

## **Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland**

<b>Submission No:</b>	48
<b>Submitted by:</b>	Soroptimist International Brisbane Inc
<b>Publication:</b>	Making the submission and your name public
<b>Attachments:</b>	See attachment
<b>Submitter Comments:</b>	



6 April 2025

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## Addressing Elder Abuse In Queensland – A Call For Enhanced Protection And Support For Older Women

### A SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ELDER ABUSE IN QUEENSLAND SUBMISSION FROM SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL BRISBANE INC

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### INTRODUCTION

- This submission is presented by **Soroptimist International Brisbane Inc (SI Brisbane)**, a volunteer-based organization dedicated to advocating for gender equality and the well-being of women and girls. Our membership comprises business, community, and professional women committed to supporting the interests of all women and girls. As part of the global advocacy network Soroptimist International (SI), our approximately 66,000 members in 118 countries work at local, national, and international levels to **educate, empower, and enable** opportunities for women and girls. Established over a century ago, SI has grown into a global organization whose mission aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality (UN Women, 2023).
- **SI Brisbane** submits this policy advocacy to the Elder Abuse Inquiry Committee, with a focus on the distressing rise in elder abuse, particularly among older women in Queensland. Older women face distinct vulnerabilities stemming from a combination of gender, age, and social status, which exacerbates their risk of mistreatment. This submission emphasizes the need for systemic reforms to better protect older women from abuse and neglect.
- Our recommendations are informed by community consultation, the lived experiences of older women and their families, current research, and the pressing need for stronger, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate responses to elder abuse.

## NATURE AND EXTENT OF ELDER ABUSE IN QUEENSLAND

- Elder abuse refers to any act, or the lack of action, within a relationship of trust that causes harm or distress. This abuse manifests in various forms—physical, sexual, psychological, emotional, and financial abuse, as well as neglect. Older women, disproportionately affected by these abuses, constitute a particularly vulnerable group (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2020).
- Although elder abuse remains significantly underreported, research and anecdotal evidence reveal a growing concern, with older women at greater risk in Queensland. The following forms of abuse are especially prevalent:
  - **Physical Abuse:** Common among women reliant on caregiving from family members, such as adult children or spouses (National Ageing Research Institute [NARI], 2019).
  - **Sexual Abuse:** A highly underreported form due to trauma, stigma, and shame (Queensland Government, 2018).
  - **Psychological and Emotional Abuse:** Includes manipulation, verbal threats, isolation, and coercion, which severely impact mental well-being (NARI, 2019).
  - **Financial Abuse:** Older women are particularly susceptible to financial exploitation, including fraud, theft, and coercion into changing wills (Australian Law Reform Commission [ALRC], 2017).

## VULNERABLE COHORTS

Specific subgroups of older women face heightened risks of abuse:

- **Women with chronic illness or disabilities:** These women, dependent on caregivers, are particularly vulnerable to neglect and exploitation (NARI, 2021).
- **Women living alone or with limited social networks:** Isolation amplifies the risk of abuse due to the lack of support systems (Hughes et al., 2019).
- **Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)** women face compounded barriers in accessing support services, making them especially vulnerable to abuse (Queensland Health, 2020).

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### Risk Factors:

- **Dependency on Caregivers:** Women reliant on caregivers, especially family members or intimate partners, face a greater likelihood of abuse (AIFS, 2020).
- **Isolation:** Older women who are socially isolated often lack the networks necessary to seek help (Hughes et al., 2019).
- **Economic Insecurity:** Gendered economic inequalities place older women at greater risk of financial exploitation (ALRC, 2017).
- **Caregiver Stress:** Family or professional caregivers under stress may resort to neglect or abusive behaviour (Queensland Government, 2020).

### Protective Factors:

- **Social Networks:** Regular contact with family, friends, or community groups provides support and opportunities for intervention (Hughes et al., 2019).
- **Community-Based Support Programs:** Access to legal, social, and counselling services can mitigate the risk of elder abuse (Queensland Health, 2020).
- **Legal and Policy Protections:** Strengthening legal frameworks and increasing public awareness about elder abuse can help victims access support (ALRC, 2017).

## EFFECTIVENESS AND COHESIVENESS OF CURRENT RESPONSES

Queensland's current response to elder abuse is fragmented, with significant gaps in prevention, identification, and support services. Key challenges include:

1. **Adult Guardianship and Violence Protection Services:**
  - **Current Gaps:** While these services exist, they remain inaccessible to many, particularly those unaware of their legal rights (Queensland Law Society, 2020).
  - **Recommendation:** Streamline access to these services and ensure that older women are adequately informed about their rights and access to resources.
2. **Civil and Criminal Legal Frameworks:**
  - **Current Gaps:** Legal protections are often insufficient, particularly when it comes to financial and emotional abuse (ALRC, 2017).
  - **Recommendation:** Strengthen laws related to elder abuse, define financial exploitation more clearly, and provide specialized training for law enforcement officers.
3. **Community Awareness and Education:**
  - **Current Gaps:** Public awareness about elder abuse remains insufficient, with many older women unaware of available resources (Queensland Government, 2020).
  - **Recommendation:** Launch public education campaigns to raise awareness about elder abuse signs and resources, especially in culturally sensitive formats.
4. **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting:**
  - **Current Gaps:** The lack of a centralized database impedes effective monitoring and evaluation of elder abuse cases (AIFS, 2020).
  - **Recommendation:** Implement a central database to track elder abuse cases, assess program effectiveness, and allocate resources where they are needed most.
5. **Human Rights Protections:**
  - **Current Gaps:** Current responses do not consistently uphold the human rights of older women, particularly their right to autonomy and dignity (United Nations, 2021).
  - **Recommendation:** Ensure that all elder abuse responses respect the fundamental human rights of older women, including their rights **to safety, dignity, and justice**.

