Edith Cowan University
Social Ageing (SAGE) Futures Lab

Curtin University

Addressing the abuse of older people

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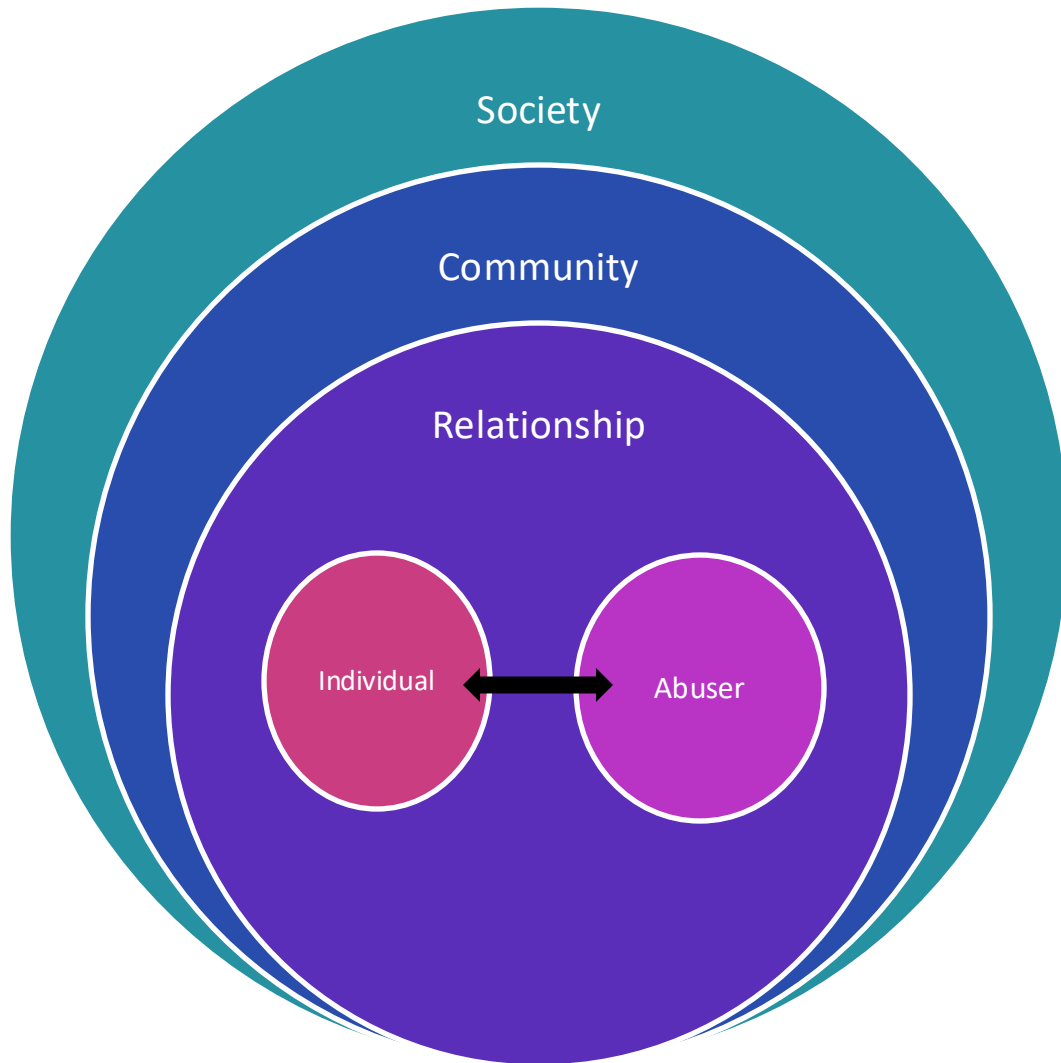
What is Elder Abuse?

A single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person.

(WHO/INPEA, 2002, p. 3)

(AHRC, 2021)

Bi-focal Model of Elder Abuse Risk

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- **Individual:** dependency/disability, low income, gender, age, ethnicity/diverse background

75 +	→	Disability	→	Culture/ Ethnicity	→	Indigeneity	→	Female

- **Perpetrator:** mental health issues, substance abuse, dependency, criminal record, childhood FDV, Pan-violence, education, minority status, social isolation

- **Relationship:** family culture, relationship dynamics

- **Community:** geographical location, degree of service support and availability

- **Societal:** ageist stereotypes, cultural norms

(adapted from Bonnie & Wallace, 2003; Pillemer, Burnes, Riffin, & Lachs, 2016; WHO, 2015)

Targeted Interventions at Each Level
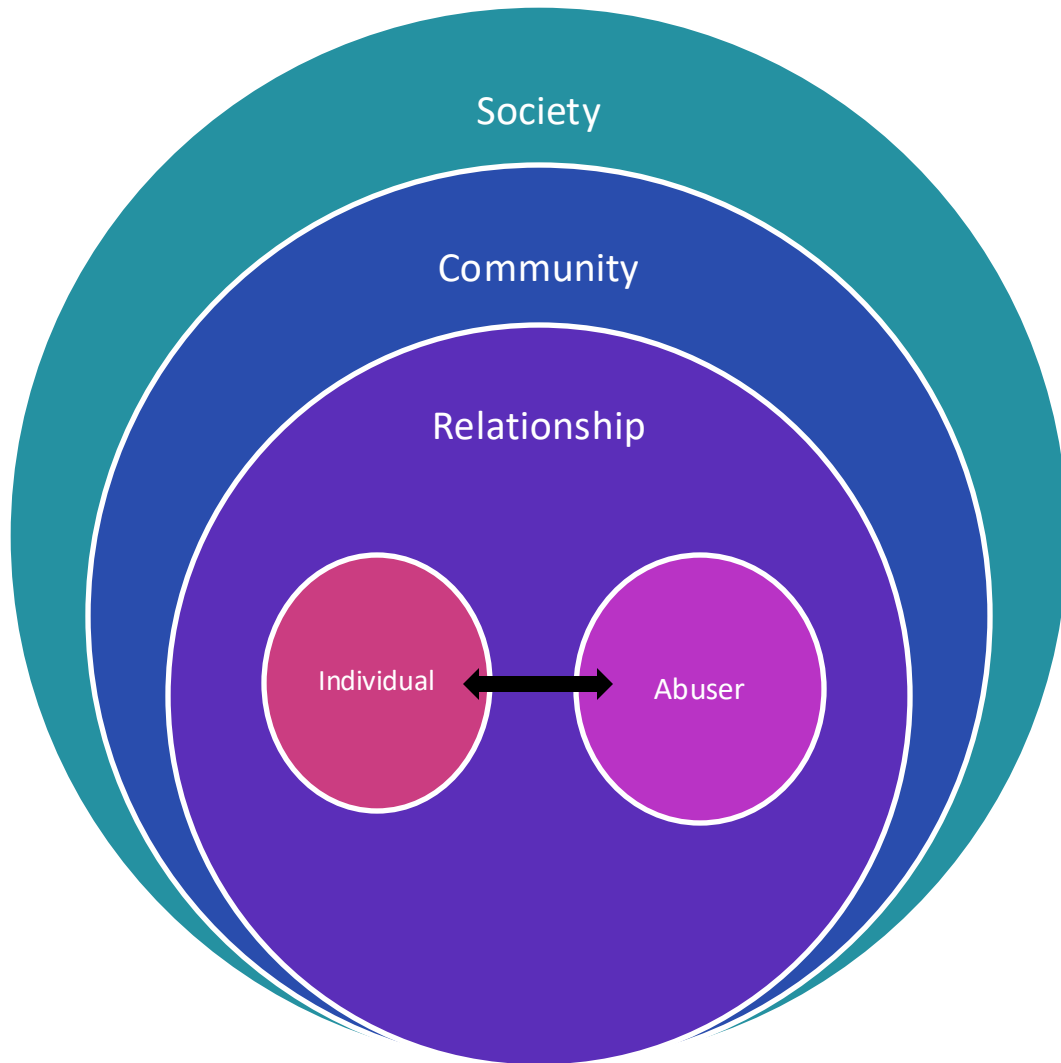
- **Primary prevention**: Information, education, screening

