

Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence

Unique experiences of Older Women in South Australia

Developed by:

The Plug=in.

Powered by

COTA
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



Supported by Office for Women, Department of Human Services South Australia

Version 1.0
May 2025

This report was developed by COTA SA (Council on the Ageing South Australia) through its team at The Plug-in research and engagement consultancy, who specialise in connecting with and understanding people aged 50+.

Findings are drawn from the 'Unique experience of older women who experience Family Domestic and Sexual Violence' project conducted by The Plug-in for the Office for Women, Department of Human Services, South Australia during 2024.

Acknowledgement of Country: COTA SA acknowledges and respects Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of the land of South Australia. We honour Aboriginal peoples' continuing connection to Country and recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded. We pay our respects to First Nations Elders past, present and emerging and extend that respect to all Aboriginal people

Thank you to the participants who provided their experiences for this research project. Thank you also for the contributions and feedback from staff at COTA SA, Office for Women, and the expert advice from the project Steering Committee that have shaped this work.

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Background

Older women's experiences of family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV) are often hidden or misunderstood. This report brings together the voices of older women across South Australia to shed light on this issue and provide an evidence-base to address the issue.

The multi-stage research project between Office for Women and The Plug-in, COTA SA included a literature and data review, community consultations, and extensive engagement with the domestic and family violence sector. Together, these findings tell a story: older women's experience of violence is often hidden, and they are being left behind by systems not designed with them in mind.

FDSV is an ongoing issue, regardless of age. Despite this, the intersectionality of age, gender and violence is often missing from academic literature and research. Consequently, the unique experiences of older people, and especially older women, who are experiencing, or have experienced, violence are often invisible and are conflated with elder abuse (Bows (Ed.) 2019; Joosten, Dow & Blakey 2015).

We sought to understand the unique challenges older women face, especially here in South Australia. By hearing directly from women and those who support them, we aimed to build a stronger evidence base that leads to real, practical change.

The following report explores the research findings in depth and offers recommendations to address the issue. Our hope is that this report helps older women feel seen, heard, and supported.

Definitions

Family, domestic and sexual violence is not always physical. The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 provides a definitional framework for national consistency, that delineates each of these terms (alongside coercive control and other types of gendered violence) (DSS 2021).

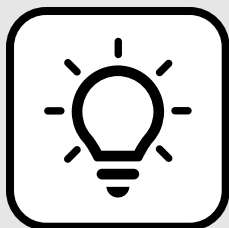
Intimate partner violence: commonly known as 'domestic violence', refers to any behaviour within an intimate relationship, either current or past, that causes physical, sexual, or physiological harm. Intimate partner violence can also occur outside of the domestic setting, such as in public and between two people who do not live together.

Family violence: refers not only to violence between intimate partners but also to violence perpetrated in family-like settings. For example, elder abuse, violence perpetrated by children or young people against parents, guardians or siblings, and violence perpetrated by other family members such as parents-in-law.

Sexual Violence: refers to sexual activity that happens where consent is not freely given or obtained, is withdrawn or the person is forced, coerced or manipulated into any sexual activity. Sexual violence can be non-physical and include unwanted sexualised comments, intrusive sexualised questions or harassment of a sexual nature.

Coercive control: describes a pattern of abusive behaviours against another person over time, with the effect of establishing and maintaining power and dominance over them. For example, financial abuse, restricting freedom or independence, using threats and intimidation, emotional or psychological abuse (including spiritual and religious abuse) and technology-facilitated abuse.

Methods



Stage 1: Literature and data review

Scope issue to understand prevalence and identify potential barriers and solutions to services



Stage 2: Service Provider Engagement

Workshops/interviews with 37 FDSV support organisations to explore awareness, perceptions and experiences; identify gaps; explore service capacity solutions.



Stage 3: Community Engagement

3a: Survey with 431 South Australian women aged 50+. Explore prevalence of driving attitudes and practices which can increase risk of FDSV for older women.

3b: Interviews with 7 older women victim-survivors.



Stage 4: Knowledge Translation & Resource Development

Produce evidence-based resource to raise awareness of older women's experience of FDSV

A lifetime of silence: The experience of FDSV for older women

“

No one would listen. No one believed me.

