



09.04.2026

S26.02

Response from the National Council of Women of New Zealand to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls: Violence Against Older Women

Introduction

1. The National Council of Women of New Zealand, Te Kaunihera Wāhine o Aotearoa (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing around 60 affiliated organisations and 300 individual members. Collectively our reach is over 200,000 with many of our membership organisations representing all genders. NCWNZ has 12 branches across the country. NCWNZ's vision is a gender equal New Zealand and research shows we will be better off socially and economically if we are gender equal.
2. NCWNZ welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). For this response, we sought members' input regarding five of the 19 questions provided by the OHCHR, reworded to maximize members' expertise and experience. These questions covered prevalence, barriers and gaps, and legal frameworks; we also added an open-ended question for any observations or stories that members would like to share.

Background

3. Age Concern New Zealand¹ - a registered charity providing information and support services for older adults, with 39 offices around the country – reports that older women (aged 65+) face higher rates of abuse. Among the 2,768 referrals of suspected abuse received by Age Concern from June 2021 to July 2022, 63% of cases were female.

¹ Age Concern New Zealand. (2022). Elder abuse hits close to home: Elder abuse and neglect prevention services at a glance, July 2021-June 2022.

https://www.ageconcern.org.nz/Public/Public/About/Our_Impact1/Elder_Abuse_and_Neglect_Prevention.asp

Alleged abusers were 57% male, and 83% were family members - often (49% of cases) living with the client. Psychological abuse was experienced by 89% of referrals, with physical violence experienced by 18%; however, financial abuse was also relatively high (37% of cases), perhaps because older women may be less familiar with managing and controlling their money.²

4. Collecting data on the rates of abuse of older people (AOP) in Aotearoa New Zealand is difficult and limited because assessments are often conducted with other people present (e.g., family, caregivers), and often only in community-dwelling situations (e.g., not long-term care or assisted living institutions). Thus, rates of AOP, particularly against women, may be underreported.
5. However, there has been increased focus on abuse in institutional settings due to recent reports by the media and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation/ Tōpūtanga Tapuhi Kaitiaki o Aotearoa.^{3,4,5} Abuse by neglect is prevalent in institutions, mainly due to insufficient staffing levels, and lack of clearly-outlined procedures and responsibilities among staff. Additionally, a significant number of sexual assault cases among older adults (65+) remains under-reported; however, among those resulting in charges by New Zealand Police in 2018, the majority of victims were women.⁶
6. Barriers to disclosing abuse include not recognising the emergence of an abusive situation, not wishing to involve outsiders in family issues, fear of being placed in a care facility, or believing police and social agencies can do little to help.⁷
7. Older women may not be aware of the types of support available to them, with medical professionals their first point of contact, given that 'red flags' - sleep difficulties, mental health issues, injuries, and substance use – often belie the existence of abuse⁸. Not recognizing that their situation is abusive, ignorance of laws, and diminished capacity to

² Good Shepherd New Zealand (2025). Issues facing women experiencing harm and hardship.

<https://goodshepherd.org.nz/new-report-on-issues-facing-women-experiencing-harm-and-hardship/>

³ Chishom, D. (2026). Not safe in care. *New Zealand Listener*, 300(4443), March 21-27.

⁴ Jones, N. (2025). 'Missed care and outright neglect': The 'crisis' in our aged care homes revealed. *Stuff report*. https://www.stuff.co.nz/nz-news/360850116/missed-care-and-outright-neglect-crisis-our-aged-care-homes-revealed?fbclid=IwY2xjawQgaYNleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBzcnRjBmFwcf9pZBAyMjlwMzKxNzg4MjAwODkyAAEeNH1U0vkSA8N8Sbf5rOctc5kUt5PVjkJAEULQe1EmYJ3URIU_8WFnTcBSpDo_aem_LrCAvTPHm2WtdMxOWldyTQ.

⁵ New Zealand Nurses Organisation: Tōpūtanga Tapuhi Kaitiaki o Aotearoa. (2025). *Care in Crisis Manaaki i te Raru: A Call for Culturally & Clinically Safe Staffing in Aged Care*. Wellington, New Zealand.

