

Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland

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Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is a whole of community issue. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments in 2013. All Australian governments, including the NSW Government, are members of Our Watch.

Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the systems, culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women.

Guided by our national frameworks, *Change the story* (2nd ed 2021),¹ *Changing the picture* (2018)² and *Changing the landscape* (2022),³ we work at all levels of our society to address the deeply entrenched, underlying drivers of violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work, and socialise.

About this submission

This submission is part of our ongoing commitment to providing clear and accessible evidence, information and advice to inform primary prevention work across Australia.

This Submission responds to the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry related to:

1.c Opportunities to improve responses to elder abuse in Queensland, within the government, broader community, non-government, and private sectors, including ensuring responses are trauma informed and culturally appropriate.

For more detailed advice or discussion, please contact Amanda Alford, Director of Government Relations, Policy and Evidence, at [REDACTED].

Executive Summary

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland ('the Inquiry'). In line with Our Watch's expertise, and due to the prevalence rates of violence against older women, the submission will primarily focus on violence against older women. However, Our Watch acknowledges that older men, non-binary and gender diverse people can experience violence in all its forms, and that any violence is unacceptable regardless of the gender of the victim or perpetrator.

A primary prevention approach is needed to address abuse and violence of older people; to stop the violence before it starts. This is consistent with the frameworks as outlined in the [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#), and [Queensland's plan for the primary prevention of violence against women 2024-2028](#).

This submission outlines aspects of a primary prevention approach that Our Watch considers could usefully inform the work of the Committee and decision-making in relation to preventing elder abuse in Queensland. This includes addressing the intersections of ageism and gender inequality, as well as the drivers of violence against women.⁴ As the [Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review report](#) highlights, in 2023–24 there were more than twice as many female victims as male victims of elder abuse and violence.⁵

The Education, Arts and Communities Committee ('the Committee') has an important opportunity to incorporate primary prevention as a crucial component of addressing abuse against older people in Queensland by applying a whole-of-society approach to addressing the gendered drivers of violence. Preventing gender-based violence is about changing individuals, systems, institutions, social norms and the culture in which individuals develop and maintain their attitudes towards violence.

Our Watch makes the following recommendations to prevent violence against older people in Queensland:

1. Invest in evidence-based strategies to prevent violence against older women
2. Build on the foundations of primary prevention in Queensland to address the drivers of violence against older women with specific references to:
 - a. Build capacity and capability of the workforce in primary prevention.
 - b. Strengthen and implement mechanisms for governance, coordination and collaboration across government, as well with services and the community.
 - c. Improve data and research to gain a better understanding of how to prevent and respond to violence against older women.
3. Ensure that prevention activities address the intersections of gender inequality, ageism and other forms of inequality affecting older women.

In making this submission, Our Watch emphasises the importance of engaging appropriately with the diversity of people and organisations which represent people with lived experience of gendered elder abuse and violence. In particular, Our Watch recommends engaging with older Queenslanders who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, given the higher prevalence of abuse and violence experienced by this group.⁶

Introduction

Elder abuse and violence continue to have devastating physical, mental, financial, social and emotional wellbeing consequences for older people, their families, and communities.⁷ This Inquiry offers an important opportunity for Queensland to inform an evidence-based approach to ending elder abuse and violence.

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (the 'Prevalence Study') released in 2021 found that one in six (14.8%) people aged 65 years or older experienced abuse in a 12-month period. The Prevalence Study also highlighted the gendered nature of this abuse and violence, with older women more likely to experience abuse and mistreatment than older men, and men more likely than women to cause harm to an older person. This is consistent with key findings in Queensland, which found 67.1% of elder abuse victims in 2023-2024 were female.

Evidence indicates:

- 15.9% of women aged 65 years and older reported experiencing any form of abuse in the previous 12 months.⁸
- Older women have a higher risk of experiencing any form of abuse.⁹
- Older women were more likely than older men to report sexual abuse, psychological abuse or neglect.¹⁰
- Perpetrators of elder abuse are more likely to be male.¹¹
- Older women experiencing intimate partner violence are often not considered within both the elder abuse and family violence sectors.¹²

While this data highlights alarming trends, more evidence is needed to understand the gendered nature of elder abuse and violence.

Our Watch suggests that the Committee recommend investment in evidence-based strategies to prevent violence against older women to complement efforts across early intervention, response, and recovery. Violence against women is preventable: Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia provides the evidence-based framework for what is needed to prevent violence against women.

