

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

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## **Submission to the Inquiry into elder abuse in Queensland**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Elder Abuse in Queensland. This submission has been developed jointly by ADA Australia and Celebrate Ageing Ltd.

The purpose of our submission is to call for recognition of the roles ageism and loneliness play in elder abuse. We also call for a gender lens to improve elder abuse prevention and responses. An overview of these three influences on elder abuse is outlined below.

### **Ageism and elder abuse**

Ageism is a significant risk factor for Elder Abuse and the main reason for elder abuse being a low global priority.<sup>1</sup> It is a deeply embedded, frequently unseen, often underestimated and a generally recalcitrant form of prejudice and discrimination.

Ageism has devastating impacts on older people - and the health care system, the workplace, the economy and our culture. Global research shows 1 in 2 people are ageist<sup>2</sup> and ageism accounts for \$1 in every \$7 spent on health care in USA alone.<sup>3</sup> Research also shows that older people who protect themselves against ageism can increase their life expectancy by 7.5 years.<sup>4</sup>

Ageism has been identified as a root cause of the marginalisation of older people.<sup>5</sup> This marginalisation is exacerbated by other forms of oppression that are not recognised due to the ageist myth that older people are a homogenous group. This includes a failure to recognise older people's experiences of racism, ableism, metrocentricity, classism and queerphobia.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, older women experience a particularly caustic form of ageism, entangled with sexism and misogyny.<sup>7</sup>

Efforts to prevent elder abuse, and improve elder abuse responses, must recognise the influence of ageism. Ageism drives elder abuse, and it will be very difficult to prevent elder abuse until we promote respect for older people as a cultural norm; and until we help older people protect themselves from ageism.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/health-topics/ageism>

<sup>3</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/60/1/174/5166947>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-832261.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979\\_copvm\\_report\\_onl.pdf](https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979_copvm_report_onl.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979\\_copvm\\_report\\_onl.pdf](https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/ca3979_copvm_report_onl.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

A significant obstacle to dismantling ageism is the broad acceptance of ‘anti-ageing’ messages, generated by the Fashion and Beauty Industry. In Western cultures we are inundated daily with calls to fight our ageing and mortality;<sup>8</sup> simply put, we are told ‘young is good and old is bad’. This ageist messaging creates a psychological distance between older people and those who are not yet old,<sup>9,10,11</sup> leading to elder abuse and inaction elder abuse.

To help address these issues, our organisations are currently rolling out the Old is Beautiful project<sup>12</sup> in six locations in Queensland. The project reframes beautiful as who we are – rather than what we look like, and it is a powerful tool in the fight against ageism. The project reduces internalised ageism and combats culturally embedded forms of ageism by helping those who are not yet old - connect with older people and envisage their own ageing in positive ways.<sup>13</sup> The project involves:

- workshops with older people to build their knowledge of internalised ageism and elder abuse and how to protect themselves from it
- documenting photo portraits of older people and their messages about what makes them beautiful as older people
- sharing the portraits and messages with the broader community, to help promote respect for older people.

Evaluation of the workshops has demonstrated a reduction in older people’s internalised ageism and community responses have been very positive. The first workshop has been facilitated, and further five workshops will be offered in rural and remote Queensland.

## Loneliness and elder abuse

Ageism is a driver of social isolation and loneliness,<sup>14</sup> which in turn increases the risk of elder abuse.<sup>15</sup> The World Health Organisation has identified that social isolation and loneliness are growing public health and policy concerns, that need to be reduced through a range of strategies, including laws and policies that address ageism.<sup>16</sup>

The Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Loneliness references The Australian Loneliness Report stating: *Australians over 65 years are least lonely; other age groups experience similar levels of loneliness* (p.11); interestingly the word ageism does not appear in the Inquiry report at all. In contrast, the World Health Organisation identifies rates at 20-34% for older people,<sup>17</sup> and a recent meta-analysis found 28.5% of people aged 60 and over, experience some form of loneliness.<sup>18</sup>

We draw your attention to these anomalies to highlight an opportunity to help prevent elder abuse i.e.: through recognition that ageism drives loneliness - and - loneliness increases the risk of elder abuse.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.celebrateageing.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/oib2024report.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://archive.org/details/birthdeathofmeane2beck>

<sup>10</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15536237/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26716474/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.celebrateageing.com/beautiful.html>

<sup>13</sup> Barrett, C. (2011). Projecting beauty in an ageist world. In Hutton, V and Sisko, S. (Eds). <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-55427-9>

<sup>14</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/factors-dynamics-and-effects-isolation-older-people#:~:text=Isolation%20is%20a%20risk%20factor,et%20al.%2C%202021>

<sup>15</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-snapshots/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-summary-report>