I didn't have voice back then, and from then on I just thought, 'well, that's all I'm used for.. that's all I'm good for... is to be used and abused'.

So all my life, I had been used and abused, bashed, assaulted."

Victim-survivor participant

Insights from the literature: Violence in later life is often overlooked

Despite growing awareness of family, domestic and sexual violence (FDSV), older women are often missing from the discussion. Most academic research focuses on younger women. When older women are included, their experiences are usually viewed through the lens of elder abuse, rather than as a form of gendered violence (Dow & Brijnath 2019).

This matters, because the types of violence older women face are varied. Many older women experience intimate partner violence, financial abuse, and coercive control, such as being isolated from friends and family (ABS 2017; Qu et. al 2021). Yet older women are often excluded from national datasets, surveys and prevention frameworks, which means their voices don't shape policy, funding or service design. As a result, their experiences continue to be overlooked.

These issues are even more pronounced for older women from marginalised communities – including First Nations women, women from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds, LGBTI+ communities, and those living in rural or remote areas . These women face additional barriers such as language and cultural stigma, lack of culturally appropriate services, geographic isolation, and limited access to support (ARAS 2023; Dow & Brijnath 2019). These overlapping challenges increase isolation and make it even more difficult to seek help.

Insights from the literature: Violence towards older women often goes unreported

Community-based violence towards women aged 50+ is likely under-representing the true population incidence (Wijeratne & Reutens 2016).

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Survey provides best current estimate (July 2021), finding that 16% of women surveyed reported an experience of elder abuse and there is an increased chance of neglect with age (Qu et. al 2021).

Key findings:

- Older women are more likely not to identify their experiences as 'abuse' or 'violence'. Older women rarely perceived verbal and emotional abuse as violence, and some women do not identify as victims of violence (Wijeratne & Reutens 2016).
- Awareness and knowledge of violence are barriers to seeking support. Older women have often been doubted when recounting their experiences to others throughout their lives, which has led them to doubt whether they were indeed experiencing violence (Meyer, Lasater & Garcia-Moreno, 2020; Our Watch 2022).

Violence against older women can span a lifetime

Our engagement with lived experience victim-survivors and service providers revealed that for older women violence or abuse can be lifelong, starting at a young age and continuing into later life:

Key findings:

- Abuse and violence can change shape across a lifetime. Intimate partner violence can escalate in later life due to changes in health and relationship dynamics.
- Many older women grew up in a time where violence, particularly as young women within a marriage, was accepted or hidden. This shaped women's perceptions of violence, as well as community perceptions.
- The impact of sexist attitudes in earlier years of life has long-lasting effects and can lead to desensitisation to violent experiences and the normalisation of violence. This is compounded by the ageism they encounter as an older woman. Sexism plus ageism can contribute to victim-survivor experiences not being believed or taken seriously.

Why awareness raising matters:

- Community education and awareness raising is pivotal in preventing and addressing FDSV towards older women, understanding that they may have experienced a lifetime of violence in different forms.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a colorful patterned sweater, is looking out a window. The background is a bright, slightly blurred view of a building and some greenery. The image is used as a background for the text boxes.

“

You just feel totally powerless and confused.

You don't understand it... you are full of self-doubt about what is happening, what to do about it and what can you do.”

Victim-survivor participant

“

I'd been reading a lot and educating myself a lot about domestic violence women and those situations.

Once I really got it clear in my head that I was living in an unsafe, very violent situation, I knew that I needed to get out.”

Victim-survivor participant

Shame and guilt are barriers to older women seeking support

Both victim-survivors and service providers spoke of the shame and guilt experienced by older women acting as a major barrier to seeking support. These feelings were often reinforced by others, including family, friends and the perpetrator of violence.

Many older women described being silenced or not believed when they spoke up – sometimes for decades. Some were told not to say anything, or that what they experienced wasn't serious. These reactions added to their sense of guilt and made it harder to ask for help in later years.

Community attitudes, especially in earlier decades, also contributed. Victim-survivors described how shame was placed on them, not the perpetrator, and how this created a lasting fear of judgement or rejection of community

Understanding and validating older women's experiences is crucial to breaking the silence.

