

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

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Introduction

The Older Women's Network (Qld) Inc. welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation. Our submission reflects the views and experiences of older women within our membership from across Queensland who shared their perspectives on elder abuse. While not all have personally experienced abuse, their responses are grounded in peer observation, community involvement, and concern for the wellbeing of others. As an organisation committed to promoting the rights, safety, and dignity of older women, we believe this collective knowledge offers valuable insight for shaping more effective responses to elder abuse across the state.

Signs of Elder Abuse

Our members identified a broad spectrum of signs that may indicate an older woman is not being treated with the respect and care she deserves. These include:

- **Physical signs:** Unexplained bruising, weight loss, changes in personal hygiene or appearance, and signs of neglect.
- **Emotional and psychological indicators:** Withdrawal, anxiety, depression, fearfulness, low self-esteem, resignation, and confusion.
- **Social cues:** Isolation from friends and family, reduced participation in social activities, or lack of access to phone or internet.
- **Financial red flags:** Sudden changes in financial circumstances, loss of access to personal finances, or pressure to lend or give away money.
- **Controlling behaviours:** A carer or family member speaking on behalf of the woman, limiting her movements, intercepting communication, or making decisions without her input.

Members noted that abuse is not always visible or recognised as such; particularly when it is subtle, normalised, or embedded in unequal power dynamics within families, aged care settings, or service relationships.

Barriers to Speaking Up

Fear emerged as a primary reason older women may not speak out about mistreatment or abuse. This fear is multifaceted:

- Fear of retaliation or escalation.
- Fear of being institutionalised or losing their home.
- Fear of losing access to grandchildren or social networks.
- Fear of not being believed, being judged, or being blamed.
- Fear of isolation if the abuser is also their primary carer or family member.

Shame and loyalty, particularly when abuse comes from adult children or close relatives, are powerful silencing forces. Many older women may also minimise their experience, not recognise it as abuse, or feel they have no alternatives due to financial dependence, housing insecurity, or lack of trusted support.

In some cases, women experiencing cognitive decline may not recognise that abuse is occurring or may be unable to articulate their concerns clearly. These women are especially vulnerable and require sensitive, proactive safeguards that do not rely solely on self-disclosure.

There is a strong perception that services are fragmented or difficult to access and that older women may be deliberately denied the information or tools they need to seek help. This is exacerbated by systemic issues, such as inadequate oversight of powers of attorney, poor regulation of aged care settings, and a lack of culturally appropriate services for First Nations women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and those in rural or remote areas.

Supporting Confidence and Choice

Older women are more likely to feel confident managing money, legal matters, and personal decisions when they are respected, informed, and supported by people they trust.

Our members emphasised the importance of:

- **Access to trusted advice** from independent advocates, legal professionals, or trained support workers.
- **Clear, accessible information** about financial rights, enduring powers of attorney, and planning for the future.
- **Safe spaces** to seek help without judgement or fear, whether community groups, social clubs, legal aid centres, libraries, or local hubs.
- **Simplified systems** for aged care, health, and financial support, with continuity of care and less duplication or confusion.
- **Preventative programs** that engage women before a crisis occurs, building confidence through education, social inclusion, and peer networks like OWNQ.

Supporting older women is not just about individual services, it is about building a system that enables them to understand their rights and navigate their options without fear, coercion, or confusion.

Community Support for Women Experiencing Abuse

A woman experiencing abuse is more likely to seek help when she feels heard, believed, and supported in a way that honours her autonomy.

Our members highlighted the value of:

- **One-on-one, confidential conversations** with someone she trusts.
- **Regular contact and check-ins** from support services and community members.
- **Public awareness campaigns** that normalise help-seeking and challenge the stigma of elder abuse.
- **Crisis options**, including independent advocates, helplines, safe accommodation, and clear referral pathways.
- **A whole-of-community approach**, where neighbours, friends, health professionals, and social groups are part of the protective web.

Importantly, members pointed out that support needs to start long before abuse is disclosed. Women need to know that help exists, that it is safe to speak up, and that doing so will not result in punishment, judgment, or a loss of dignity.

What Queensland Can Do Better

Our members call for stronger, more coordinated action across laws, policies, programs, and services to prevent elder abuse and protect older women. Key recommendations include:

- **Public education** on recognising, preventing, and responding to abuse; targeted at older people, families, carers, professionals, and the broader community. Schools could play a role by introducing an Elder Abuse Awareness Day to foster respect and awareness from a young age.
- **Better regulation and oversight** of aged care providers, powers of attorney, and financial exploitation, with stronger consequences for abuse.
- **Improved access to housing**, legal support, counselling, and culturally appropriate services for older women, particularly those at higher risk.
- **More training for frontline workers**, including police, GPs, aged care staff, and social services, to identify abuse and respond sensitively.
- **Expanded community engagement** and outreach, especially in under-served areas, to reduce isolation and increase connection to support.
- **Streamlined systems and services** that are easy to understand, well-communicated, and responsive to women's needs across changing life stages.

Members also noted that familial and financial stressors, such as the rising cost of living, generational housing insecurity, and growing inequality, are putting pressure on families and creating environments where elder abuse is more likely to occur. Living arrangements that result from financial necessity may not always be safe or suitable, especially where boundaries are blurred, or caregiving is placed on adult children who themselves may be experiencing mental health issues or personal instability. In some cases, relatives are not well-placed to provide care yet feel obligated or are relied upon without appropriate support. These social

and structural factors must be addressed alongside individual and legal responses to elder abuse.

Lastly, **combatting ageism** in all forms is essential through school curriculums, media campaigns, workplace education, and community dialogue. Too often, older people are viewed as a burden rather than as valued, contributing members of society. This perception drives neglect, fuels invisibility, and enables abuse to occur unnoticed. A cultural shift is essential to recognising the inherent worth, dignity, and continued potential of older people, especially older women.

Final Reflections

To better protect older women from abuse, we must listen deeply, respond compassionately, and act decisively. Our members want to see real consequences for perpetrators and real support for women who speak up. They want a system that is proactive, not reactive, and that centres dignity, autonomy, and respect for the knowledge and experiences of older women.

They have told us clearly: support must be meaningful, accessible, and consistent. Education is key, beginning in schools and continuing across the lifespan. Prevention, early intervention, and ongoing connection are all essential to keeping older women safe and supported in the communities they have helped build.

Ultimately, we must strive to create a society that not only protects older people from harm but celebrates and cherishes them as essential members of our communities. A society that sees older women not as passive recipients of care, but as vital participants in civic, cultural, and family life. Anything less risks not only their wellbeing, but the wellbeing of all of us.

We thank you for the opportunity to share these insights and invite continued dialogue on how Queensland can better serve and protect its older citizens, especially its older women.

Sincerely,

Management Committee of the Older Women's Network (Qld) Inc.