

# Preventing intimate partner violence against older women

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2022



**Our  
WATCH**  
End violence against  
Women And Their Children

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Our Watch acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.



### **Acknowledgement of Country**

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples past and present.

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# Terminology

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**Ableism** — refers to discrimination against persons with disability.

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**Ageism** — refers to the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination against people on the basis of their age.<sup>1</sup>

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**Drivers of violence** — are the underlying causes required to create the necessary conditions in which violence against women occurs.<sup>2</sup>

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**Elder abuse** — is recognised as a form of family violence in the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic). Elder abuse refers to any act that results in harm to the older person occurring where there is a relationship of trust. Abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional, financial, psychological or social abuse, and/or neglect, and includes intimate partner violence against older women. The term elder abuse is often used interchangeably with ‘violence against older people’ or ‘abuse against older people’. This is because the term ‘elder’ has a unique and specific meaning to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. However, some forms of violence against older people may also be committed by a stranger and therefore may occur outside of elder abuse.<sup>3</sup> In the context of this resource, violence against older women refers to a form of elder abuse because it is perpetrated by someone in a relationship of trust.

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**Gender inequality** — is the unequal distribution of power, resources, opportunity and value afforded to men and women in society due to prevailing gendered norms and structures.<sup>4</sup>

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**Intersectional understanding of violence against women** — acknowledges that while gender inequality is a necessary condition for violence against women, it is not the only or necessarily the most prominent factor in every context. Violence against women is often experienced in combination with other forms of structural inequality and discrimination, such as ageism, racism and ableism.<sup>5</sup>

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**Intimate partner violence (IPV)** — is a form of violence against women. It refers to violence and abuse perpetrated by a spouse or partner, including physical, sexual, emotional/mental, financial, social and spiritual abuse, and neglect.

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**Older women** — refers to women aged 65 and over (based on the World Health Organization’s definition for most developed world countries). This covers a significant part of the lifespan and multiple generations. Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 50 and over.<sup>6</sup>

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**Racial discrimination** — is when a person is treated less favourably than another person in a similar situation because of their race, colour, descent, national or ethnic origin, or immigrant status.<sup>7</sup>

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## Introduction

All forms of violence have a significant impact on the wellbeing and safety of women, no matter their age. Women's experiences and relationships change throughout their lifetime, but older women have been largely invisible in the work undertaken to prevent and respond to intimate partner violence. Emerging evidence suggests that in the case of violence experienced by older women, ageism intersects with gender inequality to drive violence.<sup>8</sup> These factors likely intersect to shape attitudes and stereotypes that minimise or excuse violence against older women, which creates barriers to identifying and reporting this violence.

An increased understanding of how intimate partner violence is experienced by older women and of the gendered and ageist attitudes, practices and structures that drive this violence is necessary to ensure that violence prevention and response work can better ensure all women are safe, respected and included.

### What is this resource?

This resource presents findings from the Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women Project, co-delivered by Our Watch and Seniors Rights Victoria and funded by the Victorian Government Office for Women. It explores implications and considerations for future work to address intimate partner violence against older women.

### Who is this resource for?

This resource can be used by practitioners in various settings who engage with older women. These include:

- community health practitioners
- practitioners in the family violence and elder abuse sectors
- aged-care service providers and their staff
- women's health service practitioners
- primary prevention of violence against women practitioners.

This resource aims to facilitate change in the attitudes, behaviours and structures that drive violence against older women in the places they live, learn, work and socialise.

## Project overview and methodology

The Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women Project aimed to increase understanding about the nature of intimate partner violence experienced by older women, and was informed by practitioner expertise and knowledge. Project findings can be used to guide and strengthen the capacity of practitioners in various settings who engage with older women to undertake prevention activities. The findings can also inform future initiatives. The project's funding focused on older women living in the community, with residential aged-care facilities falling out of scope. Additional funding is required to enable comprehensive research into the prevalence, nature and severity of violence experienced by women in aged-care facilities.

In November 2019 Seniors Rights Victoria, in partnership with Our Watch, led a consultation with key stakeholders. Participants represented a range of settings, including family violence services, migrant services, ageing services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services, women's health services, disability services and rural services. Fifty-two surveys were completed, and 12 organisations participated in two focus groups.

## Project limitations

This is an emerging area of work, with significant data gaps surrounding both experiences and perpetration of violence. The findings from this project are central to building the evidence base for a better understanding of the shared and unique drivers of violence experienced by older women living in the community, and for understanding what works in primary prevention. Additional engagement with older women with lived experience of violence, including those living in residential aged-care facilities, is recommended for future work.