Embedding a primary prevention approach is also consistent with the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032, and Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024-2028.

Our Watch also suggests applying an intersectional approach to prevention and ensuring experiences of LGBTIQ+ communities, women with disabilities, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women elders and migrant and refugee women. This means addressing the various and interlinked forms of discrimination such as ageism, racism and gender inequality. As the *Elder abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review 2023–24* highlights, individual factors or life circumstances may increase an older person's vulnerability and also influence their risk of experiencing abuse and may be associated with an increased risk of experiencing victimisation. For example, of older people experiencing abuse and violence, 47.2% are likely to have, or be suspected of having a cognitive impairment.¹³

In addition, the compounding impact of a lifetime of structural inequality on older women, including financial inequality and the impact of unpaid care work during their lifetime, continues into later years and can have a profound impact on how older women experience abuse. This is supported by findings in the [Elder Abuse Action Australia's \(EAAA\) report](#) that shows access to services and willingness to report elder abuse is affected by older people's experiences of disadvantage due to poverty and insecure housing.¹⁴

Item 1.c Opportunities to improve responses to elder abuse in Queensland

Our Watch makes three key recommendations to prevent violence against older people in Queensland:

1. Invest in evidence-based strategies to prevent violence against older women

Effective primary prevention strategies for raising community awareness and building understanding about the gendered drivers of violence for all women are already in [Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024–28](#). A dedicated primary prevention plan such as this provides the foundations for prevention, supports whole-of-government coordination and outlines a clear set of evidence-based prevention priorities and activities. It enables a long-term coordinated effort to achieve the sustained social change required to prevent elder abuse and violence against women. Our Watch encourages the Committee to endorse and make recommendations that build on and strengthen this Plan.

Primary prevention works to change the deep-seated gendered drivers of violence, and the underlying social condition of gender inequality in which it arises.

To be most effective there is a need for a continuum of interdependent and interlinked strategies, with efforts across the 'stream' or spectrum of primary prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery, across the life course. For a visual model of the relationship between primary prevention and other work that addresses violence against women, refer to Figure 1.

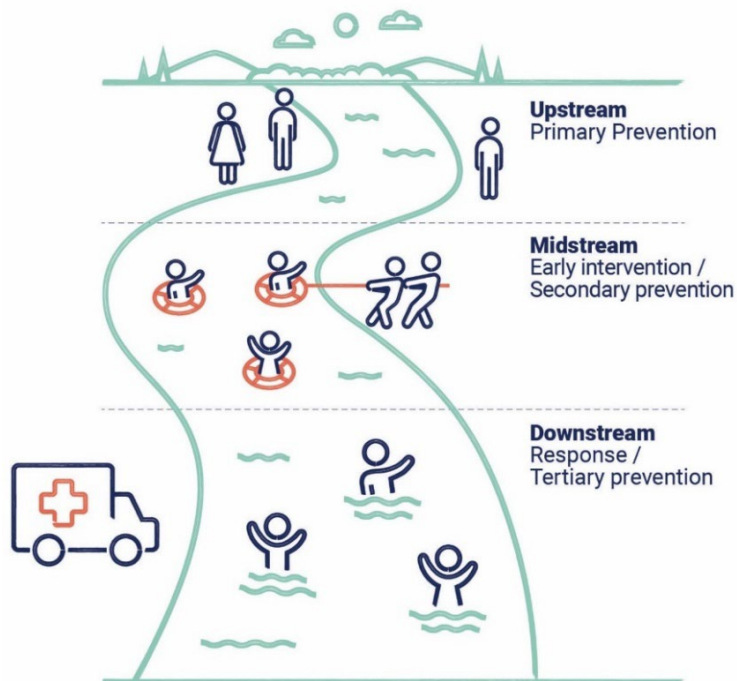


Figure 1. Primary prevention of violence against women as an 'upstream' approach – See alternative text for Figure 1 in Appendix ¹.

Preventing violence against women is about changing individuals, systems, institutions, social norms and the culture in which individuals develop and maintain their attitudes towards violence. Our Watch welcomes the inclusion of focus areas in the Inquiry that explore ways to strengthen government, community and sector collaboration and develop awareness and education campaigns that target whole-of-communities and populations, as well as efforts to identify, and respond to risk and protective factors.

