STAND UP SPEAK OUT
27-29 JULY 2026

2026 AUSTRALIAN ELDER ABUSE CONFERENCE

Qualitative insights on help-seeking from older women with experience of elder abuse

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Disclosure of speaker's interests

- Funding from: Attorney-General's Department and Allianz Australia.

- Boards: Council of the Ageing Victora.

Team

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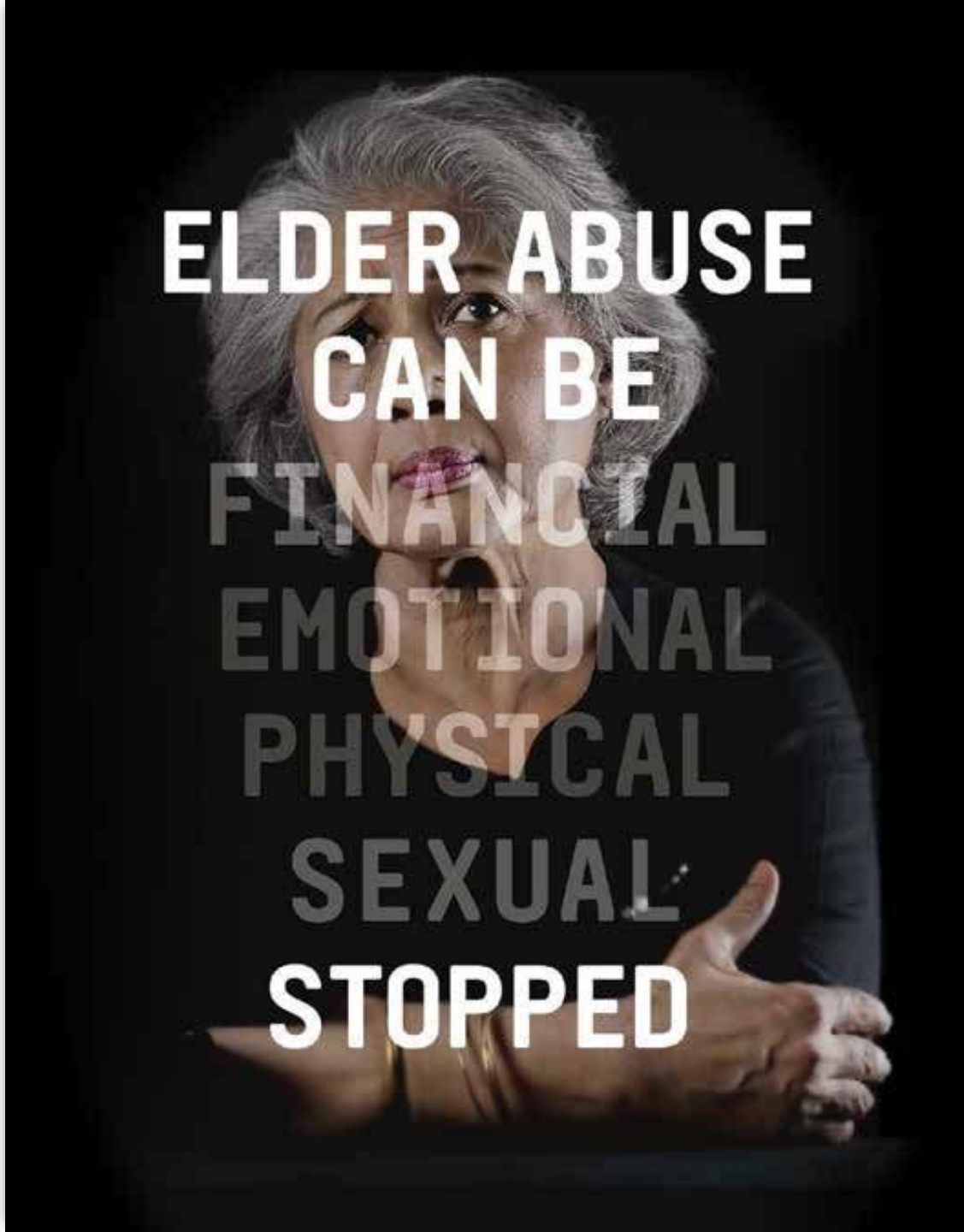
- Rachel Muoio, NARI
- Jake Najman, The University of Queensland
- Shelby Marrington, The University of Queensland
- Alexandra Clavarino, The University of Queensland
- Tara Renae McGee, Griffith University
- Anna Gilbard, UnitingCare Community

Approvals

- Funding: Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant (DP230101080).
- Ethics: The University of Queensland (2023/HE001159)

Background

- Elder abuse is associated with poorer physical and mental health, substance dependence, social isolation, and increased risk of suicide.
- Many older adults may not seek help by disclosing their experiences
- Evidence shows older people often only seek help when they perceive their abuse as unbearable or when they fear for their safety
- But most of this evidence is from the US and UK where reporting is mandatory.



Aim: To investigate the help-seeking behaviors of older women who have experienced elder abuse.

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What are the help-seeking behaviors of older women who have experienced elder abuse?

