means that women are the primary victims of physical and sexual assault.

Unfortunately, the perpetrators are often also women (even if the majority of sexual assaults are by male residents or staff against women), as the majority of *workers* in aged care are also women, who are often migrants of non-English-speaking background and extremely badly paid, often on hourly rates. In a landmark Aged Care Work Value decision in 2025, the Fair Work Commission delivered a 15% increase in award wages for some 400,000 aged care workers, with other improvements in their

working conditions as well. That decision has been vocally endorsed by the current government. Aged care workers have historically been among the worst paid in Australia, and while many of them have treated those in their care with less than full respect, the responsibility lies squarely with the largely church and business organisations that run aged care homes in Australia.

As concerns the NEAPS study, men were the majority of perpetrators, and among them, spouses and sons were the majority, and women experienced marginally more abuse overall in the five categories than did men (15.9% as against 13.6% for men) and experienced markedly more neglect and psychological abuse. Older Australians of both sexes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to experience abuse. Among those of what Australians call 'culturally and linguistically diverse' backgrounds (CALD), that is, racialised and linguistic minorities (including Indigenous), prevalence rates were the same as the overall rates. One surprising finding was that psychological abuse *diminished* significantly with age, while neglect diminished into the 70s and then rose slightly from the 80s. Another finding was that abused elders were unlikely to report the abuse to a government agency, instead trying to sort it out within the family. It is thus likely that elder abuse in a family and community setting is significantly underreported, and given that, as noted above, women are more likely to be 'trained' to be compliant and not 'make a fuss', it is also more likely that violence against older women in Australia is under-recognised and under-reported.

Even when detail is provided with regard to perpetrators, victims and types of elder abuse, different jurisdictions pick and choose which type of abuse they will respond to. In the state of Victoria for example, elder abuse is seen only as a form of family violence and funding is directed to the family violence sector. Workers in the family violence sector in Victoria are trained to respond to women of childbearing age escaping domestic violence, not older women. Therefore, support for older women is generally missing, even though the government would claim that it is addressing violence against all women.

This lack of service response is combined with a lack of education that would enable older women to feel more empowered to understand what is happening to them. Were such education to take place, women would then clearly know that regular humiliations, bullying, disrespect and discrimination are due to embedded societal attitudes of ageism and sexism and that this is actually violence against older women. Even though, according to NEAPS (2021), the highest levels of violence against women are psychological, women themselves don't label this psychological abuse as violence due to the lack of educational resources that could help them.

Risk factors for elders in general (and thus for women) identified by NEAPS, which may make it difficult to access support services, include living alone; having no partner (although the partner can also be the abuser!); having poorer health or a disability; being isolated; having less financial security; renting or not owning their home; and being from a CALD background with different expectations of caring and also language barriers (although see above re no difference in prevalence). In particular, when older women experienced abuse from family members they were less likely to report the abuse or seek support which exposed them to the likelihood of ongoing abuse.

As concerns living alone, being poor or being isolated, older lesbians can be a particularly vulnerable group, with supported single-sex services and housing being virtually non-existent. Legal frameworks now enabling some men in most Australian states to identify as women and work in intimate care settings with women militate against older lesbians (or indeed any other older women needing single sex health or aged care services) getting what they need in full respect of their dignity and privacy.

The institutional practice of folding lesbians or bisexual women into the 'LGBTIQA+' category which also includes men is not even remotely helpful in this respect. For a start, it is almost impossible to obtain meaningfully disaggregated data on this specific group of older women. The information we have is thus patchy and anecdotal and comes to us via sociocultural communities of which some of our members form part.

What we *do* know, concerning both lesbians and poorer heterosexual women, is that housing security is a major concern: women over 55 are the fastest growing group of homeless people in Australia. The national housing crisis, with rental rates and purchase rates alike out of the reach of the most vulnerable members of our society, has been at the forefront of national political debate over the last few years, with various government programs put in place. These programs, however, are largely aimed at younger people and include 'help to buy' schemes. Such schemes are zero help for homeless older women.

When women do have financial security and own their own home, they become targets for financial exploitation from family members, mostly male, and scammers. This becomes especially the case if there is cognitive decline and if there is no or only one power of attorney appointed. The legal area of estate planning and appointing more than one power of attorney for financial aspects needs urgent attention due to reported high rates of financial abuse of older women that are coming to light.