## A primary prevention focus

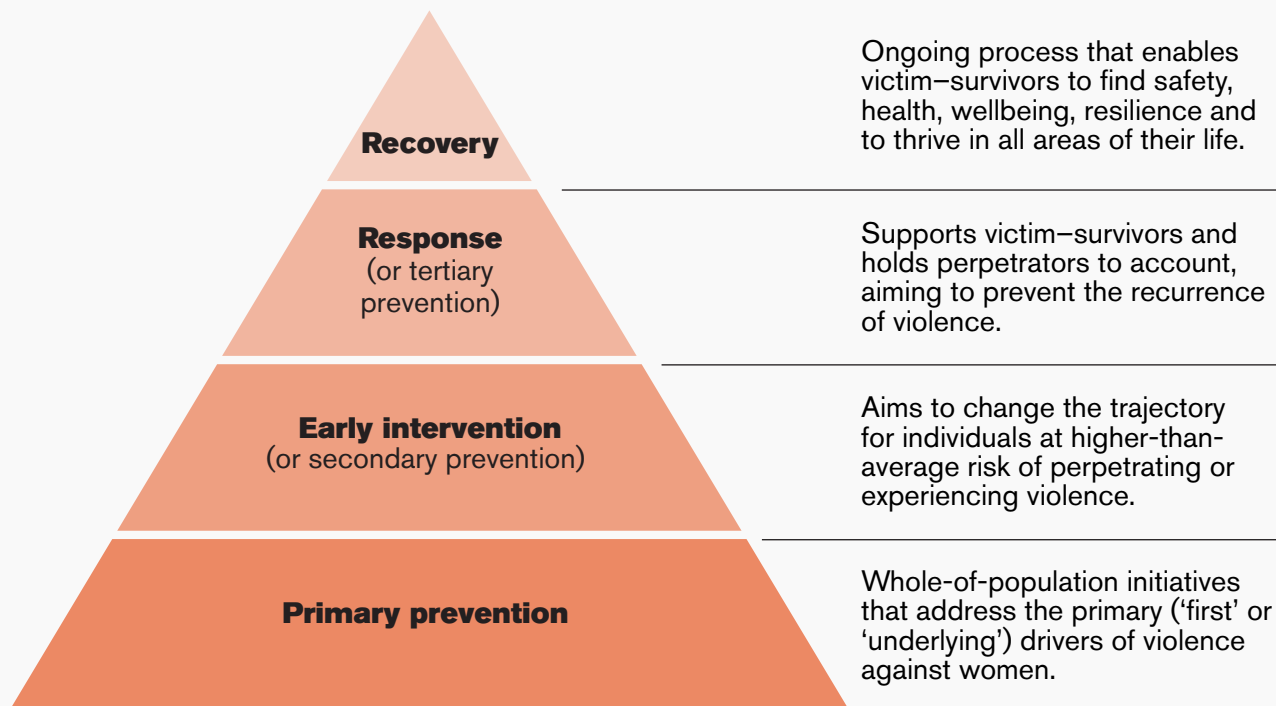
Primary prevention takes a whole-of-population approach to address the underlying drivers (or causes) of violence in order to stop it before it occurs. This means changing the social conditions, such as gender inequality, that justify, excuse or promote violence against women.<sup>9</sup> Primary prevention seeks to address the gendered norms, practices and social structures that are associated with high levels of violence.<sup>10</sup> Primary prevention forms part of a continuum of addressing violence against women, including older women in Australia, as shown in [Figure 1](#).



**Figure 1.**

The relationship between primary prevention and other work to address violence against women. **Source:** Our Watch’s *Change the story*.

Refer to [alternate text for Figure 1](#) on page 16.



International and Australian evidence identifies that gender inequality sets the necessary social conditions for violence against women to occur. Within this broader context, there are four specific gendered drivers of violence:

1. condoning of violence against women, particularly by excusing or trivialising it, or 'blaming the victim'
2. men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
3. rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
4. male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.<sup>11</sup>

Emerging evidence suggests that in the case of violence experienced by older women, ageism intersects with gender inequality to drive violence.<sup>12</sup>

To learn more about a primary prevention approach and the evidence base, refer to the Our Watch *Prevention Handbook* website: [Understand the primary prevention approach](#).<sup>13</sup>

## Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women Project findings

The information in the following sections was drawn from analysis of the consultations with participants in the Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women Project. To provide further context and understanding for these findings, they were integrated with relevant literature, research and resources.

For primary prevention work to include all women, it is important to pay specific attention to the ways in which violence is experienced across the lifespan. While older women are not a homogenous group, there are particular ways that violence may manifest for older women. As such, tailored prevention approaches are required.