⁶ Patterson, T., Hobbs, L., Brown, E., & Barak, Y. (2025). Sexual assault in older-age adults: Criminal justice response in New Zealand. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 37(3), 496-511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2023.2284575>

⁷ Yeung, P., Cooper, L., & Dale, M. (2015). Prevalence and associated factors of elder abuse in a community-dwelling population of Aotearoa New Zealand: A cross-sectional study. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 27(3), 29-43

⁸ Rathnayake, J. C., Pozian, N. M., Carroll, J., and King, J. (2023). Barriers faced by Australian and New Zealand women when sharing experiences of family violence with primary care providers: A scoping review. *Healthcare* 11(2486). <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11182486>

comprehend have also been cited as barriers to reporting violence against older women in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁹

Input from NCWNZ Members

8. NCWNZ members provided many observations regarding the current prevalence of violence against women, as well as the barriers that prevent older women from reporting violence. Less was known regarding legal frameworks. We are aware of broader laws and policies that either cover older adults or women in general, but we are not aware of any targeting older women specifically. NCWNZ has a strong policy on violence against women. We have made many submissions in recent years on family and sexual violence, and participated in forums on eliminating and reducing violence against women and girls.¹⁰
9. NCWNZ is committed to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand between the British Crown and the Māori peoples. A culturally sensitive, Tiriti-consistent response to abuse of older people – particularly older wāhine Māori - within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand requires partnership, protection, and equitable resourcing of Māori-led approaches.

Prevalence

What specific emerging or underreported forms of violence against older women do you know of?

10. NCWNZ members identified two main areas of emerging or underreported forms of violence: by digital means, and by excessive co-dependence on others, often leading to neglect or lack of appropriate action (consistent with the UN and WHO definition of abuse of older people). The move to online banking and the ‘cashless society’ approach has led to anxiety around security threats (hacking, scamming).
11. As one member pointed out: “This can lead to dependence on others to help with transactions, creating further vulnerability” and while financial abuse by friends and family has increased “such barriers could be described as institutional/commercial abuse.” Additionally, members noted that financial abuse can happen by unknown or unidentified persons, with little recourse due to international differences in digital platforms and oversight laws. Another member noted that “increasingly, it is difficult to access health care and information through phone calls rather than the use of digital devices,” leading to diminished health care access, support, and appropriate action.

⁹ Yeung et al, *ibid*.

¹⁰ <https://www.ncwnz.org.nz/submissions> . Examples: S25.03 Crimes Legislation (Stalking and Harassment) Amendment Bill 107-1; S24.20 Submission to the Justice Committee on the Evidence (Giving Evidence of Family Violence) Amendment Bill 30-1; S23.16 Victims of Family Violence (Strengthening Legal Protections) Bill 285-1; S20.02 Sexual Violence Legislation Bill 185-1.

12. One of our members stated: “Co-dependency is also a form of violence,” and went on to relate the situation where adult children refused to fill their mother’s prescription. Another member spoke of a situation specific to older rural women: “an elderly woman was locked in the house while the family was out working on the farm. The mother was unable to look after herself but unwilling to go into residential care.”
13. Other NCWNZ members noted the importance of regular contact with people outside the home for older women who are cared for by family members, giving them opportunities to disclose any potential neglect or abuse and for appropriate action to be taken. However, members also noted the need for respite care to support care givers, and potentially “avoid abuse that can arise when carers are stressed.”
14. The relative mobility of families in Aotearoa New Zealand can, as one member commented, “leave older women, either living alone in their own homes or in residential care, very vulnerable to abuse or violence because their families are not able to visit regularly to keep an eye on their situations. Often the only people who notice what's happening with an elderly person are neighbours or tradespeople. It is difficult for these people to report abuse because privacy legislation requires permission from the person in need before a complaint can be made.”

What public data concerning violence against older women in institutional settings do you know of that is available?