Lack of resources impact older women's ability to seek support

Lack of resources – especially financial and accessible housing options – was consistently identified as a major barrier to older women seeking support.

Key findings:

- Financial insecurity limits older women's ability to access support. Coercive control experienced for some over decades (particularly related to money) impacts women's available finances and therefore their choices.
- Housing instability and the difficulty in finding secure, appropriate housing that meets the needs of older women prevented women from seeking support.

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If you have limited resources it limits your choice.”

Victim-survivor participant

Supporting older women: Service needs and current limitations

“

People are traumatised through domestic and family violence, rape and sexual assault. And then the system reproduces it by making it more difficult, so the system is actually traumatising!

So, for many people they have tried and had really poor responses, so why then try again?”

Service provider participant

There are limited support services for older women

Both victim-survivors and service providers spoke of the limited options available to older women if they do choose to seek formal support services. There is a distinct lack of specialised services for older women.

Key findings:

- Older women not prioritised: Women without children or with assets can face added barriers to accessing support.
- Crisis services full: Older women needing urgent support are often redirected elsewhere and miss out on specialist help.
- Support can be conditional: Some services stop if the woman hasn't left the relationship, limiting safe options.
- Funding gaps: Short-term funding creates inconsistent support and confusion about what's available.
- Regional/rural service shortage: Services are fewer and further away for people outside of Adelaide, and harder to access safely and privately in small communities.
- Cultural gaps: Limited services that are inclusive of LGBTI+, CALD and First Nations older women.

Employing a trauma-informed approach to services is important

Both service providers and victim survivors emphasised the importance of trauma-informed approaches, especially when supporting older women who may have experienced violence across their lifetime.

A trauma-informed, holistic model places victim-survivors as experts in their own lives and walks alongside them, rather than directing them. This approach builds trust, restores control, and supports long-term recovery.

Key findings:

- “Non-blaming”, “non-judgmental”, and “transparent” were phrases used by victim-survivors and participants to describe positive service experiences.
- Victim-survivors valued services that listened without blame, respected their choices and worked with them at their own pace including offering next steps tailored to their needs without pressure or judgment.
- Services that allowed flexibility keeping cases open long-term and letting older women choose when to engage were particularly valued.

A soft-focus background image showing a pair of hands gently holding a baby's head. The hands are light-skinned, and the baby has dark, curly hair. The overall tone is warm and supportive.

“

“I think, for me with [The Specialised FDSV Service], I was so grateful to have a safe place to talk about stuff, particularly when I had mentioned it to family and friends in the past and had got such a mixed reaction...

I was so grateful that it didn't matter what I said at [The Specialised FDSV Service], there was no judgment.”

Victim-survivor participant

Community hubs and social groups serve as important informal support for older women

For many victim-survivors, community-based support groups were crucial not only in moments of crisis, but throughout their long-term healing. In some cases, these groups were the first step that led to formal support. In others, the connection and understanding within these groups provided the core of their support network.

Service providers highlighted how co-located services and community-based supports improve access and coordinated support. Hubs can help raise awareness of both formal and informal pathways to support and provide safe, welcoming spaces for older women.

This was especially important for women living outside Adelaide, where access to in-person services is more limited. These informal support groups help women build the confidence to seek formal help and feel less alone in their experience.

Community hubs should be recognised as both an early intervention strategy and a key part of long-term recovery. They offer safety, belonging, and a bridge to formal services for many older women.

Attempts to leave a violent relationship can increase the risk of serious harm

Seeking help or connecting to services should not place a sole focus on leaving the home as the goal for older women. Rather, services should meet the specific needs of older women, including those who choose to stay living with the perpetrator.

Key findings:

- Women are most at risk of being killed or seriously harmed when separation from the perpetrator occurs (ANROWS 2018).
- Services should include crisis support and on-going support for women who choose to stay.
- Non-specialised services, like healthcare providers (GPs, home care, aged care), community services (social, fitness), and financial services should act as gateways to specialised support for older women.
- Adequate training is of informal service providers is needed to ensure appropriate support is provided to victim-survivors.

“

If a GP suspects something is amiss, then they shouldn't be afraid to ask the question! But too often it seems like it's an uncomfortable topic and practitioners don't want to go there, or don't take the time.”