Older women experiencing intimate partner violence are often forgotten within both the elder abuse and family violence sectors. Frequently, older women are not visible in the family violence sector,<sup>14</sup> while a strong focus on intergenerational violence and a limited gender lens has traditionally been seen in the elder abuse sector. Given that people aged 65 and over account for approximately 16% of the Australian population<sup>15</sup> – predicted to be between 21–23% by 2066 – the experiences of older women must be considered if we are to end violence against all women.

**1.2%** of women aged 65 years and older **experienced violence** in the previous 12 months.<sup>16</sup>

Older women are more likely than older men to be victims of both **intergenerational** and **intimate partner violence**.<sup>17</sup>

Perpetrators of both **intimate partner violence** and **intergenerational violence** are more likely to be men.<sup>18</sup>



## Older women’s experiences of intimate partner violence

Data on older women’s experiences of violence remains limited, and significant underreporting is suspected due to multiple barriers to women disclosing and reporting their experiences.

Individual barriers include:

- not identifying behaviour as abuse
- shame, guilt or fear of not being believed
- greater tolerance or acceptance of abuse due to the length of time over which violence is perpetrated, or other attitudinal norms
- deterrence from reporting by adult children, other family, friends or community members
- financial insecurity or barriers, particularly once retired.

Service barriers include:

- physical inaccessibility
- lack of public transport options
- technological barriers
- failure of services to engage with and tailor service provision to older women.

More research is underway to better understand violence experienced by older people in Australia. To learn more, refer to the Australian Institute of Family Studies [National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study webpage](#).<sup>19</sup>

## Societal attitudes and norms about older women and violence

Societal attitudes and beliefs about older women shape how society understands intimate partner violence against older women. They also inform how our organisations and systems prevent and respond to it. Problematic societal attitudes and beliefs may be that:

- Older women are asexual.
- Older women do not experience sexual assault.
- Older women are responsible for keeping the family unit together.
- Older women are too old to re-partner.
- Older women should not bother with divorcing past a certain age.
- Older people are slow, feeble, weak and/or incompetent.

## Ageism and gender

Ageing is a gendered experience and it is important to recognise how older women face both sexist and ageist norms, practices and structures at various levels of society.

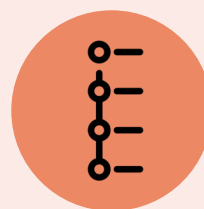
The following page provides examples of how ageism and sexism intersect.

## Examples of how ageism and sexism intersect



### UNEQUAL CARING ROLES

- Gender stereotypes and societal expectations that women should be the primary carers in families and relationships across the lifespan.
- Older women often shoulder caring responsibility for their partner, parents, adult children, grandchildren and extended family.
- Care work is largely unpaid and undervalued, and can be justified by stereotypes, such as that older women have unlimited time on their hands or 'nothing better to do.'



### GENDER VIOLENCE THROUGH THE DECADES

- Over her life, a woman may face multiple experiences of family and intimate partner violence. The cumulative physical, mental, emotional and financial impacts of this can carry into her older years.



### FINANCES AND DECISION-MAKING

- Limited control of finances and decision-making by women across the lifespan results in reduced independence and financial security for older women where, for instance, the male breadwinner is responsible for controlling household finances.
- Older women face the accumulated financial impacts of gender inequality over the lifespan, such as having less superannuation than men due to unpaid caring roles and the gender pay gap.
- Older women are at risk of employment discrimination, and face an increased risk of homelessness, predominantly due to family violence and financial difficulties.<sup>20</sup>



### INVISIBILITY OF OLDER WOMEN

- Older women face being undervalued due to the double burden of age and gender.
- In contrast to men, ageing is seen as a particularly negative experience for women. This is enforced by youth-centric beauty ideals and lack of representation of older women in the media and decision-making positions.
- Older women face invisibility outside some specialist family violence and abuse against older people services. This can occur when services believe older women do not need or use their assistance. It can also occur where family violence and aged-care services each assume care is being provided by the other service.