- **Secondary responses:** Risk assessment, referral, advocacy, counselling, mediation, specialist legal/medical/financial

- **Tertiary statutory:** Legal and statutory responses

Session Overview
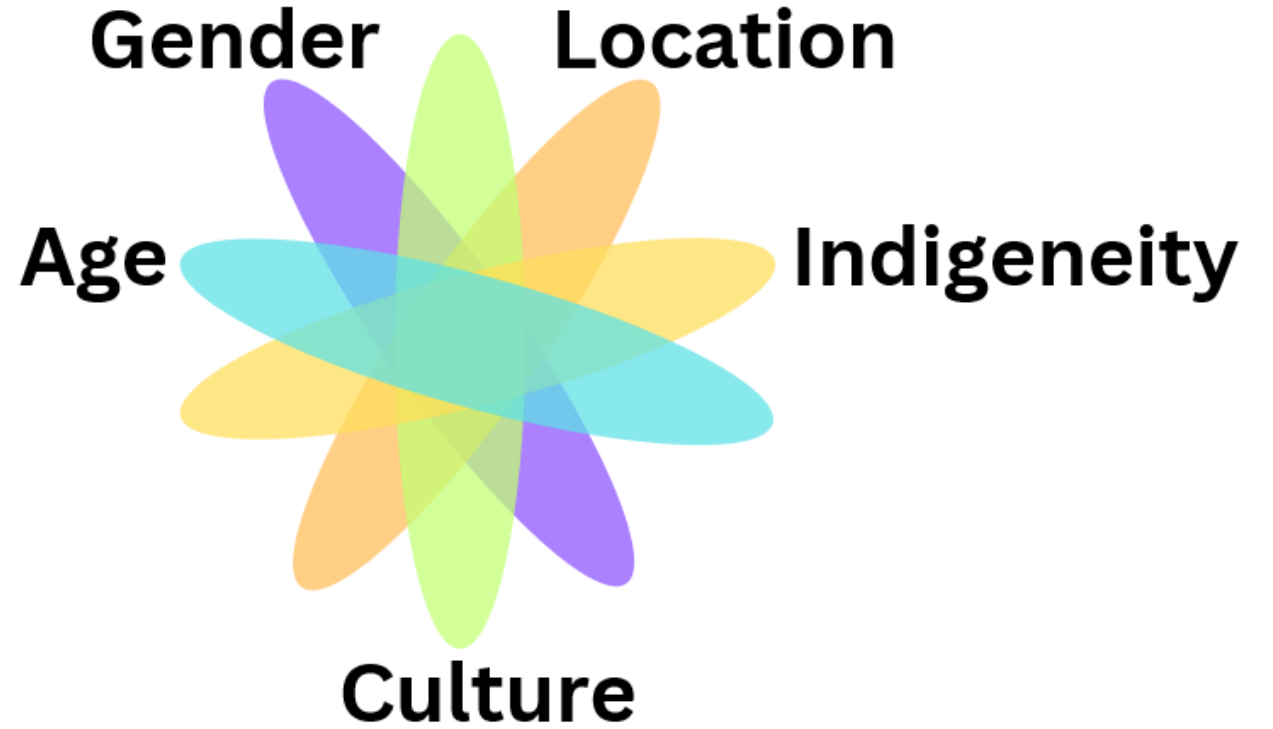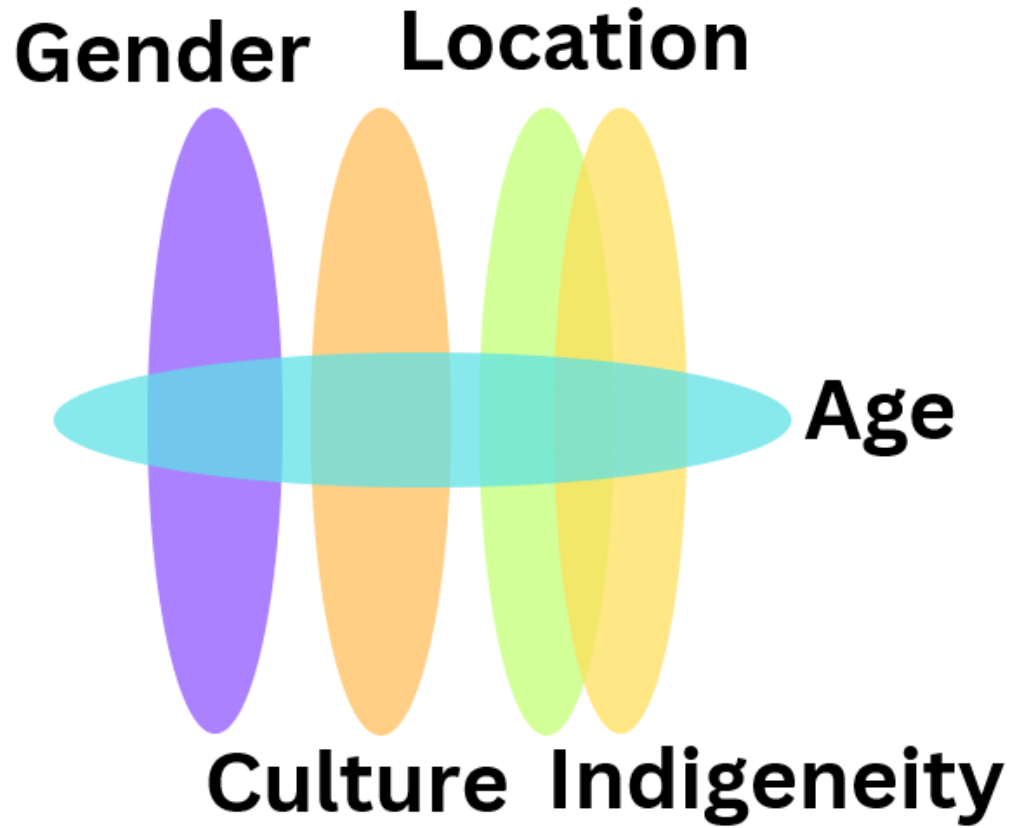
Review of the Prevalence and Characteristics of Elder Abuse in QLD:
Findings & proposed directions

(Blundell, Clare, J. Clare, M., Moir, E. & Webb, E., 2017)

Definitional Issues
- Lack of consistent definition
- Explore links with domestic violence and mistreatment of people with disabilities

Prevalence and data collection
- National prevalence study indicated
- Data collection could focus on vulnerability and repeat offenders and victims
- Use data to develop targeted responses

Characteristics and Risk factors
- Complex issue shaped by the individual, perpetrator, and context of the family, community and service system.
- Estimated to be vastly under-reported
- Tailor services to respond to the spectrum of abuse

Research findings and proposed directions

Service and System Interventions and Responses
- Skill and support frontline workers
- Address needs of diverse and vulnerable older people
- Develop coherent and cohesive response frameworks
- Explore best-practice responses and frameworks

Legislation
- Enhance protections and education for Enduring Powers of Attorney
- Support and enhance elder mediation
- Consider reporting regime with whistle-blower protection
- Consider adult protection legislation and unit

Education, Training and Information
- Education and training for older people, family, carers, bank employees, JPs, real estate agents, land titles office, health and legal professionals and wider community

Findings from Two Projects

Elder Abuse Protocols Project
(Blundell, Warren & Moir, 2020)

ABSTRACT

Written protocols may guide staff responses to elder abuse. Their effectiveness is unclear, as protocols are generally unevaluated. This project aimed to review, evaluate, and update the Alliance for the Prevention of Elder Abuse: Western Australia's 2013 Protocol. A critical literature review identified key features of elder abuse protocols. Three focus groups (N = 19), and an online survey (N = 44) examined the usefulness and effectiveness of the 2013 Protocol and identified improvements. Seventy percent of survey respondents (n = 31) were familiar with the Protocol; all found it useful. Suggested updates included: example policies and resources; screening tools, signs, indicators, and guided risk assessment; further direction and training for front-line workers; and information about issues for diverse and vulnerable groups. An updated Protocol was developed and will be supported by stakeholder education. Ongoing maintenance is required in a changing service context, and future versions could be online and include features to support responses.

