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Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls  
By email: [hrc-sr-vaw@un.org](mailto:hrc-sr-vaw@un.org)

## Input to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls - 81<sup>st</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly – Violence against older women

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to your inquiry into violence against older women.

### The work of Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a federation of community-based, not-for-profit organisations with no religious affiliations. Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances. For over 75 years, Relationships Australia has provided a range of services, including counselling, dispute resolution, children's services, services for victims and perpetrators of family violence, services for older people, and relationship and professional education. We aim to support all people in Australia to live with positive and respectful relationships, and believe that people have the capacity to change how they relate to others.

This submission draws upon:

- our lengthy experience in delivering diverse programs to victim survivors of crime, domestic, family and sexual violence, and institutional abuse
- evidence-based programs and research, and
- our leadership and policy development experience.

### Key questions and types of input/comments sought

#### A. Manifestations and perpetrators of violence

1. What are the most common manifestations of violence, including physical, psychological, economic, and sexual violence, against older women to which they are subjected on intersecting grounds but especially in connection with their sex, traditional customs or stereotyped care roles and age?

In 2021, Qu et al reported on Australian Government-funded research into the nature and prevalence of abuse of older adults (Qu et al, 2021). This was the first such research in Australia, and was informed by, *inter alia*, surveys of adults over the age of 65 living in the community. Some important cohorts were excluded or insufficiently engaged for generalisable

conclusions, including adults with cognitive impairments, those living in institutional settings, culturally and linguistically marginalised adults, First Nations adults and adults belonging to LGBTIQ+ communities. There was limited focus on people who cause harm to older adults. Even with these limitations, prevalence findings were alarming, with 14.8% of adults over 65 experiencing one or more sub-types of abuse during a 12 month period. The limitations mean that this research under-reports true prevalence. Research work is ongoing across other cohorts. Findings of particular relevance to this inquiry include:

- overall prevalence rates were similar for men and women, although men were slightly more likely to experience physical abuse and more women experienced sexual abuse and neglect;<sup>1</sup> this is broadly consistent with an earlier meta-analysis which found that, internationally, there was a greater likelihood of women being abused (15%) compared with men (10.6%)<sup>2</sup>
- men outweighed women as perpetrators of abuse by 10 percentage points overall, especially in relation to physical, sexual, and financial abuse
- the most common form of abuse is psychological abuse (11.7%) and neglect is the next most common abuse subtype at 2.9%.
- other prevalence rates were 1.8% for physical abuse and 1% for sexual abuse; these findings are consistent with another meta-analysis of abuse of women over 55 which showed that the most common abuse subtype was psychological abuse (11.8%), followed by neglect (4.1%), financial (or economic) abuse (3.8%), sexual abuse (2.3%) and physical abuse (1.9%)<sup>3</sup> In relation to sexual abuse, Qu et al further observed:
  - that police and legal responses are almost never invoked (despite the potentially criminal nature of the conduct)
  - that distress scores of older people who experience sexual violence were similar to the scores of those who experienced physical and financial abuse, and
  - the relative absence of policy and programme responses to sexual violence against older people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. (2021). National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report>, pp 11–13, 39–40; Australian Law Reform Commission. (2025) Safe, informed, supported: Reforming justice responses to sexual violence. (Report 143) <https://www.alrc.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/JRSV-Final-Report-Book-for-Web-final-20250211.pdf>, paragraph 16.18.

<sup>2</sup> Ho, C., Wong, S., & Ho, R. (2017). Global analysis of elder abuse: A meta-analysis and meta-regression. *East Asian Archives of Psychiatry*, 27, 43–55.

<sup>3</sup> Yon, Y., Mikton, C., Gassoumis, Z., & Wilber, K. (2019). The prevalence of self-reported elder abuse among older women in community settings: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 20(2), 245–259.

<sup>4</sup> Qu et al, 2021, pp 161-162.

