

# Spotlight

## on Older women's health and wellbeing

December 2017

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Longer lifespans mean that they are more likely than older men to live alone,<sup>3</sup> more likely to be in residential care, are the majority of those with dementia,<sup>4</sup> and live fewer active years despite older age.<sup>5</sup>

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)<sup>6</sup> and are more likely to suffer musculoskeletal conditions and neurological diseases.<sup>7</sup> Common chronic conditions experienced by older women include arthritis, diabetes, sleep problems and incontinence.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> They are often stereotyped as asexual and undesiring of sexual intimacy.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.

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- 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

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[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

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[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

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## Physical health

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

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## Mental health

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[Women and Alzheimer's Disease : the facts behind the headlines \[U.S.\]](#) Society for Women's Health Research for Huffington Post, 2017

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## Body image

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[Representing older women in the media : the key issues](#) University of West England. 2013

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## Sexual and reproductive health

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## Housing and financial security

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[Time of our lives? : building opportunity and capacity for the economic and social participation of older Australian women](#) Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, 2016

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GPO Box 1160 Melbourne, Victoria 3001 - Phone: [+61 3 9664 9300](tel:+61396649300)

Email: [clearinghouse@whv.org.au](mailto:clearinghouse@whv.org.au) - Website: [www.whv.org.au](http://www.whv.org.au)

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