Mistreatment of Older Aboriginal People in Rural and Remote Areas (Pitts, 2022)

This study examined the mistreatment of older Aboriginal people in rural and remote Western Australia (WA) and explores the response of services to this issue. The research identifies that the mistreatment of older Aboriginal individuals is an under-researched area, with specific considerations related to cultural, social, and historical factors. Geographical isolation adds further barriers to accessing services in rural and remote WA. The study adopts a sequential mixed methods design, including a survey (n=15) and follow-up interviews (n=5). Analysis of the data reveals four key themes: Cultural and Familial Obligations, Implications of Australia's Colonial History, Rural and Remote Service-related Concerns, and Family and Community Engagement. The findings highlight the importance of integrating intergenerational experiences and cultural obligations into practice, flexible and well-resourced service delivery models, consultation and co-design with community and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and incorporating elements of cultural safety frameworks into service responses.

Elder Abuse Protocols Project

(Blundell, Warren & Moir, 2020)

Key Findings

Effectiveness and usage of previous APEA: WA (2013) Protocol

- 100% of survey respondents (N=44) said it was a useful document.
- Protocol was clear, concise and easy to understand, with practical suggestions and referral links.

Document design and amendments

Eye catching and user-friendly design, targeted broadly.
Expand definition of elder abuse to include community and residential abuse.
Include:

- Procedures to follow and more guidance for staff and agencies.
- Further abuse information, examples, and 'how to' steps.
- Link to example policies, procedures, and resources.
- Detail around decision-making capacity and notes for diverse and vulnerable groups, with specific referral options.

Elder abuse responses

- 76% respondent organisations had a policy, procedure or process; followed in 90% of cases.
- Protocols need contextualising within each organisations' broader policies.
- Clear processes information is required, including responsibility and lines of reporting.

Elder abuse education

- 18% of respondents had formal elder abuse training; 50% informal training; 38% learned 'on the job'.
- Protocols should be supported by education and training.

(APEA: WA, 2017)

Project takeaways:

- Useful document
- EA protocols need to be localised and supported with education and training
- Need details about decision-making capacity and notes for diverse and vulnerable groups, with specific referral options
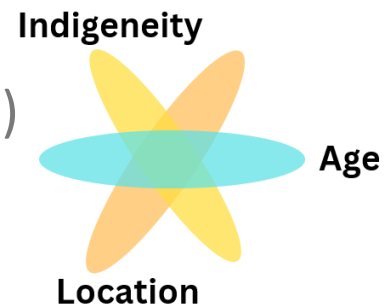
Mistreatment of Older Aboriginal People in Rural and Remote Areas (Pitts, 2022)

(unknown, u.d.)

Service Barriers in Rural and Remote Western Australia

- Geographical isolation: lack of services and unsuitable urban-centric models of service provision (Warren & Blundell, 2018)

- Diversity of Aboriginal communities in different geographical locations – difficulty generalising research (Kaspiew et al., 2016)

- Racism (Government of South Australia, undated)

- Reluctance to engage due to historical mistreatment by statutory authorities (Government of South Australia, undated)

- Lack of culturally appropriate responses (OPA, 2005)

Indigeneity

Age

Location

Mistreatment of Older Aboriginal People in Rural and Remote Areas (Pitts, 2022)