The evidence demonstrates that prevention efforts need to reach and engage everyone, at every age and stage of life. Importantly, to embed, reinforce and sustain change across the population, evidence highlights the need for prevention to engage people not just on a one-off basis, but in multiple, mutually reinforcing ways over the course of their lives.¹⁵

Older people may have had limited engagement with primary prevention activity, given the relative newness of the field and because they are less likely to be engaged in settings where prevention activity is becoming common (for example, schools, universities/TAFEs, workplaces, sports clubs). As part of the life stage approach, it is important that prevention efforts include a focus on influencing older people's attitudes and behaviours and supporting older women's independence. This aligns with [Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024-2028](#), which calls for awareness raising of the abuse of older Australians through campaigns and education that focus on the rights of older persons to live safely, with dignity and respect as a key action.

There is an opportunity for the Committee to consider, for example:

- Recommending a primary prevention approach to Queensland strategies and action plans as they relate to elder abuse and violence against older women, in line with the [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#), and [Queensland's plan for the primary prevention of violence against women 2024-2028](#).

2. Build and expand the foundations of primary prevention in Queensland to address the drivers of violence against older women

Primary prevention requires strong foundations (or infrastructure), which are the systems and structures that ensure primary prevention work is supported, coordinated and sustained over the long term. These foundations, as identified in [*Building strong foundations for primary prevention infrastructure*](#), are critical to enabling and sustaining changes to the drivers of violence and ensuring the design, implementation and evaluation of prevention efforts occur in a coordinated way.¹⁶

Our Watch's recommended actions for strong prevention foundations in Queensland are:

2.1 Build capacity and capability of the workforce in primary prevention

Mechanisms for workforce and sector development are one of eight key foundations of primary prevention in [*Building strong foundations to support primary prevention*](#). It is also highlighted as a key focus area in [*Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024–2028*](#).¹⁷

As evidence suggests, a whole-of-society approach to preventing violence against women requires a multidisciplinary and diverse workforce with expertise in a range of settings and prevention techniques which can undertake prevention activities that are trauma-informed and culturally appropriate.¹⁸ This includes strengthening the primary prevention workforce—both specialist and generalist workers—in setting where older women work, live and socialise.

[*Growing with change: Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women*](#) further outlines five areas of governments focus to expand the prevention workforce and support its growth: workforce planning; workforce preparation and pathways; sector governance and coordination; working conditions; and professional development.

These areas provide opportunities to strengthen prevention foundations in Queensland and increase capacity and capability of the workforce to support prevention of violence initiatives.

There is an opportunity for the Committee to consider, for example:

- Ways in which professionals in relevant occupations across services and government can be supported and equipped to not only to identify and respond to ageism and abuse of older women, but also to prevent it.

- The way in which men are and can be further engaged in the prevention workforce. Engaging and working with men is critical to the success of preventing violence against older women. There are benefits to supporting pathways for men to enter the prevention workforce and build the capacity of existing workforces to work with older men on prevention of violence initiatives.

2.2 Strengthen and implement mechanisms for governance, coordination and collaboration across government, services and the community

Preventing elder abuse and violence requires a holistic, multilayered approach through a coordinated, long-term, whole-of-society approach based on multiple, mutually reinforcing efforts.¹⁹ The Queensland government has unique access to policy, legislative and regulatory levers to address gender inequalities across society and to change the underlying conditions that produce and support violence against women. There is an opportunity for the Committee to outline and make recommendations which can underpin a whole-of-government approach to preventing violence against women (including older women) and in a way that aligns, builds on and strengthen the significant work and reforms that are underway.

There is an opportunity for the Committee to consider, for example:

- Ways in which the strategic response to elder abuse and violence of women in Queensland can align with existing plans, strategies and frameworks, including the following key documents:
 1. [the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children](#)
 2. [the National Outcomes Framework and National Plan](#)
 3. [the National Gender Equality Strategy](#)
 4. [the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Action Plan \(2023-2025\)](#)
 5. [Queensland's plan for the primary prevention of violence against women 2024–28](#), and
 6. The Second National Plan to End Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People (soon to be released).