2. What are the causes of violence against older women and who are the most common perpetrators of violence against them.<sup>5</sup>

*Risk factors of experiencing violence as an older woman*

Relationships Australia practice experience, supported by research literature, indicate that risk factors of experiencing violence as an older woman include:

- family separation
- complex and conflictual family dynamics
- housing pressures, 'inheritance greed', demographic trends, and the increasing availability of superannuation through inheritance
- disputes among adult siblings about care and decision-making arrangements of older relatives
- experience of abuse as a child, adolescent and in early and middle adulthood
- dependency for care and assistance with activities of daily living, and
- living with cognitive impairment.

*Risk factors of causing harm to older women*

Risks and associations of causing harm to older women include:

- financial hardship (particular association with perpetrating financial abuse)
- physical ill-health (particular association with neglect)
- economic dependence on the older woman
- having experienced family violence and/or child maltreatment
- misuse of alcohol (particular association with perpetrating sexual abuse of an older woman)
- mental ill-health, and
- social isolation.<sup>6</sup>

Across our services supporting older adults experiencing abuse and mistreatment, there are patterns in which adult sons who have used violence in their intimate relationships, and are subject to protection orders, may return to live with their parents. They take with them co-existing challenges including harmful use of alcohol and other drugs, harmful gambling, and mental health challenges. They may also be returning to the home in which they were initially exposed to violence within family dynamics.

3. How does intersecting and historical discrimination and preexisting vulnerabilities compound older women's exposure to violence?

This remains under-researched; particularly for abuse types that are difficult to evidence and quantify (such as psychological abuse and neglect). The clearest available evidence relates to

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<sup>5</sup> Qu et al, 2021, Chapter 2, p 57.

<sup>6</sup> See Qu et al, 2022, Chapter 2.

vulnerability to financial abuse, which generally leaves a trail of evidence and is more amenable to quantification.

Women experience an accumulating exposure to risk of abuse from infancy; women abused as children appear to be at heightened risk of abuse for the rest of their lifespan (whether from the same or multiple abusers). Relationships Australia's practice experience is that violence against older family members can be a manifestation of decades-old dynamics.

Gendered social and occupational roles, disruptions to earning arising from caring responsibilities, and chronic under-valuing of work characterised as 'women's work', expose women to greater risk of experiencing lifelong financial disadvantage. Historic devaluation of caring work derives from, and persists by virtue of, devaluation of women and their contributions to society.<sup>7</sup>

These circumstances exacerbate vulnerability to economic abuse across the lifecourse, and heighten the barriers to recover from economic abuse. Following relationship breakdown, women experience financial hardship for longer periods, compounding economic vulnerability into late adulthood.<sup>8</sup>

Older women are too often excluded from consideration in funding safe and secure housing. Accommodation for women escaping violence prioritises women with children. In our elder abuse services, Relationships Australia has encountered tragic cases where older women enduring abuse (including intimate partner abuse) are denied access to emergency accommodation services.

Finally, assistance with financial management provides opportunity for financial abuse to occur, particularly in the context of gendered financial management roles and patterns that see women relying on adult children for assistance with managing financial matters to a significantly greater extent than men.

4. Are there specific emerging or underreported forms of violence against older women, including in digital technologies, and the digitalization of essential services for everyday life, including financial and patrimony issues?

Relationships Australia is concerned that all forms of violence against older women are under-disclosed, with barriers to disclosure and help-seeking including shame, embarrassment, and lack of confidence that support is available and will be provided, as well as cultural and linguistic barriers. This lack of confidence is well-founded. Although evidence indicates that

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2020) Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summaryfindings/latest-release>

<sup>8</sup> See, eg, Smyth, B., & Weston, R. (2000). Financial living standards after divorce: A recent snapshot (Research Paper No. 23); Broadway, B, Kalb, G, and Maheswaran, D. (2022) From Partnered to Single: Financial Security Over a Lifetime; de Vaus, D., Gray, M., Qu, L., & Stanton, D. (2015). The economic consequences of divorce in six OECD countries (Research Report No. 31); Easteal, P., Young, L., & Carline, A. (2018). Domestic violence, property and family law in Australia. *International Journal of Law, Policy and The Family*, 32, 204–229 doi:10.1093/lawfam/eby005.

psychological abuse is exponentially more prevalent than other forms of abuse, Australian Governments have failed to provide ongoing funding to support victim survivors of forms of abuse that do not give rise to legal remedies. While the national Government has guaranteed ongoing funding for legal services, there is no such guarantee for therapeutic and psychosocial services that are necessary to disrupt intergenerational dynamics of violence and to support recovery.