Additional Barriers to Service Access for Older Aboriginal People Experiencing Mistreatment
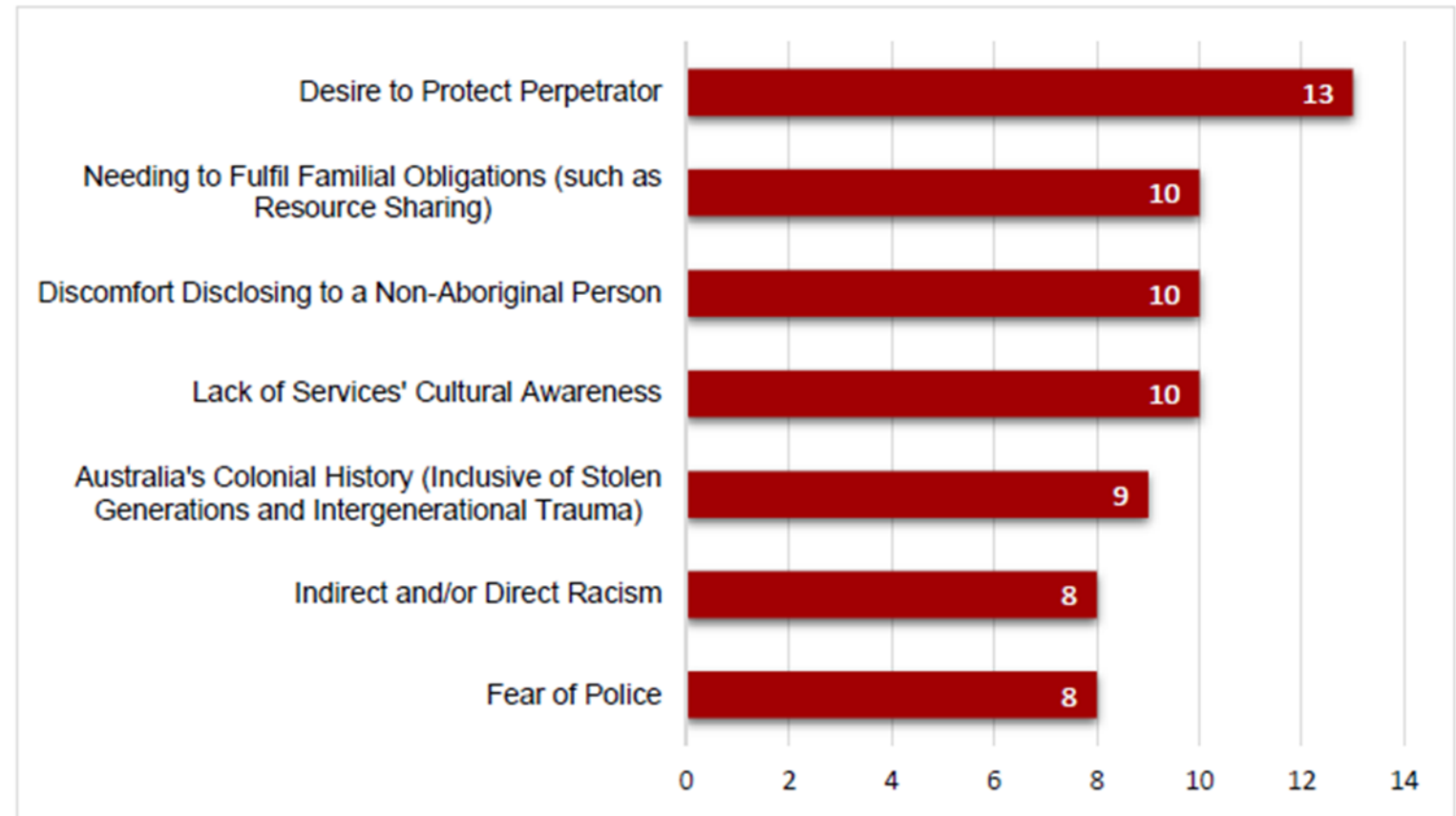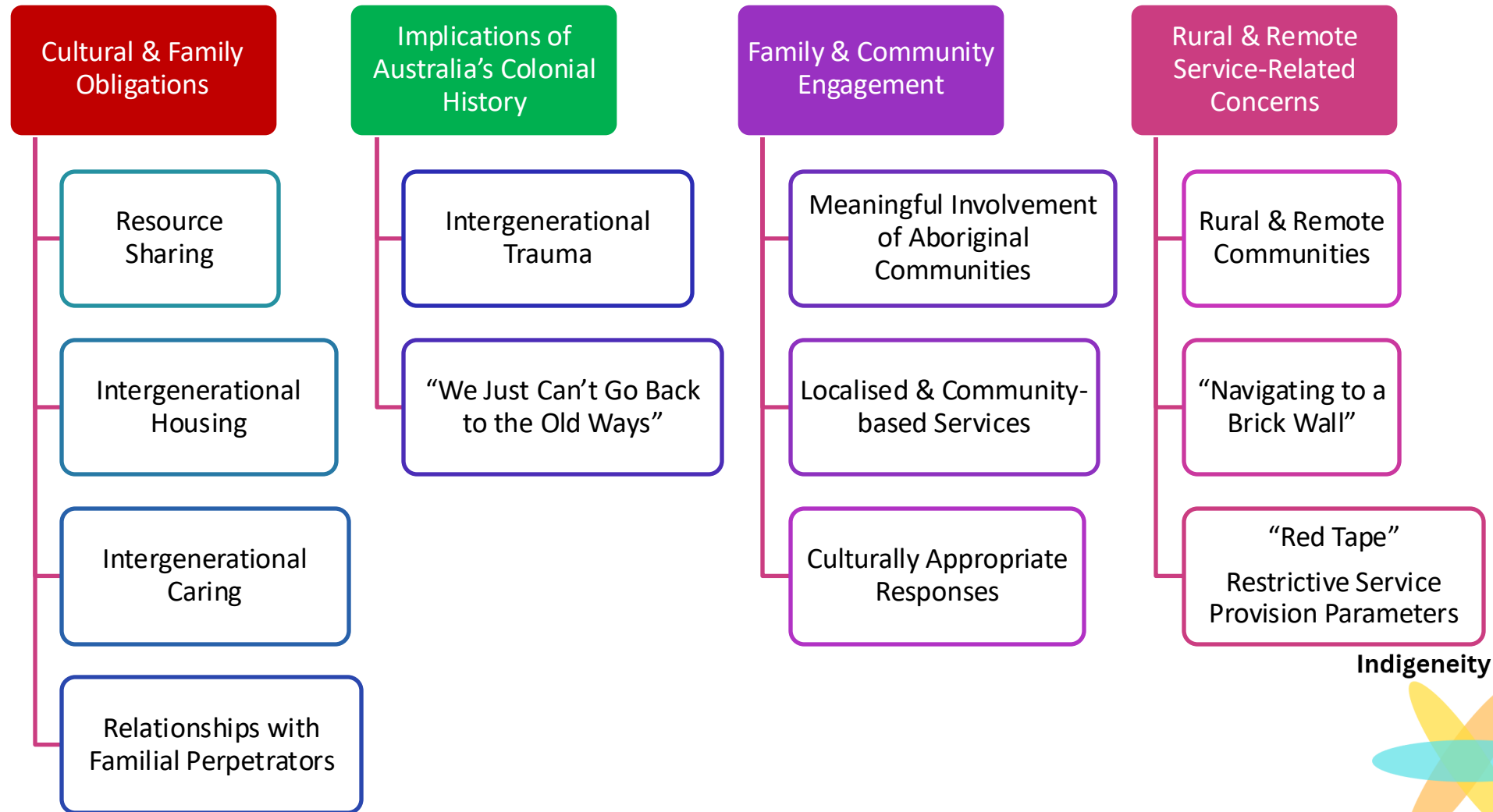
(*n*=13)

Indigeneity

Age

Location

Note. Respondents were encouraged to select all applicable options for this question

(Pitts, 2022, p. 16)

Mistreatment of Older Aboriginal People in Rural and Remote Areas (Pitts, 2022)

Mistreatment of Older Aboriginal People in Rural and Remote Areas (Pitts, 2022)

Key Findings

- An understanding of intergenerational experiences and cultural obligations of older Aboriginal people must underpin practice.

- Service delivery models must be flexible and appropriately resourced.

- Consultation and co-design with community and ACCOs are fundamental to success.

- Whilst cultural safety frameworks are often not formally referred to, service providers identified elements of these as essential to appropriate service responses.

Findings mapped to Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Model (Pitts, 2022, p. 56)

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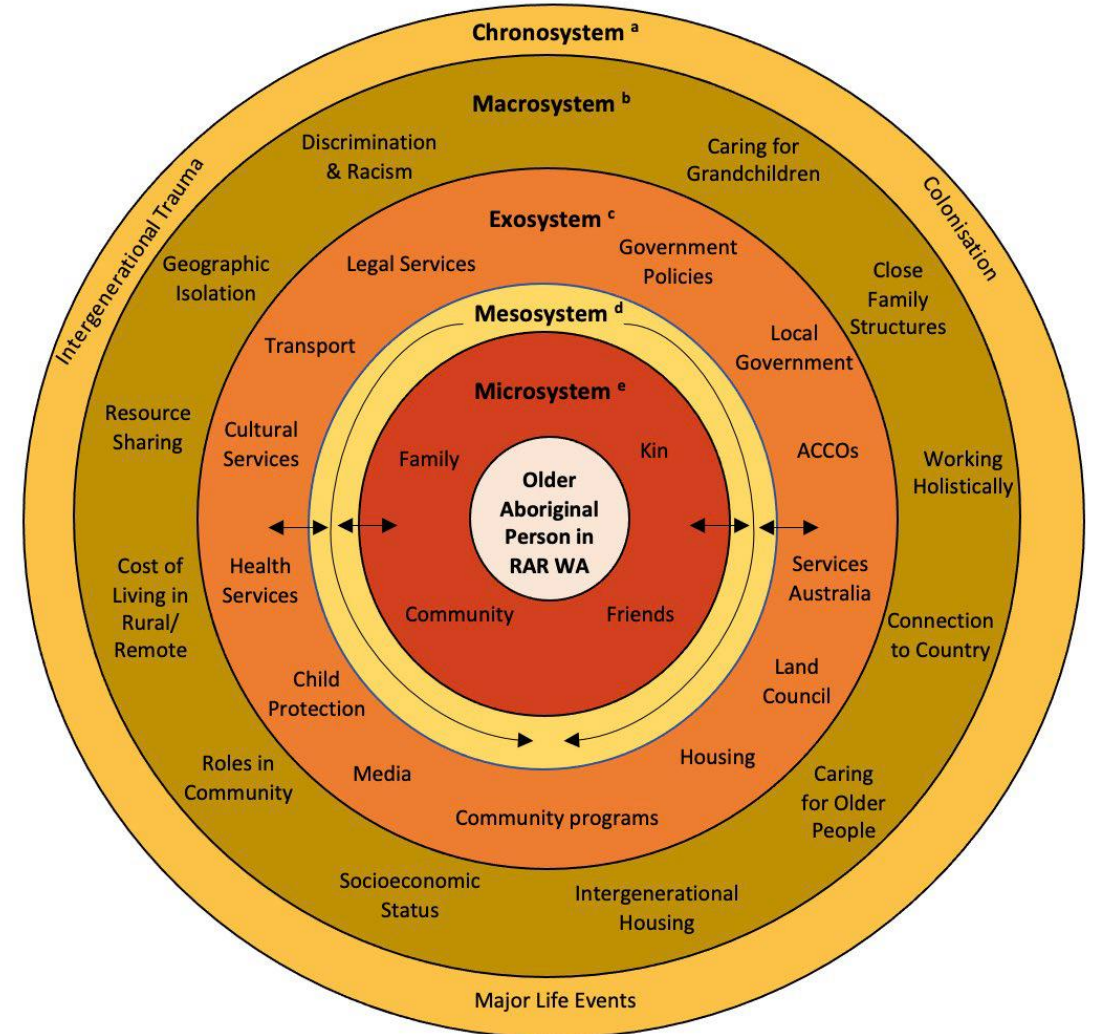
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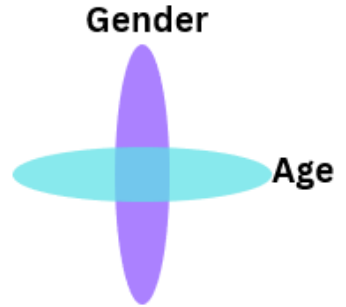
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How do ageism and sexism intersect in the lives of older women who experience violence?