Service provider

Recommendations to improve support services for older women

Recognition of FDSV as a primary health issue:

FDSV Service providers recommend that FDSV be integrated into Primary Care with standardised, trauma-informed questioning to encourage early intervention and reporting.

Trauma-informed care: It's crucial for all victim-survivors, especially older women who may not recognise their risk, to receive trauma-informed support. This approach helps them understand available services and make informed choices at their own pace.

Equipping non-specialist services: Training for non-specialist services is essential for identifying early signs of FDSV and be equipped with the skills to create a safe space for a disclosure.

Cross collaboration between services:

Cross-collaboration approach should be adopted between specialised and/or non-specialised services. This proactive approach can identify FDSV cases sooner, supporting early intervention and reducing the strain on crisis services like emergency accommodation and long-term motel stays.

Raising community awareness of FDSV towards older women

“

There's so much stigma around it [violence], particularly for older people. They're just so ashamed of it, it's very hard to get over that to get help.

So, the more we talk about it, the less stigma and then less danger of perpetrators getting away with it, because people are going to talk about it.”

Victim-survivor participant

Public Awareness Poster Campaign

We developed and conducted an evidence-based, public education poster and outdoor advertising campaign, and created an online resource hub, to raise awareness of older women's experiences, whilst championing victim-survivors' voices/experience.

Our Campaign:

- Poster messages targeted older women who are experiencing FDSV and yet to seek support; and members of the general public who may be concerned an older woman is in an unsafe situation.
- A3 posters were distributed to community and health service locations where women were likely to see the posters.
- An outdoor advertising campaign was conducted across bus shelters during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence, November 2024
- COTA SA developed an accompanying [webpage](#) offering a list of FDSV service and supports that can be accessed by community.

Four key messages from the research informed our public education campaign:

1. Violence against women is everyone's issue
2. It's never too late to seek help
3. Financial abuse is a form of violence
4. If you are experiencing violence in your home, there are people who can help

Violence doesn't discriminate by age.

"It took 45 years to finally have the knowledge and courage to make a new life."



It's never too late to seek help, even if you have experienced violence all your life.

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence or abuse, you can call **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732 or visit www.1800respect.org.au for online chat and video call services.

This campaign is supported by the Office for Women. To find out more about violence towards older women and support available, go to www.cotasa.org.au/olderwomen



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Violence doesn't discriminate by age.

"We didn't have superannuation in the 1960's and I didn't have a separate bank account.

He controlled all the money, and I was completely dependent on him."



Financial abuse is a form of violence.

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence or abuse, you can call **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732 or visit www.1800respect.org.au for online chat and video call services.

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Violence doesn't discriminate by age.

"There is so much stigma and shame around violence in the home, particularly for older people. It's hard to get over that to get help.

The more we talk about it, the less stigma."



If you are experiencing violence in your home, there are people who can help. It's not your fault.

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence or abuse, you can call **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732 or visit www.1800respect.org.au for online chat and video call services.

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Violence doesn't discriminate by age.

"Growing up, we knew there were women in our neighbourhood experiencing violence.

The attitude was: 'what went on in their house was their business'.

We didn't do enough for them."



Violence against older women is everyone's issue.

If you or someone you know is experiencing violence or abuse, you can call **1800RESPECT** on 1800 737 732, text 0458 737 732 or visit www.1800respect.org.au for online chat and video call services.

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Support services for older women experiencing FDSV violence

Violence is never acceptable. Help is available. If you are an older woman or are concerned for the safety and wellbeing of an older woman, below includes a list of services and resources to guide you towards the information and support you need.

1800 Respect

<https://www.1800respect.org.au/> | call 1800 737 732 | text 0458 737 732 | 24/7 service

Lifeline

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/> | call 13 11 14 | text 0477 13 11 14 | 27/7 service

13 Yarn

<https://www.13yarn.org.au/> | 13 92 76

Domestic Violence Crisis Line

Call 1800 800 098

SA Police

Call 000 for emergency assistance.

Visit the COTA SA website for a list of South Australian and national FDSV support services:

<https://cotasa.org.au/programs-and-services/older-womens-services-and-supports>

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