Australia’s population is ageing. People aged over 65, the majority of whom are women, currently make up 15% of the Australian population. Aboriginal people are considered ‘older’ at age 50 and over due to the life expectancy gap and their experience of chronic health issues.1

As they age, many older people will continue living independently or with little assistance, and continue being active members of the community through working, volunteering, and caring for spouses and grandchildren. Women live longer than men and can expect to live almost twenty years beyond the Age Pension entitlement of 67 years.2 Longer lifespans mean that they are more likely than older men to live alone,3 more likely to be in residential care, are the majority of those with dementia,4 and live fewer active years despite older age.5

Older women and men report similar rates of disability, however older women are more likely to report living with a severe or profound core activity limitation (23% and 17% respectively)6 and are more likely to suffer musculoskeletal conditions and neurological diseases.2 Common chronic conditions experienced by older women include arthritis, diabetes, sleep problems and incontinence.4

The consequences of gender inequity experienced over a lifetime can have an accumulative effect on a woman’s later life. More than 50% of retired women live in households with annual incomes below $30,000.2 Consequently, women are less likely to own their own home and older women comprise a large and growing proportion of homeless people. Due to traditional family and childcare responsibilities, older women’s employment histories are characterised by disruption and part time work, meaning they retire with less superannuation and savings and are more likely to be in poverty than men.8

Older women are significantly more likely to report elder abuse than older men. Elder abuse can be physical, sexual, financial or psychological and can involve abuse of a parent by their adult children or ongoing abuse of women by their male partners.4 They may also be living with the legacy of domestic violence in the form of physical injury or poverty. Women from the LGBTI community may fear experiencing discrimination or harassment when needing aged care and health services, and this may affect their help-seeking behaviours.

Ageism, and negative attitudes associated with ageing, can lead to older people being marginalised and discriminated against. Older women are largely absent from positive representation in the media and pop culture.10 They are often stereotyped as asexual and undesiring of sexual intimacy.11 Sexual assault of women often goes unrecognised and is underreported, and the physical effects of sexual assault on older women can be severe, resulting in an increased need for health services, and poorer overall health and life expectancy.12

There is a need for more freely available and up-to-date research on the health and wellbeing of older Aboriginal women, women from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and older women with disabilities.

WHV thanks the following expert reviewers for their input:
- Melanie Joosten, Seniors Rights Victoria
- Deb Parkinson, Women’s Health Goulbourn North East, Women’s Health in the North and Monash University Disaster Resilience initiative
- Sharon Granek, Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria
Overview

**Older Australia at a glance** Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017

**Older women on gender equality** Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria, 2016

**World report on ageing and health 2015** World Health Organization 2015

**Explaining the elderly feminization of poverty : an analysis of retirement benefits, health care benefits, and elder care-giving** Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy, 2014

**Women, health and ageing : findings from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health** Women’s Health Australia, 2010

**Has the sisterhood forgotten older women? : a compendium of essays [U.K.]** International Longevity Centre, 2013

**Challenging ageism** Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria, 2016

Physical health

**Health and disability status In: Older Australia at a glance** Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017

**Disability-free life expectancy over 30 years : a growing female disadvantage in the US population** American Journal of Public Health, 2016

"Just get on with it": qualitative insights of coming to terms with a deteriorating body for women with osteoarthritis PLOS One, 2015

**Health, lifestyle, and gender influences on aging well : an Australian longitudinal analysis to guide health promotion** Frontiers in Public Health, 2014

**Health checks : women over 60** Jean Hailes for Women’s Health 2014

**Women, HIV and ageing : some specific challenges** Positive Women, 2012 Reprint
Mental health

Women’s Health Series : Part 4 : Mental health of older women [Audio interview] Life Matters (ABC Radio National), 2014

Longevity and loneliness biggest risks for older Australian women Aged Care Guide, 2017

Social isolation : its impact on the mental health and wellbeing of older Victorians Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria, 2014

Women and Alzheimer’s Disease : the facts behind the headlines [U.S.] Society for Women’s Health Research for Huffington Post, 2017

'We are still gay…' : the needs of LGBT Australians with dementia Australian Journal of Dementia Care, 2015

Body image

Double standards and derision : tracing our attitudes to older women and beauty The Conversation, 2017


Representing older women in the media : the key issues University of West England. 2013

In the margins : the impact of sexualised images on the mental health of ageing women Sex Roles, 2011

Sexual and reproductive health

Sex, desire and pleasure : considering the experiences of older Australian women Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 2015
Related article in The Conversation

Sexual health in older women World Health Organization, 2013
Housing and financial security

Women on the edge [older women and homelessness] [Video] SBS Insight, 2017

What do single, older women want? : their `own little space’ (and garden) to call home, for a start ABC Online, 2017

Time of our lives? : building opportunity and capacity for the economic and social participation of older Australian women Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation, 2016

Older women’s pathways out of homelessness in Australia : report for the Mercy Foundation University of Queensland. Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR), 2014

Living longer on less : women speak on superannuation and retirement Women’s Health In the North and Women’s Health Goulburn North East, 2013 and
Living longer on less : women, paid work, and superannuation in Victoria, Australia SAGE Open, 2015

Ageing and women’s homelessness : overcoming the bag lady syndrome Women’s Property Initiatives, 2013

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and superannuation National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Alliance, 2013

Elder abuse

Women, ageism and elder abuse Power To Persuade (Women’s Policy Action Tank), 2016

3. What is known about the prevalence and dynamics of elder abuse? In: Elder abuse Understanding issues, frameworks and responses Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2016

Norma’s Project : a research study into the sexual assault of older women in Australia La Trobe University. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), 2014
**Relationships**

*Our voices: the experiences of people ageing without children* Ageing Without Children [UK], 2016

*Grandparent childcare and labour market participation in Australia* National Seniors Australia, 2015

*Theme 3: Elderly family members are important to family functioning In: Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing* Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2014

*Health transitions in recently widowed older women: a mixed methods study* BMC Health Services Research, 2013

**Policy**

*Legislated review of aged care 2017* Australia. Department of Health 2017

*A husband is not a retirement plan: delivering economic security for women in retirement* Australia. Senate. Economic References Committee, 2016

*Ageing is everyone’s business: a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians* Commissioner for Senior Victorians, 2016

*National lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) ageing and aged care strategy* Australia. Department of Health and Ageing, 2012

*Age Friendly Victoria Declaration* Victoria. Department of Health and Human Services and Municipal Association of Victoria, 2016


References


2. Parkinson D, Weiss C, Zara C (2013) Living longer on less : women speak on superannuation and retirement Women’s Health In the North and Women’s Health Goulburn North East, Thornbury.


Produced by Women’s Health Victoria 2017
GPO Box 1160 Melbourne, Victoria 3001 - Phone: +61 3 9664 9300
Email: clearinghouse@whv.org.au - Website: www.whv.org.au
Women’s Health Victoria acknowledges the support of the Victorian Government.
Subscribe here to receive future Spotlight series titles.