Gender

Age

- Old age, in general, is experienced differently by men and women

  - Women experience far greater pressure to hide signs of ageing and are more likely to be viewed as frail, burdensome and/or incompetent

  - Older women are typically more invisible in society than older men

- Older women are also invisible in elder abuse and domestic and family violence (DFV) research

  - DFV research typically excludes women over the age of 50-60 years old

  - Elder abuse research typically does not use the same gendered lens as DFV research, conflating the experiences of both men and women

- This invisibility leads to older women's experiences of violence being disbelieved, minimised, or even justified

(Cecil et al., 2021; Crockett et al., 2018)

# *What do we know about violence against older women in Australia?*

Australia's overall **elder abuse** prevalence rate is **14.8%**

Prevalence rates are **slightly higher** for **women** than for **men**
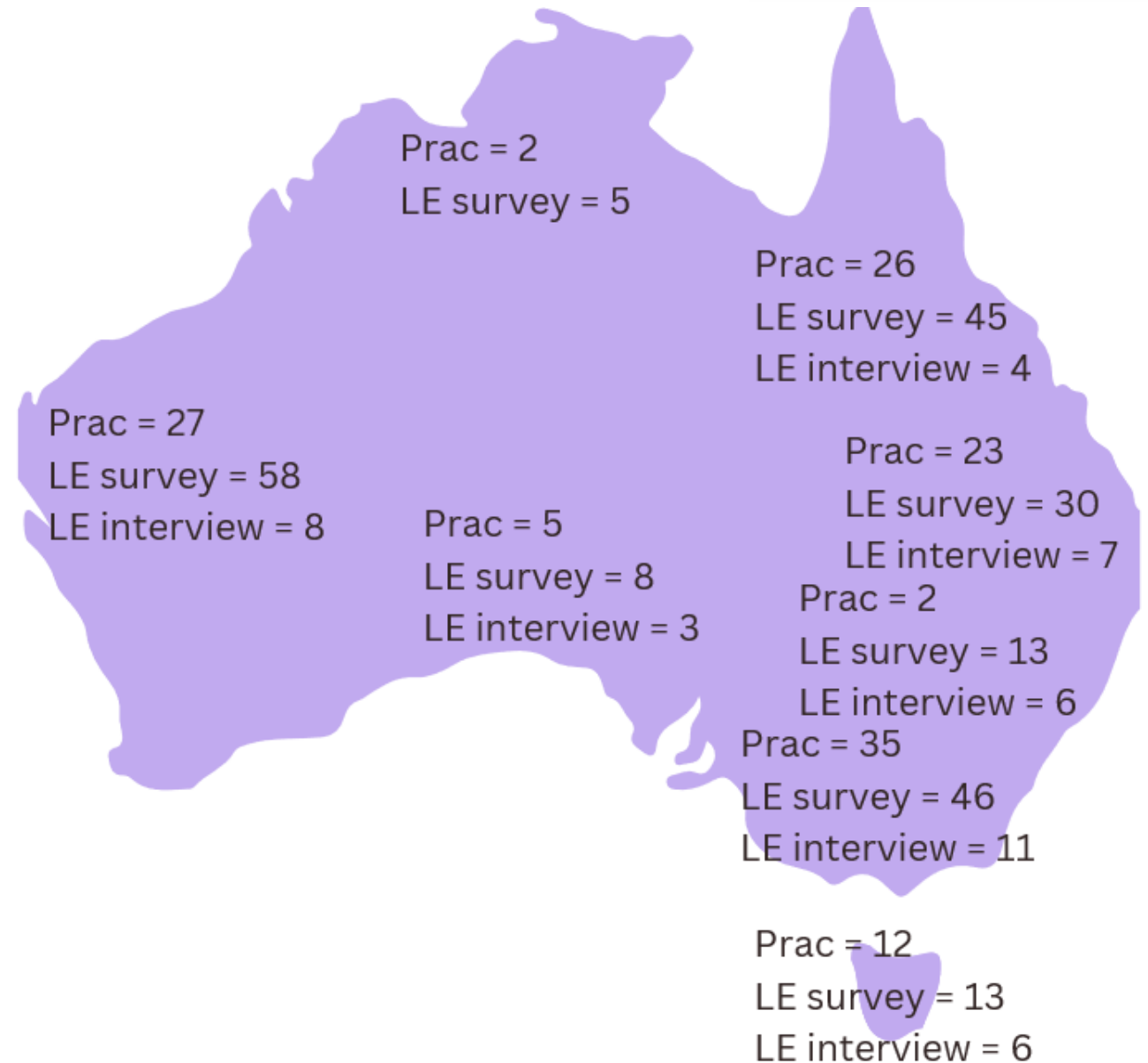
13.6% of Australian men over the age of 65 report experiencing elder abuse in the last 12 months

15.9% of Australian women over the age of 65 report experiencing elder abuse in the last 12 months

(Qu et al., 2021)
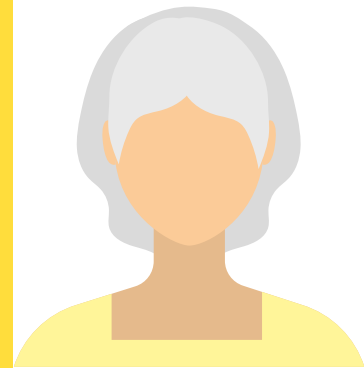
The Women's Experiences of Violence Across the Lifespan (WEVAL) Project

- Two stage project conducted from 2021-2024
- Stage One
  - International scoping literature review
  - Australian federal policy review
- Stage Two
  - Online surveys of Australian practitioners
  - Online surveys and follow-up interviews of Australian women with lived experience of violence

Prac = 2
LE survey = 5

Prac = 26
LE survey = 45
LE interview = 4

Prac = 27
LE survey = 58
LE interview = 8

Prac = 23
LE survey = 30
LE interview = 7

Prac = 5
LE survey = 8
LE interview = 3

Prac = 2
LE survey = 13
LE interview = 6

Prac = 35
LE survey = 46
LE interview = 11

Prac = 12
LE survey = 13
LE interview = 6

Domestic and family violence (DFV)

Any violence that occurs within family relationships, such as between parents and children, siblings, intimate or dating partners or kinship relationships

Most common forms:

- Physical abuse

- Sexual abuse

- Emotional/psychological abuse

- Financial/economic abuse

(AIHW, 2024; Warren et al., 2024)

Elder abuse

A single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person

Most common forms:

- Physical abuse

- Sexual abuse

- Emotional/psychological abuse

- Financial abuse

- Neglect

(Warren et al., 2024; WHO, 2024)

Relationship

Occurs within specific relationships where there is

an expectation of trust

Abuse therefore constitutes a violation of trust

Behaviour

Single incident or pattern of incidents

Commissions and omissions

Behaviours are largely similar, though may be

perceived differently (e.g., neglect vs. economic

abuse)

Intention

Intentional vs. unintentional

Power and control vs. benefit

Harm

Causes actual or potential physical and/or

emotional harm to the victim

(Warren et al., 2024)

How do practitioners categorise abuse of older women?