<sup>16</sup> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/343206/9789240030749-eng.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/343206/9789240030749-eng.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2024/221/6/loneliness-epidemic-holistic-view-its-health-and-economic-implications-older-age>

## Gender and elder abuse

Gender has a powerful impact on most aspects of life, starting from the moment of birth. Recognition of the importance of gender and the need for gender equality has led to a global focus on gender analysis and strategies to promote gender equality. For example, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet have put gender equality at the heart of policy and decision making for a more equitable society, as follows<sup>19</sup>

*Policies that are developed without consideration of gender, or which are considered 'gender-neutral' or 'gender-blind' policies, assume that gender is not a factor in how a particular issue affects people. However, existing inequality as well as gender norms and stereotypes can mean policy changes which may appear gender neutral can have disproportionate or different impacts on people because of their gender.*<sup>20</sup>

While there is a widespread push to recognise the influence of gender on equality, the gendered experience of ageing,<sup>21</sup> ageism<sup>22</sup> and elder abuse is under-recognised.<sup>23</sup>

Gender influences the elder abuse context, the types of abuse experienced, the ways abuse is interpreted, the sources of help sought,<sup>24</sup> and barriers to reporting or accessing support services.<sup>25</sup> In most forms of elder abuse, if the victim is female, the perpetrator is more likely to be male.<sup>26</sup>

In their call for a gender specific approach to elder abuse, the World Health Organisation<sup>27</sup> notes:

*A gender-specific approach includes recognition of and response to the different specific risks and vulnerabilities ...[across genders] in relation to abuse of older people and takes into account the interaction of gender with ageism in the context of abuse of older people. The approach includes recognition that gender norms, socialization, roles, differential power relations and differential access to and control over resources contribute to differences in vulnerability and susceptibility to abuse of older people and to how such abuse is experienced, how help is sought and how services are accessed. (p. 10)*

The World Health Organisation's call for gender specific approaches to policy and strategy have not yet been enacted in Australia. There is currently no guidance on gender specific approaches in the elder abuse context. Gender was missing from the first *National Plan to Plan to Respond to the Abuse of Older Australians*,<sup>28</sup> and currently, most public records of data collection by elder abuse services do not routinely report gendered patterns of abuse and service use. This silence on gender perpetuates ageist myths of older people as genderless and is a barrier to preventing and responding to elder abuse.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment\\_0.pdf](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment_0.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment\\_0.pdf](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/aps-guide-gender-analysis-impact-assessment_0.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/genderlenselements.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://theconversation.com/from-cauldrons-to-cardigans-the-lurking-prejudices-behind-the-name-granny-238200>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/genderlenselements.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/lifestages.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> <https://eapu.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/UC-Elder-Abuse-Statistics-in-QLD-Year-in-Review-2024.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356151/9789240052550-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/publications/national-plan-respond-abuse-older-australians-elder-abuse-2019-2023>

Recognition of ageing and elder abuse as gendered experiences is beginning to occur. The *Consultation draft of the National Plan to End the Abuse and Mistreatment of Older People 2024-2034*<sup>29</sup> acknowledges elder abuse is a gendered issue, and gender inequality one its drivers. It also recognises that older women are more likely to experience elder abuse; and that a lifetime of gender inequality can have a profound impact on how older women experience abuse.

Our organisations led the development of a world first Gender Lens<sup>30</sup> to enable gender analysis and planning for elder abuse prevention. Gender analysis tools help to clarify inequalities between genders, particularly in relation to resources, opportunities, constraints and power - for the purposes of developing interventions that address gender inequalities in policies, programs and projects related to elder abuse prevention.

The aims of the Gender Lens are to promote more effective elder abuse prevention and responses through gender analysis, planning and improvements, including the following:

- identifying historical and contemporary inequalities between genders, particularly in relation to resources, opportunities, constraints and power – as context for preventing elder abuse
- identifying gendered experiences of elder abuse e.g.: prevalence and forms
- identifying gendered patterns of service use
- implementing gender specific strategies to prevent elder abuse
- implementing strategies to promote gender equality in elder abuse policies, programs, services, data collection, research, projects and funding.

The Gender Lens was launched by Age Discrimination Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald AM on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2025. A particular highlight of the launch was a presentation on the influence of gender by Anna Gillbard, Research Officer at UnitingCare Qld. We strongly encourage you to view the launch recording.<sup>31</sup>

In summary we believe prevention and improved responses to the problem of elder abuse must address ageism, loneliness and gender differences. We urge the inquiry to consider these issues

We have no objection to this submission being published and available to the public.

Yours truly



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<sup>29</sup> <https://consultations.ag.gov.au/families-and-marriage/eamop/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.emboldenfestival.com/uploads/1/5/3/9/15399992/genderlenselements.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://youtu.be/cVyD16kZxd8?si=k5WIW6VadKtHdw-R>