Older adults remain over-represented among cohorts who experience digital exclusion in Australia.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of sexual violence against older women has yet to receive the attention it merits.<sup>10</sup> Older women reporting sexual violence are likely to have their reports minimised or disbelieved.

7. What evidence and data exist on violence against older women in institutional settings such as nursing homes, long-term care, assisted living facilities, or hospitals?

Australia's Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety characterised abuse of older people living in residential aged care facilities as 'an extreme example of substandard care' which extended 'into the realm of criminal behaviour'.<sup>11</sup> It assessed the prevalence of abuse in residential aged care as being 39.2%.<sup>12</sup>

8. What mechanisms do States have in place to effectively monitor and report violence committed against older women, as well as their ability to access justice and redress mechanisms for abuse in these settings?

Older women are often strongly averse to seeking legal recourse, especially where they are being harmed by a family member. Formal justice system mechanisms are inappropriate and unresponsive to the wishes and agency of older women seeking to preserve but improve valued relationships. However, where legal recourse is appropriate and consented to, current legal is inadequate to uphold older women's rights.<sup>13</sup> Older women suffer from violations of the right to life, the right to privacy and the right to family life, as well as the right to freedom from cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Ormond-Parker, L., Morrison, K., Rea, H., & Ganley, L. Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: 2025 Australian Digital Inclusion Index. <https://digitalinclusionindex.org.au/the-2025-findings/>

<sup>10</sup> For more information, see <https://www.opalinstitute.org/>

<sup>11</sup> Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Final Report: Care, Dignity and Respect, 2021, Volume 2, p 93; see also Australian Law Reform Commission. (2017) Elder abuse: A national legal response. (Report 131) <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/elder-abuse-a-national-legal-response-alrc-report-131/>; Qu et al, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> As noted in Qu et al, 2021, p 1.

<sup>13</sup> See Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission Report Final Report, 2021; Royal Commission Interim Report, 2019.

The *Aged Care Act 2024* is said by the Australian Government to be rights-based. This is misleading. While section 23 of the Aged Care Act enumerates rights of users of aged care services, subsection 24(3) removes from such users any standing to enforce the section 23 rights, or to vindicate breaches of these rights in a court or tribunal; instead, enforcement of rights is left to the complaints mechanism in the Act. Further, the Act has failed to move towards reducing and eventually eliminating the use of restrictive practices.

Beyond institutional settings, monitoring and reporting violence against older women is hindered by pervasive ageism which de-prioritises detection and remediation of such violence.

## B. Gaps and barriers

### 9. What barriers prevent older women from reporting violence and from accessing assistance and protection in a timely manner?

Lack of geographic equity in service availability, and failure to fund services proportionate to even known prevalence, are barriers erected and maintained by governments.

The Second National Plan to End Abuse and Mistreatment of Older Adults, released three years after expiry of the first Plan, disgracefully includes no funding commitments; nor does it articulate a timeframe for achieving its goals, unlike the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children. As noted above, while there is some (although insufficient) ongoing funding for legal services, many of our clients do not wish to pursue legal remedies. Further, in many cases of the most prevalent form of abuse – psychological abuse - there is no legal cause of action. The underlying issues are relational; so, too, must be responses.

Other barriers are social and cultural, including shame, stigma, and internalised ageism. Older women may avoid seeking external help because they do not want the person harming them to suffer legal consequences. The person harming them may also be their only carer, and older women fear that if they seek help, they may be left with no option but to go into institutional care, which is unappealing for a range of reasons. They may fear that if they seek help, they will lose contact with other family members; especially grandchildren. It is our practice experience that contact with grandchildren is often weaponised by adult children, and used as leverage to cause harm, especially financial abuse.