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The following strategies offer key opportunities to enhance responses to elder abuse:

1. **Trauma-Informed Approaches:** All services must adopt trauma-informed practices to ensure that older women are treated with empathy, dignity, and respect (AIFS, 2020).
2. **Culturally Appropriate Services:** Develop community-based, culturally specific services for Indigenous, CALD, and marginalized women to ensure trust and accessibility (Queensland Health, 2020).
3. **Collaborative Stakeholder Engagement:** Strengthen coordination between government agencies, NGOs, and community groups to create a unified, effective response to elder abuse (Queensland Law Society, 2020).
4. **Empowerment and Education:** Provide educational programs to empower older women, enhancing their knowledge of legal rights, financial security, and abuse prevention (NARI, 2019).

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

We have also included in this submission an **annotated bibliography** that provides a strong foundation for understanding **the causes of elder abuse, particularly for older women**, and highlights **policy and legal reforms** needed to improve protection.

Additionally, on April 3, 2025, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a consensus resolution to begin drafting a new international human rights treaty focused on protecting the rights of older people. This milestone follows over a decade of advocacy by civil society organizations, particularly the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older People (GAROP) and addresses long-standing protection gaps in the existing human rights framework. Older individuals worldwide face daily violations such as age-based discrimination, social exclusion, and denial of services. The upcoming intergovernmental process marks a significant step toward ensuring equal human rights protection in older age (HRW 2025).

## CONCLUSION

- Elder abuse remains a significant issue in Queensland, with older women being disproportionately affected. Existing responses are often fragmented and inaccessible, especially for vulnerable groups. This submission advocates for comprehensive, trauma-informed, and culturally sensitive reforms to better address the needs of older women.
- By prioritising prevention, protection, and support, Queensland can foster a safer environment for older women, ensuring they live with dignity and are free from harm.
- We respectfully urge the Committee to consider these recommendations and take decisive action to safeguard older women from abuse.

Soroptimist International Brisbane Inc



## ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON ELDER ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA AND QUEENSLAND

This **annotated bibliography** provides additional perspectives on the prevalence, risk factors, and systemic responses to elder abuse in Australia, with a particular focus on older women. The highlighted studies underscore the necessity for targeted policies, legal reforms, and community-based interventions to protect vulnerable populations.

**Australian Law Reform Commission. (2017). *Elder abuse—A national legal response (ALRC Report 131)*.**

**Source:** <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/elder-abuse-a-national-legal-response-alrc-report-131/>

**Summary:** This comprehensive report by the Australian Law Reform Commission examines the legal frameworks surrounding elder abuse in Australia. It identifies gaps in protections for older adults, particularly women, and recommends strengthening laws and policies. The report emphasizes the need for a national plan to combat elder abuse, incorporating legal reforms, service improvements, and community education.

**Bagshaw, D., Wendt, S., & Zannettino, L. (2009). *Preventing the abuse of older people by their family members*. Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse.**

**Source:**

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242331949\\_Preventing\\_the\\_abuse\\_of\\_older\\_people\\_by\\_their\\_family\\_members](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242331949_Preventing_the_abuse_of_older_people_by_their_family_members)

**Summary:** This paper explores the dynamics of elder abuse perpetrated by family members, highlighting the gendered nature of the issue, with older women being more frequently victimized. It discusses the challenges in identifying and addressing such abuse due to familial bonds and societal perceptions. The authors recommend community education and the development of supportive networks to empower older individuals.

**Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., & Rhoades, H. (2016). *Elder abuse: Understanding issues, frameworks and responses*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.**

**Source:** <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/elder-abuse-understanding-issues-frameworks-and-responses>

**Summary:** This report delves into the complexities of elder abuse in Australia, examining various definitions, risk factors, and the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks. It highlights that older women are particularly vulnerable to abuse due to factors such as longer life expectancy and societal norms. The authors advocate for a multidisciplinary approach to address the issue, emphasizing the need for improved data collection and research to inform policy and practice.

**Joosten, M., Dow, B., & Blakey, J. (2017). *Profile of elder abuse in Victoria: Analysis of data about people seeking help from Seniors Rights Victoria*. National Ageing Research Institute.**

**Source:** [https://seniorsrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Summary-Report\\_Profile-of-Elder-Abuse-in-Victoria\\_Final.pdf](https://seniorsrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Summary-Report_Profile-of-Elder-Abuse-in-Victoria_Final.pdf)

**Summary:** This analysis provides insights into the characteristics of elder abuse cases reported to Seniors Rights Victoria. The findings indicate that the majority of abuse victims are women, with financial and psychological abuses being the most common forms. The report underscores the importance of accessible legal and support services for older adults and calls for increased public awareness to prevent abuse.

**Wainer, J., Owada, K., Lowndes, G., & Darzins, P. (2011). *Elder abuse and sexuality: Exploration of cases reported to two Australian elder abuse helplines*. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 30(2), 87-91.**

**Source:** <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-6612.2010.00451.x>

**Summary:** This study investigates cases of elder abuse with a focus on sexual abuse, as reported to helplines in Australia. The research reveals that older women are disproportionately affected by sexual abuse, often perpetrated by family members or caregivers. The authors highlight the need for specialized training for professionals to recognize and respond to such cases effectively.

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