Doris (70)

Experiencing verbal/emotional and physical from husband of 54 years

Husband has a recent Alzheimer's dementia diagnosis

Elsie (71)

Experiencing financial and verbal/emotional abuse from adult son

Son and family recently moved into Elsie's home following her husband's death

"I would be tempted to term it Elder abuse because of their age, but it's been going on the entire marriage. If it started when Doris became older or infirm, and if the perp was attempting to access her resources, limit her access to health care or generally financially abuse her then it would trend more towards Elder abuse. This seems like domestic violence that has followed Doris into old age, not started there."

- Practitioner, case study 3 (Doris)

"Abuse is controlling behaviours and relevant to Elsie being older i.e., using power of attorney as method of control, financial abuse while being on pension etc."

- Practitioner, case study 5 (Elsie)

"… could also be argued as being Family Violence as her son is demonstrating financial abuse & cohesive control [sic] over her affairs, but I feel an Elder abuse service would be better placed to advise on this matter."

- Practitioner, case study 5 (Elsie)

Unique experiences of older women who are victim-survivors of both DFV and elder abuse

Abuse experiences are intrinsically linked

"With the discipline, with kids and that, he always went against me. The youngest one, when she was 16, it was him and her against me. And she's turned out just like him actually." - P210 (interview)

"I just don't understand, I'm her mum… she used to be, in her early part of marriage, forever, 'I need money, Mum…' And he would always be telling me off, 'Don't give her this. Don't give her that.' But I think – I'm positive, I know for sure, but I can't prove it—and that is that he'd be saying one thing to me and saying another thing to her. And I think that's why she was against me." - P84 (interview)

"And what he's done is he's just exerted power and control over the kids. And so, they're adults, but I have no contact with them, because they're not allowed to. And so, two of them have threatened me… And he won't go to any family events if I'm there. So, I'm not invited to family events." - P122 (interview)

Key takeaways – elder abuse and gender

Older people's voices (and particularly the voices of older women) are often invisible in relation to a range of issues, including abuse - how might you be able elevate these missing perspectives in your own work?

Older women may experience both elder abuse and DFV - how can we make sure that older women in our communities are aware of abuse and where to seek help if needed?

How do we make sure responses are appropriate across the lifespan?

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The abuse of ethnically diverse older people: Intersections of culture and age
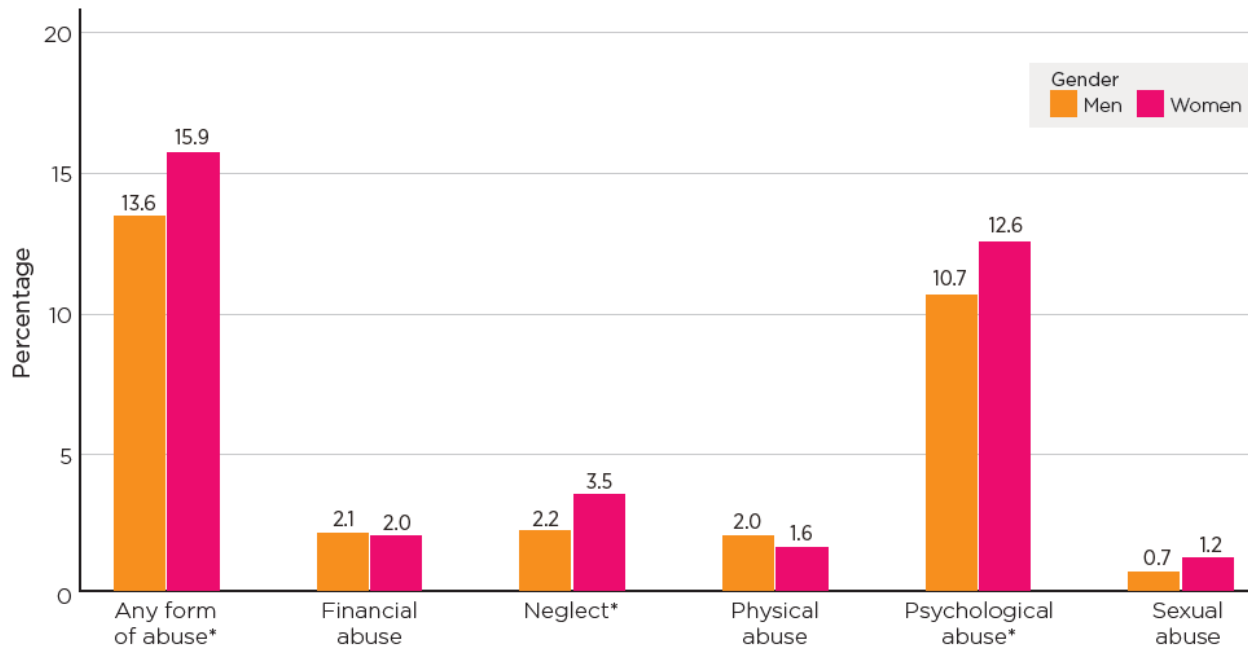

- Prevalence of abuse and risk factors for CaLD older people

- Everyone's Business – findings from research into responses to abuse in WA

- Best practice guidelines for interviewing older people at risk – a new tool for services and professionals
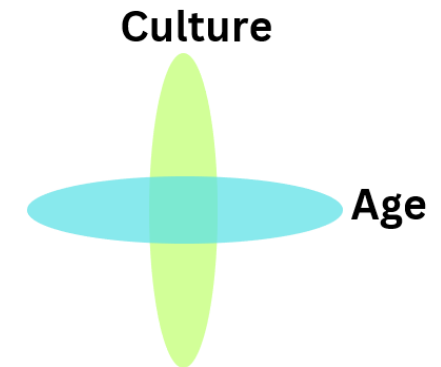
Prevalence of abuse in Australia

Figure 6.1: Prevalence of elder abuse by gender

- **1 in 6 (15.7%)** older adults worldwide experience abuse (Yon et al. 2017)

- National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study found pooled prevalence rate among community dwelling people aged 65+ in Australia is **14.8%** (Qu et al. 2021)

- Abuse of older people has **differently gendered** dimensions to other forms of abuse or family violence

- Prevalence rate for CaLD subsample in National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study similar at **15.3%** (Qu et al. 2021)

NEAPS CaLD subsample

- Factors associated with elder abuse for CaLD subsample:
  - Gender – higher prevalence for women than men
  - Living alone
  - Living with children, esp. abuse relating to language and culture and abuse relating to labour expectations

- Limitations of CaLD subsample
  - Small – 608 of 7,000 older adults; 660 of 3,400 general community.
  - 'CaLD' collapses diverse experiences
  - Findings hard to 'disentangle' from other intersecting factors (p.19)

Prevalence of elder abuse in the **CALD** subgroup **does not differ greatly** from the overall **population**

CALD participants were **less likely** to report their **sons** or **daughters** as **perpetrators**

▶ The overall prevalence of elder abuse in the CALD subgroup does not differ greatly from prevalence overall in the population (14% for the CALD sample cf. 15% of the non-CALD sample). The prevalence of the five subtypes were also similar for the two samples.

▶ Abuse relating to language and culture was reported by 4% of the CALD subsample, with the most commonly reported behaviour being 'not respecting you when talking to you because of your culture'.

▶ CALD participants were less likely to report their sons/daughters as perpetrators.