15. Overall, NCWNZ members responding to this question are not aware of any publicly-available data on violence against women in institutional settings. However, one identified problem is the lack of disaggregated data by sex or gender: the “CEDAW report is always requesting disaggregated data...the more subtle things are not reported.” Another member commented: “I do not know of any public data. I do know that a complaints report has to be reported to the Ministry of Health monthly by any institutes/organizations receiving any Government contract/funding. NASCs [Needs Assessment Service Co-ordination] must also file a complaints report.”
16. Points were also made that women are more likely to be in institutional settings due to their longer life expectancies, and that while government agencies collect data on abuse in care facilities, data on abuse within families is reported less.

Gaps and Barriers

What barriers prevent older women from reporting violence, or from accessing assistance and protection? What should be done to overcome the barriers?

17. NCWNZ members mentioned both individual and structural barriers to reporting. For example, not understanding that the situation is an abusive one, particularly in cases of mental or emotional abuse: “Many women are not aware of the definition of elder

abuse offered by the United Nations and the World Health Organisation as well as the NZ Office of Seniors.¹¹ This can mean that they do not define themselves as experiencing abuse, even when others are abusing a relationship of trust and care.”

18. Pride or embarrassment can also prevent reporting the violence, e.g., “people do not want to betray their family” or in the case of one concerned family member who “spoke of seeking advice only to be told that nothing could be done unless/until the victim reported to an authority.” Not knowing to whom the violence should be reported, or “not understanding that if you report to an institution such as HRC [Health Research Council], Hospital, NASC, Advocate, Ministry there will not be any come-back and they will support you.”
19. Fears of not being believed or of retribution were also mentioned by NCWNZ members, e.g., “oh, he wouldn’t do that – you are making that up”; lack of belief can then lead to dismissal and misdiagnosis unless one is prepared to advocate for oneself, which also has its difficulties. Relatedly, one member commented that the digital nature of reporting can be “isolating and disadvantageous for those who are not digitally enabled.”
20. Additionally, older wāhine Māori and kuia face additional barriers shaped by: inequitable access to kaupapa Māori services; institutional racism and mistrust of state systems; under-resourcing of Māori-led prevention and response models; and service frameworks that do not reflect whakapapa, whānau, or tikanga realities.
21. Our members felt that services could be improved by having social workers readily available with correct information, so that decisions are not made under duress. In addition, NCWNZ members would support the introduction of legislation that violence of any sort against older women is a crime requiring mandatory reporting.
22. Members suggested using a public education campaign through various media to generate greater community awareness, as well as ensuring that relevant agencies are easily accessible.

How accessible and age-appropriate are healthcare, housing and support services for older women survivors of violence in Aotearoa New Zealand? How could these services be improved?

23. NCWNZ members felt that services available for older women survivors of violence are not easily accessible, due both to lack of publicity but also that some services are

¹¹ Office for Seniors. (2015). Towards gaining a greater understanding of elder abuse and neglect in New Zealand. <https://www.officeforseniors.govt.nz/assets/documents/our-work/elder-abuse/Elder-abuse-and-neglect-in-New-Zealand-summary-report.pdf>

difficult to source, if they exist at all. In particular, support services are limited, and dependent on where the survivor lives (rural or city). Older women “often need assistance to locate age-appropriate services, and the people providing the assistance are the perpetrators.”

24. One member’s story highlighted staffing issues and the lack of appropriately trained medical staff in care facilities: “A family member in care woke at around 3am in pain and rang the call bell, to be told by the attending staff member that no nurse was on duty until 7am so wait till then. The elderly member complied. Medical intervention was administered soon after 7am, after a very painful four hours.”
25. Older women may also not realise that Women’s Refuge¹² “caters for their age group with accommodation, food, and legal services.” Affordable, accessible social housing for older people is an issue in Aotearoa New Zealand; for older women – particularly survivors of violence – there is a dearth of transitional or emergency housing.
26. Our members suggested remedies for the lack of services for survivors of violence that included: government mandates for accessible social housing specific to older women’s needs; requiring medical staff on site 24 hours a day in care facilities; and appointment of a health advocate at care facilities.

Legal Frameworks and Remedies

What laws and policies do you know of that specifically address the risks older women may face? What other legal protections are needed?