### 10. What barriers prevent older women from accessing justice and reparations?

Where legal remedies are available and desired, they are expensive, time-consuming and stressful. As indicated in our response to Question 8, the *Aged Care Act 2024* expressly excludes older adults in government-funded aged care from seeking remedies for breaches of their rights.

11. How accessible and age-appropriate are healthcare, housing and support services for older women, especially the survivors of violence Describe both adaptations and gaps.

Australian government-funded services for older women experiencing violence, to the limited extent they exist, privilege legal responses over therapeutic and psycho-social supports. Older women who are survivors of domestic and family violence, of intergenerational trauma or of institutional violence face intersecting social and bureaucratic obstacles to accessing person-centred, culturally responsive and trauma-informed support. Intersecting circumstances of vulnerability contribute to increasing numbers of older women experiencing homelessness and housing precarity.

Experience of domestic violence is emerging as a significant factor underlying homelessness and housing precarity among older women.<sup>15</sup> Risks of homelessness are exacerbated by ageism and gendered economic disparities.<sup>16</sup>

12. How are older women represented or consulted in policy-making processes, design, and monitoring of responses to violence?

Policy documents generally caveat commitments to seek out, elicit and embody the voice of older adults (including women) by references to 'where possible'. It often seems not to be 'possible'. For example, the Second National Plan was consulted on over 6 weeks leading up to Christmas. Consequently, some important cohorts were significantly under-represented. We experience this frequently and across a range of social policy consultations, where it appears that intentions to engage in co-design and value lived experience dissipates to become (at best) last minute afterthoughts or 'tick a box' rituals.

## C. Legal frameworks and remedies

14. How do existing national legal frameworks address violence against older women? Are there any laws and policies that specifically address the risks they face and their needs?

A stark illustration of de-prioritisation of violence against older women is plain from the timeframes of two relevant national plans. The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children commits to a timeframe of 'within a generation'. The delayed National Plan to End Violence Against Older Persons has no timeframe.

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<sup>15</sup> This is consistent with emerging research; see, eg, Shao, N. (2024) The crisis of older women's homelessness: A case study of Australia. 42 *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences* 406 <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5e6d/a64bf636c94cd1c857c0fed1e0c0a1ff579f.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> See, eg, Craig, L., & Hastings, C. (2024). Intersectionality of gender and age ('gender\* age'): a critical realist approach to explaining older women's increased homelessness. *Journal of critical realism*, 23(4), 361-383. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14767430.2024.2389675?needAccess=true>.

The national government has committed more than \$4 billion to implement the plan to end violence against women and children (media release 4 March 2026, by Minister Plibersek and Assistant Minister Kearney).

At date of writing, no money has been allocated to implement the elder abuse plan.

16. In any future international instrument on older persons, what specific issues should the instrument include with regards to older women?

Key issues include recognising:

- the inherent value of older women as rights-bearers
- intersectionality of risk and protective factors, including the confluence of ageism, sexism, racism and ableism
- the value of prevention and disruption of intergenerational violence, and
- lifelong structural inequities that exacerbate risk, compound harm, and hinder recovery and repair.

17. Are there examples of promising practices or reforms that have improved the prevention, protection, or redress of violence against older women?

#### *Relational, holistic responses that respect older women's autonomy*

Prevention and early intervention opportunities could build on successes demonstrated by multi-disciplinary hub models, and promoting integration into the broader family relationship, family law and family violence service systems. Hub approaches have been recommended and successfully implemented across a range of social service delivery systems.<sup>17</sup> Hubs are uniquely positioned to offer seamless whole-of-lifecourse, whole-of-family responses.

The practice experience of Relationships Australia confirms that the risk and impact of abuse can be reduced by employing relational, holistic models, tailored to individuals' circumstances.