## Intersections of ageism, sexism and other forms of discrimination

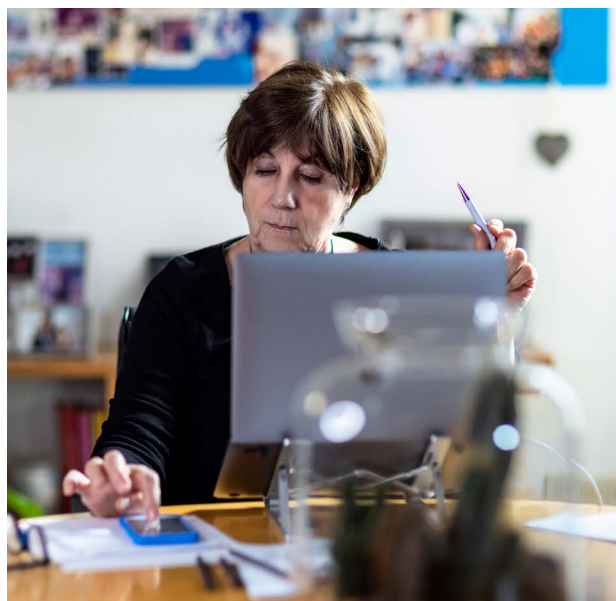
For many older women, their experiences are also shaped by intersecting forms of discrimination, such as racism, homophobia or transphobia, ableism and classism. For instance:

- Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women may be caring for partners, children, grandchildren and extended family, and may be unwilling to access services due to the history of institutional violence, child removal and dispossession.
- Older LGBTIQ women may not have come out to family and friends or may feel excluded from services, as a legacy of homophobia and the criminalisation of same-sex relationships.
- Older women from migrant or refugee backgrounds may experience barriers to services due to language barriers or visa restrictions.
- Older women with disability are more likely to have their experiences minimised or dismissed, and may not be able to access services due to lack of mobility accommodations. For instance, failure to identify or act on intimate partner violence when either the victim or perpetrator has dementia.
- Older women in rural and remote areas may be isolated from services due to distance and limited internet access, or concerns over confidentiality in small communities.

## Implications for future primary prevention initiatives

Based on findings across the consultations, we have identified three main areas of focus relevant to the development of future primary prevention activities that address intimate partner violence experienced by older women. These are:

1. the need for a clear, evidence-based framework
2. the inclusion of older women's voices in the design of prevention activities
3. an intersectional approach that focuses on intersections between gender inequality and factors such as ageism, racism and ableism.



# Improving primary prevention practice

Given the findings from the Intimate Partner Violence Against Older Women Project, the below tips may help practitioners and organisations to improve primary prevention practice for older women.

## Critical reflection activity

*The prompts below can be used for either individual or group reflection. They will help you assess how your current practice considers (and challenges) some of the ageist and/or sexist norms and beliefs that drive intimate partner violence against older women.*

See the following resources for examples of how stereotypes about gender and sexuality can be challenged, and positive attitudes to ageing can be promoted:

- [Celebrate Ageing](#): a social enterprise to challenge ageism and promote and build respect for older people
- [Every Age Counts](#): an advocacy campaign to challenge ageism
- [Flesh After Fifty](#): changing images of Australian women in art.

Do I adhere to any **stereotypes** about ageing and gender?

Do I view ageing as **positive or negative**?

Am I looking forward to getting older? If yes, why? If not, why not? What **changes in society** would need to occur for my views to change?

Do I have any **firm beliefs** about how people should (and should not) age? Are any of these beliefs specific to women? Are any specific to men?

How do I feel about **older people and sexuality**?

What are my thoughts on **older people having sex**? Does it make me uncomfortable? Do I celebrate it? If so, why?

When speaking about or undertaking training on healthy relationships, do I include **older intimate partnerships**?

How might my **attitude towards ageing** and older people influence how I engage with older women?



## Tips for organisations

**Centre the voices of older women in your work, including as experts, mentors and leaders.**

**Undertake education and awareness-raising activities for staff, clients and the wider community on topics including:**

- intimate partner violence against older women
- the prevention of violence against women, including the gendered drivers of violence and essential actions needed to address it
- ageist and sexist stereotypes and the impact of these on older women.

**Ensure your organisational policies, procedures and practices promote gender equality for all women through the following:**

- Identify any barriers to older people accessing your service or being included in your prevention initiatives.
- Ensure older women are visible and represented in your organisation's promotional materials and campaigns, and that your marketing strategy includes specific tactics to connect with older women.
- Ensure recruitment, remuneration and working conditions support workers across the age range, including flexible working arrangements for older workers and meeting the professional development needs of all staff.
- Review representation on advisory groups and external working groups, including how you will ensure the voices and experiences of a diverse range of older people are represented.
- Support staff and colleagues to reflect on unconscious biases and beliefs about age and gender that may shape their individual and team practices.