▶ CALD participants were more likely to identify son/daughter in-law, siblings and friends as perpetrators.

2020-2022 research in Western Australia

Everyone's Business

Research into responses to the abuse of older people (elder abuse) in Western Australia

83 Interview and focus group participants

674 online survey respondents

60 organisations represented

Literature review, review of relevant legislation

Catriona Stevens, Loretta Baldassar, Eileen O'Brien, Ekaterini Cokis, Lukasz Krzyzowski, Maria Greta Carleze Du Plooy, Bronte Jones, Gaynor Noonan and Fran Ottolini

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

ECU EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

University of South Australia

SAGE

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A complicated service landscape
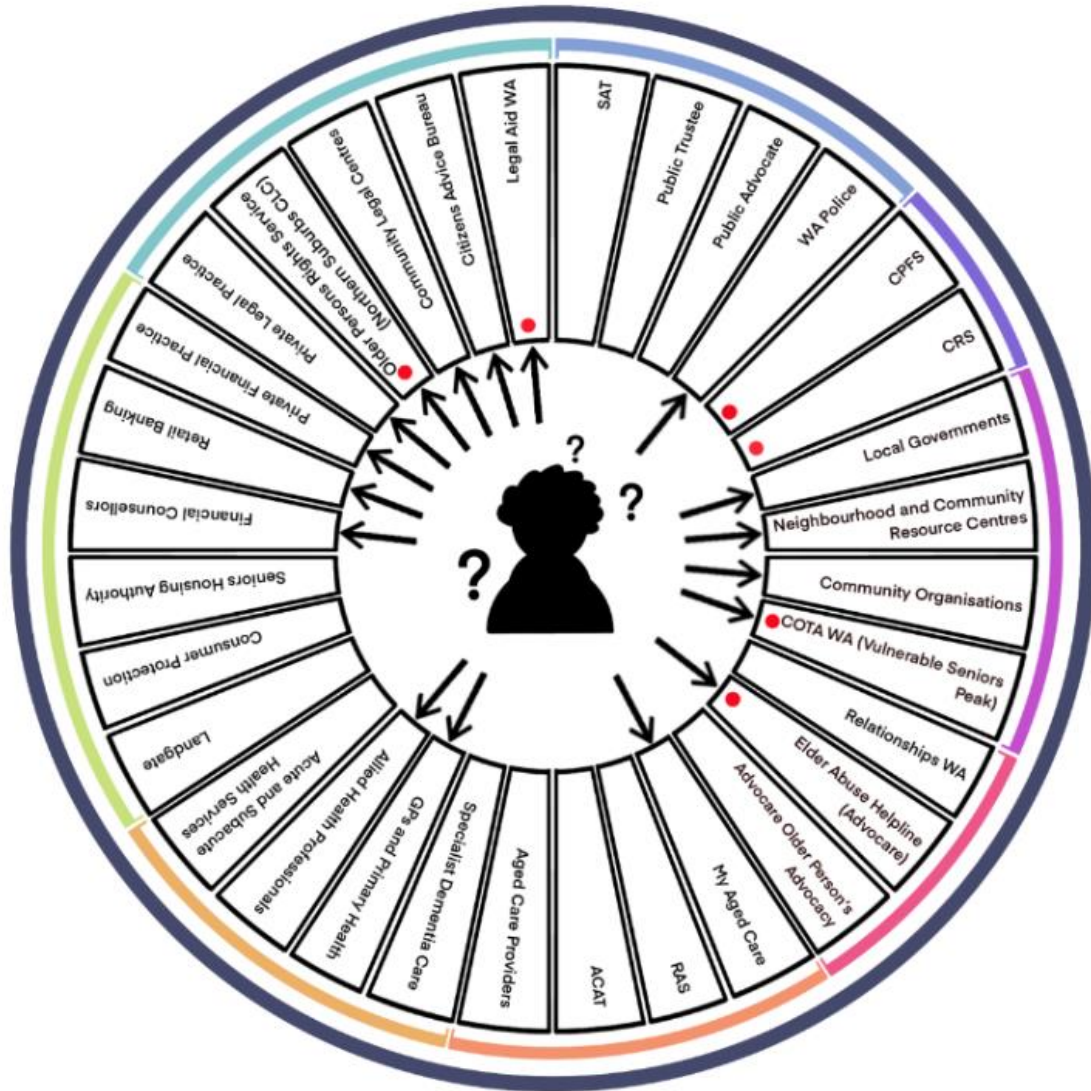
Service Pathways

➤ Common point of self-referral/ first identification

🔴 Response funded by Department of Communities

⬛ Statutory responses (policing and guardianship)

⬛ Family violence responses

⬛ Systemic advocacy, public awareness and information

⬛ Advocacy, counselling and mediation

⬛ Care services

⬛ Health services

⬛ Financial services and responses
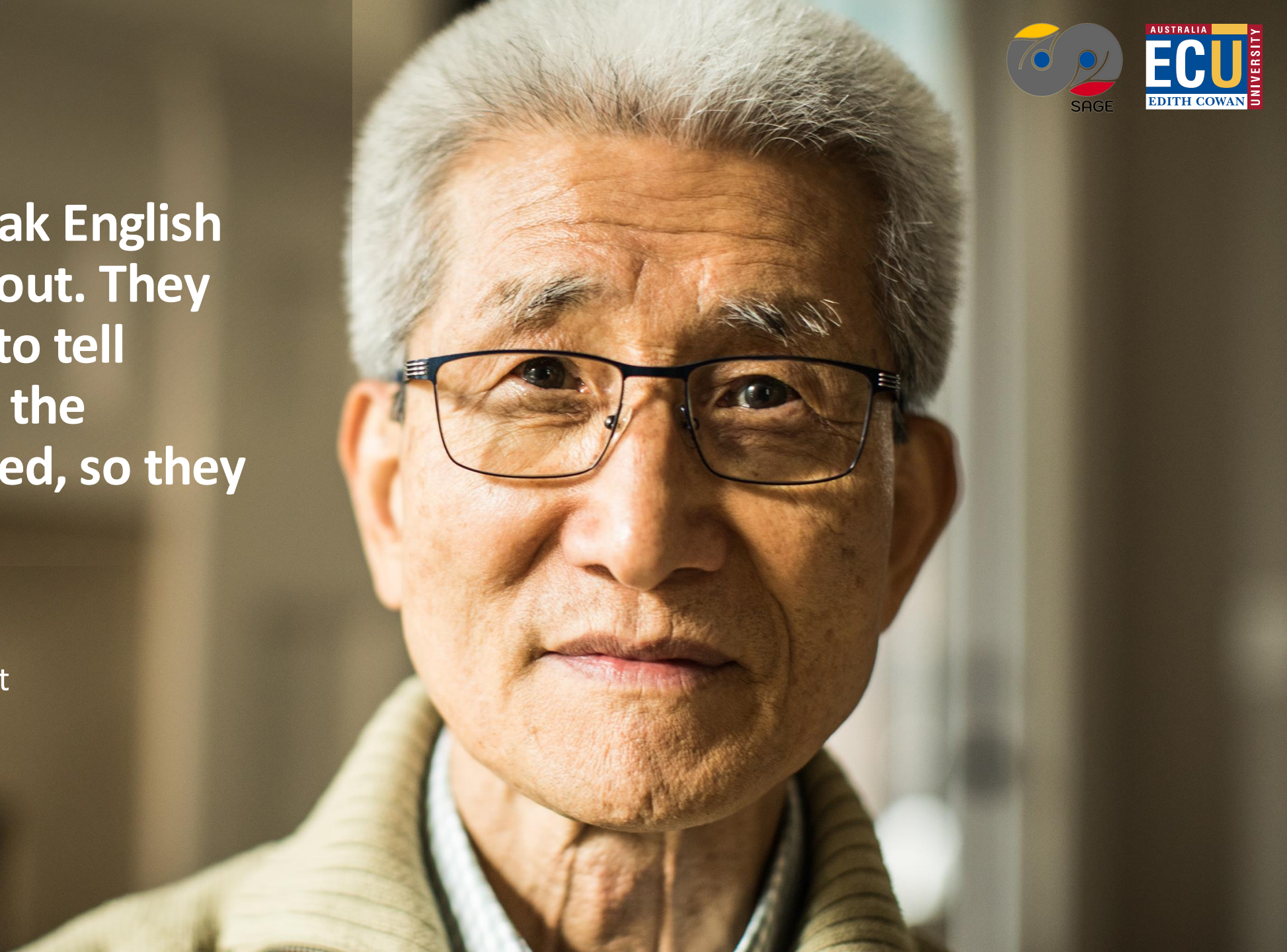
⬛ Legal services and responses