Legal frameworks and remedies (Part C)

Some of the difficulties Australia has in addressing elder abuse in general and violence against older women in particular is that we are a federal system, with health services in particular coming under the aegis of the states, while regulation of aged care provision and in-home support services being a federal responsibility. As concerns violence against women, the responsibility is shared between both federal and state governments. As with other intersecting forms of violence impacting on women but subsumed into a category that also includes men (such as racialised sexual violence, or violence against women with disabilities), violence against older women is usually subsumed into the 'elder abuse' category with the specific forms of violence they experience *as women* not appearing as clearly as they could or not getting the services they need.

In 2019, the Australian government set up a national helpline for people seeking information and support on elder abuse. However, that helpline refers callers to relevant state-based services, which can lead to differential outcomes as noted above in the case of Victoria. Outcomes are also subjected, of course, to the political priorities of whichever government is in power at the time.

All is not bleak, however, which shows that various studies and inquiries and Royal Commissions have made governments pay attention. (One could also observe, more cynically, that with close to one fifth of the entire population and close to one quarter of the voting-age population now being 60-plus in age, governments have a weather eye to who will be voting them in or out in the next election.)

The first five-year National Plan to end elder abuse in Australia was set up in 2019; the second, the [National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2026-2036](#), was published on 16 March 2026. It is founded on six principles (taking a human rights approach; ending ageism; listening to and learning from the experiences of older people and diverse communities; a strong focus on prevention and early intervention; supporting individual decision-making, autonomy and dignity; and a person-centred and trauma-informed response), and has four key focus areas (increase whole-of-

community awareness, education and engagement; improve laws and systems to promote and protect the rights of older people; strengthen the capacity and capability of services, including through targeted education and training for professionals; address gaps in the evidence base and increase collaboration).

We attach particular importance to the human rights approach and to listening and learning from the experiences of older women (who are invariably ignored or considered less worthy of attention than older men), and consider addressing gaps in the evidence base to be crucial. As is frequently the case where women's rights are concerned, there is insufficient disaggregated data for women's needs as *both* female *and* elders to be adequately addressed. Often, we look to studies or statistics on violence against women *tout court* or on femicides to find the answers. For example, in 2025 *The Guardian* reported a [2023 figure from the Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) that showed that 28 women over 55 were killed in (alleged) domestic violence (DV) homicides that year. That is one third of all DV homicides for 2023. Which begs the question: were they killed because they were *older* women or simply because they were *women* living with or having previously lived with violent men? How can we represent these figures intelligibly to separate which bit is woman-killing and which bit is elder-killing? Yet, the murdered women are not separable into bits.

Until women are considered as a core constituency that is prioritised for research, law, policy and action, with our 'woman-ness' taking precedence over our 'old-ness' or any other intersecting category, it is likely that we will see little change. For all the government action plans and laws and money allocated to programs, violence against women and femicide in Australia are increasing rather than decreasing. Which is why we continue to take government plans with a grain of salt or two. We certainly need to focus on keeping older women safe(r), but we also need to address the misogyny that is the underlying cause of the abuse (misogyny that is also, unfortunately, internalised by many women). The victims will not be protected until we stop enabling perpetrators: culturally, societally, legally, financially. They will not be protected, either, until we start treating those workers, also mostly women, mostly in precarious employment, as less disposable and more deserving of care themselves.

Yet, we must and do live in hope. There has been new activity in this area, and new government action that is in direct response to inquiries and reports. For example, in November 2025 the current Australian government brought in a new framework for in-home support for the aged, called, logically, Support at Home. It is a more coordinated framework that brings together and replaces previous programs. This measure was a direct response to recommendations of the RCACQS to

- create a more equitable system
- improve access to services, assistive technology and home modifications
- better help older people to stay active, healthy, and socially connected to their communities ([Australian Dept of Health website](#), accessed 10 April 2026, see also [Support at Home website](#)).

Both past and current Australian governments also supported the establishment of the peak NGO [Elder Abuse Action Australia](#) (EAAA), set up in 2018. Depressingly, a quick search of EAAA's website does not reveal any specific treatment of abuse of older women. We look forward to this peak body making progress in this area.

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