

Older People: Equity, Respect & Ageing

Phase 1 Findings | December 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Executive Summary

“While we have a sound evidence base for the prevention of violence against women, we know less about what causes, and what works to reduce, other forms of family violence including elder abuse...” *

Elder abuse is a form of family violence. It is any act or behaviour that results in harm to an older person caused by someone they know or trust. It can be physical, social, financial, psychological or sexual and can include mistreatment and neglect. Older people can experience a number of different types of abuse at the same time (Seniors Rights Victoria, 2018).

The prevalence of elder abuse in Australia is not known, and, like other forms of family violence, many cases of abuse go unreported. The World Health Organisation quotes an international 2017 study that estimates that one in six people aged 60 years and older were subjected to some form of abuse over a one year period (Yon, Mikton, Gassoumis and Wilber, 2017). The experience of elder abuse is gendered, and most commonly takes place within the family context. Data from Seniors Rights Victoria (as reported to their helpline) found that two-thirds of abuse is perpetrated by a son or daughter of the older person, and that the number of older women reporting abuse was approximately 2.5 times that of older men (Seniors Rights Victoria, 2015).

While there is a growing understanding and acceptance of elder abuse as a form of family violence, resources put towards addressing this complex issue have predominantly focused on how to identify someone at risk, or respond to abuse once it has occurred.

There is currently no consistent understanding of the causes of elder abuse, or how it can be prevented from occurring in the first place.

The Older People: Equity, Respect and Ageing (OPERA) Project responds to this gap in the evidence. While there is not yet clear consensus, the literature suggests that ageism, including stereotyping and discrimination against individuals or groups on the basis of their age, is a contributing factor to elder abuse (NARI, 2018; Crichton, Bond Harvey and Ristock, 1999; Phelan, 2008; Nelson, 2005).

Based on this assumption, the focus of OPERA was to explore how ageism plays out in the day-to-day experiences of older people, to better understand its trajectory towards elder abuse.

An extensive community consultation process explored the expressions and impacts of ageism as experienced by older people in Melbourne’s Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR).

Findings from the consultations informed a second phase of the Project, led by Swinburne University. This included the development of a digital intervention, applying a co-design method, to further explore findings from the community consultation. An additional phase of the OPERA Project was funded in mid-2019, enabling further stakeholder engagement to inform branding and design of OPERA resources, an OPERA website and a Project launch.

The report presents an overview of findings from the community consultations and provides analysis and recommendations for action in the prevention of elder abuse.

“We are currently in an age-centric culture where ageism is both widespread and ubiquitous. It hides in plain sight, subtle unnoticed, accepted. We need to change that”

(EveryAGE Counts, The Real Old)



Key findings:

Below is a summary of the main themes that arose from the consultations with community. Further discussion on these key findings is provided throughout the full report.

Images and Stereotypes

- There were internalised beliefs on ageing by many older people who held negative associations with the word ‘ageing’ or ‘older person’. Many of the associated terms centred on a sense of decline, vulnerability, dependence on others, loss of identity and perceived irrelevance/invisibility by the community.
- Ageism is embedded and expressed through negative portrayals of some older people, including in the media, movies, children’s picture books and birthday cards.

Barriers to Participation

- Accessibility barriers are experienced through the built environment, public transport and technology
- Difficulty in obtaining and maintaining employment

Community Attitudes and Behaviours

- Rigid gender roles that set men up as ‘breadwinners’ and women as ‘nurturers’ has implications for an individual’s financial autonomy, agency, social connection and sense of value; potentially leading to an increased risk of experiencing elder abuse
- Disrespect, disregard and impatience towards older people
- Invisibility and perceived irrelevance of older people
- Grandparenting expectations placed on older people

Frameworks to Understanding Ageism

A number of participants identified the hallmarks of capitalism, including money, status and power, as the driving forces that fuel a social mentality around consumption, individualism and greed. This sets the social context in which ageism occurs, where a person’s intrinsic value and relevance in society is measured by their perceived capacity to contribute economically through an earned wage.

* (Free from Violence: Victoria’s strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women, State Government Victoria 2017)

Recommendations

1) Evidence

- a. Develop an evidence informed Primary Prevention Framework for Action to guide initiatives to prevent elder abuse.
- b. Resource further research into the impacts of individualism and consumerism as frameworks that contribute to the underlying social context in which elder abuse can occur.
- c. Strengthen evidence and understanding around the intersections of gender, family violence and elder abuse.
- d. Resource further research to explore the systemic frameworks and cultural norms that can exploit older people as caregivers of grandchildren.

2) Community attitudes to ageing and older people

Establish a mechanism by which community attitudes and beliefs on ageing can be measured and used to inform practice (such as National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)).

3) Local Partnerships

Organisations commit to working collaboratively with local stakeholders to develop primary prevention initiatives to prevent elder abuse.

4) Funding

Increase funding for Elder Abuse Prevention Networks to support the development of local primary prevention initiatives and action research that will build on the current evidence.

Acknowledgements

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Members included:

Jill Exon, Eastern Community Legal Centre
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Project Partners

Sector and Community

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ECLC also acknowledges those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including Elders, who came to live on Wurundjeri land as a result of dispossession from their homelands and in more recent times through choice.