How do informal sources of support influence their help-seeking?

How do past experiences with services shape their willingness to seek help?

How effective do these women perceive the services they have accessed to be?

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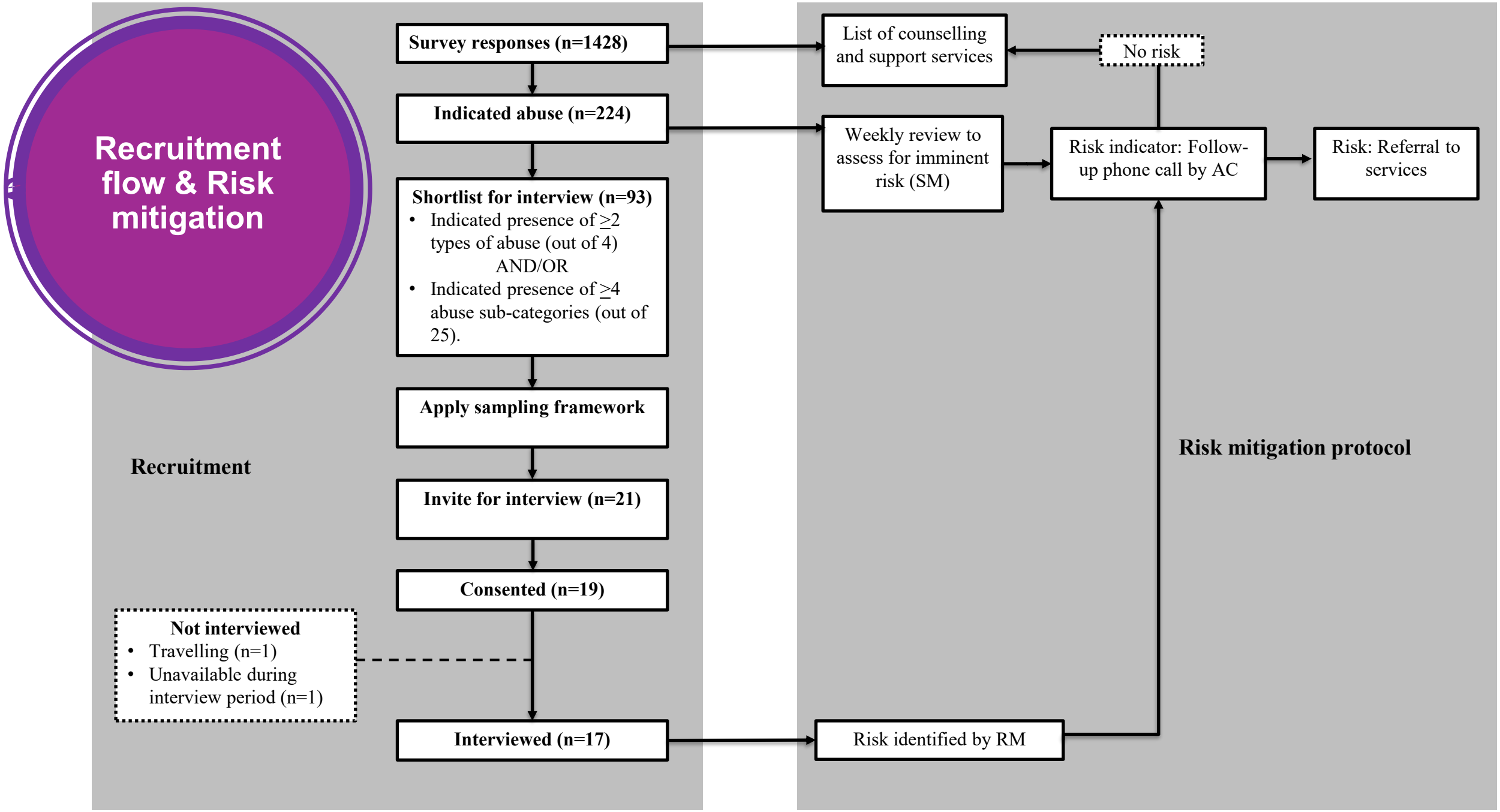
Methods

- Participants recruited from the longitudinal Mater-University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy cohort.
- Aged ≥60 years
- Self-report experiencing elder abuse within the past 12 months
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews (April- November 2024).
- Data were thematically analyzed.


Recruitment flow & Risk mitigation
Survey responses (n=1428)
Indicated abuse (n=224)
Shortlist for interview (n=93)
• Indicated presence of ≥2 types of abuse (out of 4)
AND/OR
• Indicated presence of ≥4 abuse sub-categories (out of 25).
Apply sampling framework
Invite for interview (n=21)
Consented (n=19)
Not interviewed
• Travelling (n=1)
• Unavailable during interview period (n=1)
Interviewed (n=17)
Recruitment
List of counselling and support services
No risk
Weekly review to assess for imminent risk (SM)
Risk indicator: Follow-up phone call by AC
Risk: Referral to services
Risk identified by RM
Risk mitigation protocol

Participant characteristics

- 17 women
- Aged between 61 and 76 (*M* age 65.8, SD 4.5)
- All were Caucasian, relatively healthy, cognitively well, and not dependent on others for care.
- 7 (41%) lived in rural or remote areas
- 13 (76.5%) reported earning <$35,000 per year.