2.3 Improve data and research to gain a better understanding of how to prevent and respond to violence against older women

Effective primary prevention activity needs to be both evidence-based and evidence generating, informed by ongoing data collection, research, practice and evaluation.²⁰ This need for investment in data collection, research, monitoring, and evaluation continues to be highlighted as critical to any efforts to address elder abuse and violence. For example, the [Elder Abuse Action Australia's report](#) has listed measurement, evaluation and learning as a foundational condition for enabling ongoing improvement of the implementation and impact of elder abuse initiatives across the country.

The [Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in Review report](#) has also highlighted the need for further research to better understand the multifaceted types and domains of elder abuse on the rise, including social abuse and neglect. Understanding how diverse

women and girls are differently affected, and if and how they are accessing services, is critical to ending violence in all its forms. As [World Health Organisation research](#) shows, more disaggregated data and research is needed, including on older women with disabilities, whose under-representation in much of the available research on violence against women undermines the ability of programmes to meet their particular needs.²¹

Data gaps about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander abuse and violence are an ongoing issue both nationally across all states. This lack of visibility is due to a number of reasons including insufficient identification of gender and/or Indigenous status in relevant datasets.²² As a result, understanding the full extent of abuse and violence against elder women who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander is difficult to determine. Prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led research, Indigenous Data Sovereignty,²³ and reciprocal engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations is a critical step in preventing violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older women.²⁴

Our Watch encourages the Committee to recognise the important foundational role of prioritising and investing in ongoing data collection, research, monitoring and evaluation of programs addressing elder abuse and strengthening data.

There is an opportunity for the Committee to consider, for example:

- Making recommendations about evidence based approaches to monitoring and evaluation, including the use of appropriate measures and indicators to ensure the data is available to demonstrate any progress in primary prevention.²⁵
- Highlighting and supporting efforts to increase information sharing among government agencies, services and the community across the prevention, intervention, response, and recovery system to identify critical knowledge and service gaps.
- In making recommendations about data, highlighting the importance of identifying indicators and measures that can capture intersectional data to monitor progress in prevention of abuse and mistreatment for groups of older people who have an increased risk of experiencing violence. This includes the use of data disaggregated by characteristics such as gender, sexuality, culture/ethnicity, disability as well as for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, migrant and refugee people, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people, and people living in rural, regional and remote communities.
- Recognising the importance of data sovereignty when addressing domestic and family violence of older women in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

3. Prevention activities address the intersections of gender inequality, ageism and other forms of inequality affecting older women

To understand and prevent violence against older women, it is critical to consider ageism, age discrimination, and other forms of inequality affecting older women at a population level. Different aspects of an older person's identity can expose them to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people, for example evidence indicates that understanding of elder abuse needs to be situated within the history of colonisation and its consequences.²⁶

Ageism also helps drive the abuse and mistreatment of older women by creating an environment where older women are not valued by the community as equal members. As the World Health Organisation's Global Report on Ageism details, ageism is widespread in institutions, laws and policies across the world. It damages individual health and dignity and denies people their human rights and their ability to reach their full potential.²⁷ Services not designed with older women's accessibility in mind can cause older women to experience isolation or a loss of agency. In some cases, this can lead to older women being more susceptible to abuse and exploitation.

Our Watch suggests that the Committee apply an intersectional approach to its findings, including considering the ways in which ageism, gender inequality and other forms of structural oppression and discrimination contribute to the abuse and violence of older women.

There is an opportunity for the Committee to consider, for example:

- Intersectionality considerations such as gender inequality, ageism and other forms of systemic and structural oppression and discrimination and the ways these can underpin the Committee's analysis and findings in this Inquiry.²⁸
- The role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in leading responses for their communities and deliver those responses to prevention of elder abuse of women.²⁹
- The important role of initiatives that prevent violence against older women by addressing the social norms, structures and practices that shape the situation of older women and situate them in a position of inequality compared to men, and to women of younger age groups in the Inquiry's findings.
- The ways in which government communications, media, and awareness campaigns can play a role in challenging stereotypes about older women and address the ways in which ageism and gender inequality intersect to create disempowering or disrespectful social norms, structures and practices. For example, these may relate to finance management, caring roles and sexuality.

Appendix 1: Alternative text for figures

Figure 1: Primary prevention of violence against women as an upstream response

Infographic showing the different stages of intervention in the problem of violence against women. The different stages of the problem are represented by a river.

Prevention is work that occurs upstream in the river, because it is trying to prevent the problem from happening in the first place. This is represented in the image as people standing on the riverbank, stopping anyone from falling in.