**Develop and deliver primary prevention activities tailored to older women and their experiences of violence, for instance:**

- financial literacy education designed for older women
- primary prevention initiatives that engage older men, including direct participation programs, community engagement or social marketing campaigns targeted to them as the key audience
- intergenerational activities that build respect and relationships between generations
- activities about gender equality and ageism that target grandparents in caring roles
- activities that challenge internalised ageism across the lifespan
- activities that foster relationships and collaborations between the primary prevention, family violence and elder abuse sectors
- accessible activities, including translations and appropriate formats for people with dementia and other disability.

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## Support services

In an emergency, call **000**.

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**1800RESPECT** provides confidential counselling, information and support 24 hours a day to anyone impacted by family violence or sexual assault.

**1800 737 732**

[1800respect.org.au](https://1800respect.org.au)

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**CASA House** provides counselling and advocacy for survivors of sexual assault and their family members.

**03 9635 3610**

[casahouse.com.au](https://casahouse.com.au)

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**Seniors Rights Victoria** offers a helpline and support for those experiencing elder abuse (including older women experiencing intimate partner violence).

**1300 368 821**

[seniorsrights.org.au](https://seniorsrights.org.au)

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**Men's Referral Service** is a men's family violence telephone counselling, information and referral service operating around the country. It is the central point of contact for men taking responsibility for their violent behaviour.

**1300 766 491**

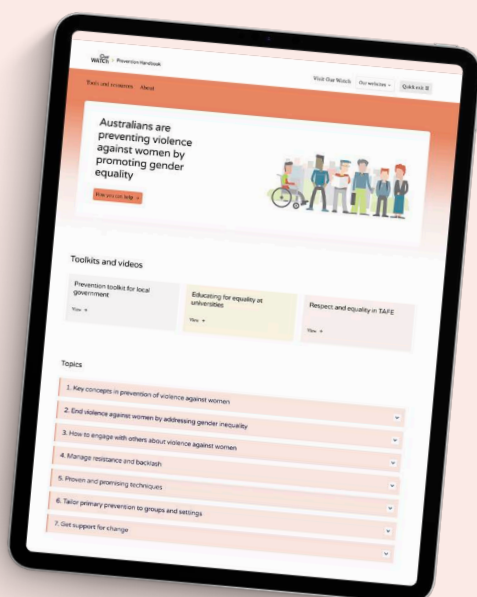
[ntv.org.au](https://ntv.org.au)

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## Find out more

Learn more about preventing violence against women.

- Our Watch: [Prevention Handbook](#)



Learn more about preventing violence against older women and elder abuse.

### Publications

- The Benevolent Society: [The drivers of ageism](#)
- Seniors Online Victoria: [Ageing well in a changing world report](#)
- Seniors Rights Victoria: [Elder abuse, gender and sexuality discussion paper](#)
- Seniors Rights Victoria: [Seven years of elder abuse data in Victoria report](#)
- Southern Melbourne Primary Care Partnership: [Preventing elder abuse, A literature review for the SMPCP Elder Abuse Prevention Network](#)

### Webpages

- Compass: [Guiding action on elder abuse](#)
- Crime Statistics Agency: [Family Violence Data Portal](#)
- Dementia Training Australia: [Sexualities and dementia education resources](#)
- Department of Health Victoria: [Preventing elder abuse](#)
- Norma's Project: [Preventing sexual assault against older women](#)
- Older People, Equity, Respect and Ageing (OPERA): [Project resources](#)
- Older People, Equity, Respect and Ageing (OPERA): [Videos to challenge ageism and age discrimination](#)
- Opal Institute: [Promoting the sexual rights of older people](#)
- Respect Victoria: [Respect Older People: 'Call It Out' campaign](#)

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## Alternative text for figures

### Figure 1

Infographic showing the relationship between primary prevention and other work to address violence against women. The relationship between these is depicted as a pyramid that narrows from broader whole-of-population initiatives to response services for individuals.

- Primary prevention: whole-of-population initiatives that address the primary ('first' or underlying) drivers of violence against women.
- Early intervention (or secondary prevention): aims to change the trajectory for individuals at higher-than-average risk of perpetrating or experiencing violence.
- Response (or tertiary prevention): supports victim–survivors and holds perpetrators to account, aiming to prevent the recurrence of violence.
- Recovery: ongoing process that enables victim–survivors to find safety, health, wellbeing, resilience and to thrive in all areas of their life.

Return to [text following Figure 1](#) on page 7.



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## Endnotes

- 1 Applewhite, A. (2016). *This chair rocks*. London: Melville House.
- 2 Our Watch. (2021). [Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia](#) (2nd ed.). Melbourne: Our Watch.
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- 20 Australian Human Rights Commission. (2019). [Older women's risk of homelessness: Background paper](#).

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