27. Although NCWNZ members are aware of laws and policies that address survivors of violence in general, we are not aware of policies pertaining specifically to the risks of violence for older women. One member asked “What do other countries do that would fit NZ?”
28. Members pointed to broader violence-adjacent policy changes that could diminish susceptibility to violence, such as laws concerning digital banking: “Policies around the use of technology, particularly in the banking sector, can be a barrier themselves.” In describing a recent experience, another member commented: “Recently...a couple of our members could only pay for an event in cash. No computer or not able to use a computer because of arthritis or eyesight, therefore a disadvantage” and presumably requiring help to complete transactions that could put them at risk.

¹² See <https://womensrefuge.org.nz/>

29. Members also suggested changes to end-of-life planning, particularly the Enduring Power of Attorney (EPOA) legislation (in line with Ries et al., 2026¹³), which “is challenging and expensive to navigate – if the abuser is also the EPOA then this presents further challenges and places the woman at significantly higher risk.”
30. Other suggestions included a widescale advertising campaign targeting the existence of EPOAs, and for EPOAs to be subsidized. One member observed: “New Zealand’s...culture does not equip family members for discussions about death. There is also general avoidance of talking about money. End of life planning requires both.” Two further suggestions were 1) to give the Public Trust Office - which specializes in writing wills and creating EPOAs - extended jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute financial mismanagement (manipulation of contents or changes in the will) by family members, and 2) to expand social workers’ education to include modules on human rights, protection of persons and property, EPOAs, and recognising ageism.

NCWNZ Members’ Observations

31. Responses to our final open-ended question included comments on the plight of older women in general, the structural nature of violence against older women, a call for nationwide awareness of violence against older women, and for dedicated funding that takes into account Aotearoa New Zealand’s unique cultural environment.
- “As a general rule women live longer than men, have faced systemic barriers to financial equity, lack assertiveness about their needs, and often have complex relationships with their middle-aged children with regard to family money. The lack of visibility of older women, and their perceived irrelevance within the wider community, is also deeply troubling to many women.”
 - “These [retired] women have held prominent positions in the community but once retired somehow...their opinion is no longer sought in regard to family. Migrant older women are also invisible, their daughters are out in the world, but come home time, they too are subject to the customs of their culture, often paternalistic regimes. Cultural and religious bias may cloud a situation thereby creating a barrier to resolution.”
 - “Violence against older women persists not only through individual acts, but through systems that fail to provide accessible protection, clear accountability, or safe alternatives. When services are fragmented, data is absent, and responsibility is placed on the individual to navigate harm alone, violence becomes structurally enabled.”

¹³ Ries, N., Tsihlis, E., & Somes, T. (2026). Preventing financial elder abuse: A critical commentary on harmonization of Enduring Power of Attorney laws. *Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 45:e70122. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.70122>

- “Clearer informative statistics and a nationwide campaign led by the government around violence to women which includes older women and the complexities would be beneficial.”
- “Dedicated funding is required for elder-specific refuge options, kaupapa Māori safeguarding services, integrated advocacy, and enforceable oversight in aged care. Older women deserve safety, dignity, autonomy, and redress — not invisibility.”

Summary of recommendations

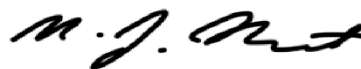
32. NCWNZ members suggested a number of improvements for mitigating violence against older women in Aotearoa New Zealand:

- social services should include availability of well-informed social workers (and expanding their education curriculum);
- public education campaigns that generate greater community awareness of violence against women - as well as ensuring that relevant agencies are easily accessible – and for greater awareness around EPOAs;
- introducing legislation that violence against older women is a mandatorily-reported crime;
- government-mandated accessible social housing specific to older women’s needs;
- requiring medical staff on site 24 hours a day in care facilities;
- appointment of a health advocate at care facilities;
- changes to broader violence-adjacent policy could diminish susceptibility to violence, such as changing laws concerning digital banking; subsidizing EPOAs, as well as extending powers of investigation and prosecution to the organisation that helps prepare wills and EPOAs.

33. Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback from the National Council of Women of New Zealand concerning violence against older women.



Carin Sundstedt
NCWNZ Board



Nicky Newton
Safety, Health & Wellbeing Action Hub