Abuse of older women is not stopped by 'transactional' solutions that do not take into account underlying psycho-social dynamics (such as the use of coercive controlling behaviours) and do not attend to relationships that are valued by an older woman. Clients tell Relationships Australia that they delay help-seeking because they regard legal responses as unacceptable, and are unaware of other options. Our clients often don't want their abuser to be punished or removed from the family. Overwhelmingly, they want support to change relationships which they value, but that are harming them. The common denominator across each successful intervention is durable, relational change. This can be achieved only by gaining a deep understanding of the relationships which clients value.

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<sup>17</sup> See, eg, the highly successful Family Relationship Centres in the Australian family law system, Child and Family Hubs in New South Wales, and Integrated Child and Family Centres, as well as the Victorian 'Our Place' schools programmes.

Cultural safety is critical. Our First Nations clients, for example, tell Relationships Australia that they value access to Aboriginal staff who can advocate for solutions that strive to harmonise relevant elements of law and traditional cultural practices.

### *Specialist elder mediation*<sup>18</sup>

To support safe and successful elder mediation, our services may initially offer our client and family members:

- counselling
- psycho-education
- case management and coordination, and
- referrals to complementary services, within or outside our federation.

Elder mediation, undertaken by specialist workers:

- centres rights
- disrupts intergenerational patterns of conflict and violence, and
- repairs family relationships and social connections.

### *Eldercaring Coordination*

The Eldercaring Coordination model works with high conflict families to ensure their focus remains directed to the needs and desires of the older person; effectively centring the voice of that older person in decision making that affects them. It has been developed in the USA as a solution for those high conflict families for whom mediation may not be an appropriate solution.<sup>19</sup> A group of Australian practitioners, researchers and other stakeholders have been exploring the potential implementation of this model here in Australia. A pilot programme was undertaken and evaluated.<sup>20</sup>

### *Perpetrator interventions*

Relationships Australia has achieved promising outcomes with:

- cognitive behaviour therapy
- education around abuse and neglect of older people
- education on taking care of older family members
- assistance with conflict resolution and family-decision making, and
- offering adjunct services to address risk factors affecting the person causing harm, especially within multidisciplinary teams.

Further research is needed.

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<sup>18</sup> Such as those qualified under the Elder Mediation International Network (<https://elder-mediation-international.net/>) and the Elder Mediation Australasian Network (<https://elder-mediation.com.au/>).

<sup>19</sup> For more information about Eldercaring Coordination, see, eg, <https://www.eldercaringcoordination.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> See the report on the evaluation is at <https://www.relationships.org.au/document/research-report-preserving-dignity-overcoming-conflict-adelaides-eldercaring-coordination-project/>

19. What funding, resources, and institutional arrangements are necessary to effectively address violence against older women? Are there any good practices that sought to identify more resources to prevent violence against older women and assist survivors of such violence?

Relationships Australia proposes a holistic ‘whole of lifecourse’ response to violence against older women which includes:

- a comprehensive international convention on the rights of older persons, and
- integrated service delivery that:
  - acknowledges the heterogeneity of older women and their families
  - eschews othering of older women
  - rejects stigmatisation of older women and those who work with them
  - values specialist knowledge and skills, and
  - is not hostage to bureaucratic or professional fragmentation.

Relationships Australia advocates funding that is proportional *at least* to known prevalence, and that ensures geographic equity in service availability.

Recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified workers, particularly in rural, regional, and remote communities, is constrained by short term contracts, and ‘11<sup>th</sup> hour’ funding extensions.

Australia’s federated system avoidably limits meaningful, sustained collaboration between and within the different tiers of government. Good ideas with broad-based support across the community languish as individual jurisdictions elevate parochialism to the detriment of older women experiencing violence. The most serious barrier, however, is a lack of political urgency to address violence against older women.

## Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry. We look forward to reflecting your findings in our ongoing service provision and advocacy to support older women at risk of, or experiencing, violence. I can be contacted at [ntebbey@relationships.org.au](mailto:ntebbey@relationships.org.au). Alternatively, you can contact our National Policy Manager, Dr Susan Cochrane, at [scochrane@relationships.org.au](mailto:scochrane@relationships.org.au).

Kind regards



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