CaLD focus group and interviews – key findings

- **Language as a barrier in responding to abuse**

  - Limited information and resources in languages other than English

  - (Mis)translation and challenges of communicating key terms and concepts

  - Reliance on adult children or other relatives to act as interpreters

  - Limitations of accessing TIS

    - Confidentiality concerns

    - Unfamiliar or stigmatized topic for interpreters – need for more training and awareness

"They do not speak English so they just miss out. They don't know how to tell them, don't have the language they need, so they are just lost ."

CaLD focus group participant
(service provider)

"If I translate 'abuse' to [my language] it's a very severe word. It implies really extreme abuse like imprisonment or torture."

CaLD focus group participant (service provider)

CaLD focus group and interviews – key findings

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  - Limitations of accessing TIS

    - Confidentiality concerns

    - Unfamiliar or stigmatized topic for interpreters – need for more training and awareness

- **Limited health literacy and lack of appropriate services**

  - CaLD people accessing services later and in poorer health than others

  - Shortage of culturally appropriate services that can act as protective factor (esp home care and community care)

  - Differentiation between services for established CaLD communities vs new and emerging

CaLD focus group and interviews – key findings

- **Cultural issues in understanding and responding to abuse**

  - Expectations and norms around family decision making and management of family resources and assets

  - Expectations around intergenerational care obligations, including elder care and grandparenting care

  - Expectations around social care, formal care services vs family care, and 'successful ageing' or 'ageing well'

"Ethnic communities operate differently on the family level... more interlinked and sometimes it's very difficult to draw the line between what is abuse and what is actually just cultural."

CaLD focus group participant (service provider)

CaLD focus group and interviews – key findings

- **Cultural issues in understanding and responding to abuse**

  - Expectations and norms around family decision making and management of family resources and assets

  - Expectations around intergenerational care obligations, including elder care and grandparenting care

  - Expectations around social care, formal care services vs family care, and 'successful ageing' or 'ageing well'

- **The impacts of migration and migration policy**

  - Familiarity with Australian public administration and daily life, including health and care services, legal systems, public transport, driving habits, etc.

  - Diminished and/or non-proximate social networks and sources of support

  - Pre-migration trauma

  - Visa costs and processing times (parent visas), prolonged temporariness and service (in)eligibility (visitor and sponsored parent visas), and related dependencies

Best practice guidelines for interviewing

Best practice
guidelines
for interviewing
older people
at risk

- Commissioned by the Older People's Rights Service (OPRS) at Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre

- Responding to resource gap identified in earlier research

- Steering group: Advocare, COTA WA, NSCLC, Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing, Office of Commissioner for Victims of Crime, Department of Communities, WA Police Force

- Target end users: Service providers and professionals who conduct interviews with older people at risk of or experiencing harm

First half – theory and context

Trauma-informed principles to consider during an interview: [11, 13, 14]

- **Build rapport** – Focus on building trust first.

- **Demonstrate belief** – Fear of not being taken seriously is a significant barrier to communicating important information.

- **Grant control** – Empower the older person to take control of the interview process by leading their own narrative and taking breaks when they need.

- **Support memory** – People who have experienced trauma can exhibit unique and non-linear memory patterns. By giving the older person control to tell their narrative in the way that makes most sense to them you will also elicit the most accurate recall of the situation.

- **Use verbal and non-verbal language carefully** – Take care in word choice, facial expressions and gestures, avoiding emotive words/expressions or attributing blame. Focus on what the person is saying and follow their language use, where appropriate.

- **Listen actively** – Be attentive and non-judgemental. Use body language to reassure the person and encourage information sharing.

- **Understand emotionality** – Recounting traumatic events will likely bring up some emotions in the older person. Remain calm and empathetic to maintain a safe environment. Approach the conversation gently without sudden movements or sudden changes in demeanour.

- **Avoid re-traumatisation** – If possible, record details of the interview in an appropriate manner to spare the older person from repeating the traumatic events multiple times to various authorities and service providers.

- **Seek consent** – Ensure you have explicit consent to share information with other service providers and to make referrals.

1 Working with complex life histories and family dynamics

Demonstrate your belief in the older person

Recognise red flags that may indicate elder abuse or mistreatment

Practice trauma-informed interviewing

Take a strengths-based perspective

Understand other possible sources of support

Recognise the importance of self-care for professionals working with trauma

2 Ageism: recognising and addressing biases

Address ageism in yourself and your organisation

Address self-ageism in older people

3 Interviewing diverse older adults

Interviewing Aboriginal older people

Interviewing culturally and linguistically diverse older people

Effective and appropriate use of interpreters during interviews

Interviewing LGBTIQ+ older people

Interviewing older people with diverse abilities

Interviewing people living with dementia

Second half – practical interviewing tips

4 Before the interview: preparing well

Reason for the interview and the older person's prior understanding

Interview location and set up

Interview support people

5 Interviewing environment and arrangements

Interview environment

Interview time and timing

Including support people in interviews

Interviews conducted in other locations

Interviews conducted online or by telephone

6 Strategies and techniques for effective interviewing

Rapport, trust and clarity - the basics of good interviewing practice

Communicating your belief in the older person

Opening conversation for rapport and information

Narrative interviewing technique

Funnelling questions

Essential non-verbal communication skills – what to do and what to watch for

**7 After the interview: closure, advice, and follow up action**

Providing advice and supporting follow up action

Providing written information

Supporting autonomous decision-making

Funnelling questions

The funnel technique is a questioning approach that moves a discussion from the general to the specific. It is an effective way to confirm detailed elements of an account without interrupting free recall or using leading questions that might affect accuracy.
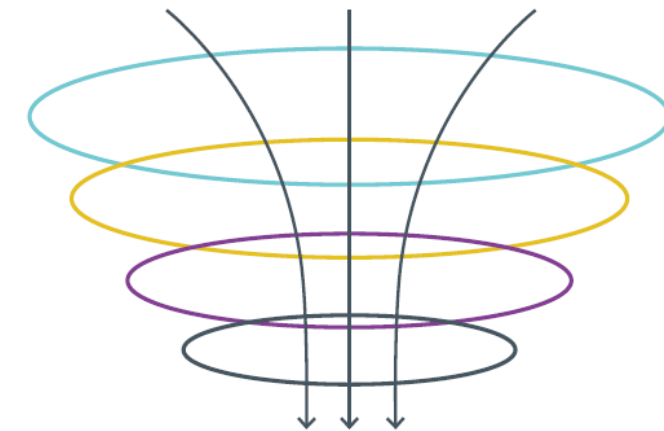
General open questions or narrative prompts,
e.g., Tell me about your children.

Specific open questions,
e.g., What is it you find difficult about discussing this matter with your children?

Choice questions,
e.g., Do you find it easier to discuss this matter with your son or your daughter or perhaps with someone else?

Closed yes/no questions,
e.g., Has your son refused to talk with you about this matter?

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