Abuse experience

Types of abuse

- 17 (100%) experienced verbal or emotional abuse
- 8 (47%) financially abused
- 6 (35%) physically
- 1(3%) sexually.

Perpetrators

- Adult children (9, 53%)
- Partners (3, 18%) or ex-partners (2, 12%)
- Siblings (2, 12%)
- Grandchildren (2, 12%)
- Other family members (3, 18%) and other individuals (2, 12%).
- Four participants (23%) were abused by more than one person

11 (64.7%) had not sought help or disclosed their abuse

Why women do not seek help

- Shame
- Stigma
- Victim-blaming
- Privacy and stoicism

At the root of all this is a sense of shame. It's a bit like, 'Well, I've allowed this to happen'
Participant #1

I do not wish to share; I do not wish to give any angst to anyone.
Participant #2

Can family and friends help?

- Friends rarely used
- Supportive family enabled action
- Isolation limited disclosure

I've been very lucky because I've got my family… That's what saved me
Participant #16

I've lost friends in the past because of it…and I don't want my family judged
Participant #6

What help did women want?

Perpetrator support

- Mental health, addiction, social isolation
- Frustrated by long wait times to see GPs and specialists, high out-of-pocket costs, and a lack of timely advice or referrals.
- Where help was received, participants were positive about the effects:

> Her [my granddaughter's] psychologist is great, he's made a lot of headway with her
> *Participant #14*

Experiences with services for themselves

- **GPs trusted**
- Counselling often disappointing
- Police useful in crises
- Limited awareness of specialist services

I have such a rapport with my GP, so I would probably chat to her
Participant #2

I've been to counselling, and it didn't do anything… They'd say, 'Go, leave, leave'… My values are strong to me, I married my husband for better or for worse… They should be trying to help you sort it out
Participant #10

How do women cope?

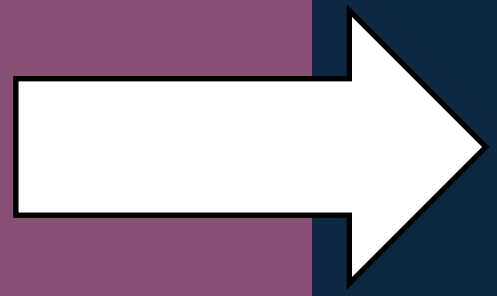
- Experience poor quality of life and mental distress
- Abusive themselves
- Self management via gardening, positive affirmations, and prayer

I tend to take things and take things and take things, until I explode.
Participant #15

I don't know how I'd get through my life without my faith… It gives me the strength to keep going
Participant #11

Does it have to be this way?

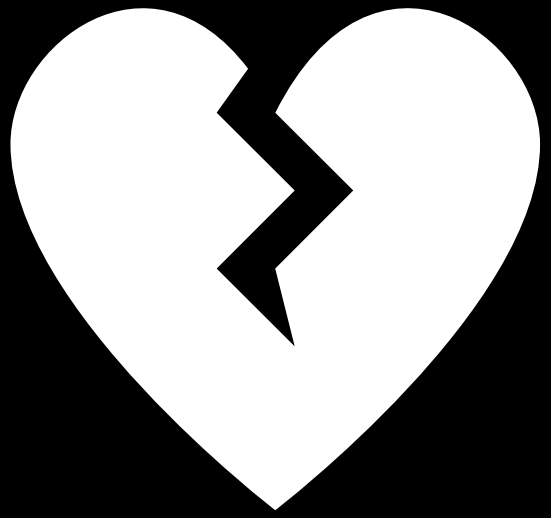
‘Sliding doors moment’



It was not me that was the problem; it was him [my husband] and his temper and his aggression

Participant #6

Money would have made a huge, big difference in how I have lived my life
Participant #8



I love her to bits. I will never hate her… I'm just not going to live like that. And I miss her like hell…

Participant #3

Implications

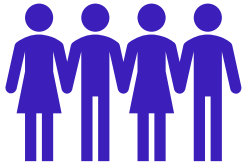
- Routine screening in health settings
- Integrated victim-perpetrator responses
- Affordable mental health/addiction care services for perpetrators
- Reduce stigma and ageism
- Support financial security

Strengths & Limitations

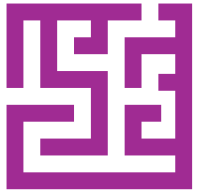
- Rich narratives
- Australian policy relevance
- Small, female, mostly Caucasian sample

Take home message

Abuse often endured silently



Relationships shape help-seeking



System reform should be relational, integrated and preventative

Read the paper

Bianca Brijnath, Rachel Muoio, Jake Najman, Shelby Marrington, Alexandra Clavarino, Tara Renae McGee, Anna Gilbard, Qualitative insights on help-seeking from older Australian women with lived experience of elder abuse, *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, Volume 81, Issue 1, January 2026, gbaf232, https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaf232

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Thank you

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