The second stage is early intervention. It is work that tries to help people who have only just fallen into the river. Early intervention is represented in the image by a person throwing life buoys to rescue people who are midstream in the river.

The third stage is crisis response. It occurs downstream when the problem is already advanced. It is represented in the image by an ambulance attempting to rescue people who are in very serious trouble much further downstream in the river.

References

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- ² Our Watch (2018). *Changing the picture*. Retrieved from: [Changing the picture](#) (ourwatch.org.au)
- ³ Our Watch (2022). *Changing the landscape*. Retrieved from: <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/01135647/Changing-the-landscape-AA.pdf>
- ⁴ These gendered drivers of violence against women are detailed in the [Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024-2028](#).
- ⁵ Gillbard, A. (2024). *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in review 2023-24*. Elder Abuse Prevention Unit, UnitingCare
- ⁶ *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in review 2023-24* found in the 2023-24 reporting period, 94 victims aged over 50 (3.7%) identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. This number is 1.5 times the number that would be expected from population statistics (i.e. 2.4% of Queenslanders aged over 50 years identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023)
- ⁷ Dreyfus, The Hon Mark (2024) *Media Release Consultation opens on the National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People*, 12 December 2024
- ⁸ 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
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- ¹² Crockett, C., Brandl, B., & Dabby, F. (2015). Survivors in the margins: The invisibility of violence against older women. *Journal of Elder Abuse and Neglect*. 27(4-5). 291-302.
- ¹³ There can be differences in assessment and interpretation of capacity due to different frameworks being used (e.g. medical versus legal). Data recorded in Queensland PEARL database is largely self-reported, and thus findings should be interpreted with caution. Further details available at Gillbard, A. (2024). *Elder Abuse Statistics in Queensland: Year in review 2023-24*. Elder Abuse Prevention Unit, UnitingCare.
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- ¹⁵ Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story*. Retrieved from: [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia \(2nd ed.\)](#). (ourwatch.org.au)
- ¹⁶ Our Watch (2024). *Building Strong Foundations to Support Primary Prevention*. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch
- ¹⁷ The [Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024-2028](#) includes as Focus Area 2 Strengthening the Primary Prevention Workforce,
- ¹⁸ Our Watch. (2023). Growing With change: Developing an expert workforce to prevent violence against women. Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia as cited in [Queensland's Plan for the Primary Prevention of Violence Against Women 2024-2028](#)
- ¹⁹ Our Watch. (2024). *Building strong foundations to support primary prevention*. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch
- ²⁰ Our Watch. (2024). *Building strong foundations to support primary prevention*. Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch
- ²¹ World Health Organization. (2024) *Measuring violence against women with disability; Data availability, methodological issues and recommendations for good practice*
- ²² Our Watch. (2018) *Changing the picture: Background Paper*. Retrieved from: [Changing the picture](#) (ourwatch.org.au)
- ²³ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's data sovereignty refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples exercising ownership over Indigenous data through the creation, collection, access, analysis, interpretation, management, dissemination, and reuse of Indigenous data See Lowitjia Institute. (2024). *Taking control of our data: A discussion paper on Indigenous data governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities*

²⁴ Lowitjia Institute. (2024). *Taking control of our data: A discussion paper on Indigenous data governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities*. www.lowitja.org.au/resource/taking-control-of-our-data-a-discussion-paper-on-indigenous-data-governance-for-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-and-communities/. Maïam nayri Wingara Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Sovereignty Collective and the Australian Indigenous Governance Institute

²⁵ Our Watch's *Counting on change* and *Tracking progress in prevention (TPiP)* provide guidance on measuring population-level progress towards the prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia

²⁶ See, eg, 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

²⁷ World Health Organization. (2021). *Global Report on Ageism*. Geneva, Switzerland

²⁸ Intersectional frameworks by Our Watch that can inform the Inquiry's understanding and application of how gender inequality, ageism and forms of systemic, structural oppression and discrimination drives elder abuse and violence against women include *Changing the picture* (2018) Our Watch's dedicated framework for the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, and *Changing the landscape* (2022) Our Watch's dedicated framework for the prevention of violence against women and girls with disabilities

²⁹ This is in line with The Summit Delegates of Women's Safety Statement call for the National Plan to work on in its priorities as highlighted in the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*