

AGEISM

PRINCIPLE

Older women experience a unique and harmful intersection of ageism and sexism that undermines visibility, safety, and access to justice.



CONSIDERATIONS

Ageism is one of the most pervasive and socially accepted forms of discrimination. The World Health Organization estimates that half of the global population holds ageist beliefs. For older women, ageism intensifies when combined with sexism, producing unique forms of silencing and harm.

Key forms of ageism affecting older women include:

- Public and media **portrayals that mock, stereotype, or erase older women.**
- **Internalised ageism** that leads to shame, diminished confidence, and reduced help-seeking.
- **Workplace discrimination** that marginalises older women and reinforces economic insecurity.
- Health and aged-care practices that **minimise concerns** or attribute trauma responses to “ageing” or “confusion.”
- **Cultural stereotypes** positioning older women as asexual, which contribute to disbelief when they report sexual assault.
- **Intersectional erasure** of older women from policies and strategies addressing sexual violence, domestic violence, or gender equality.

The Biscuit Tin program—Australia’s only primary prevention initiative focused on older women—shows that older women are typically portrayed as:

- “**Grannies**”: fussy, frail, or comical
- “**Cougars**”: mocked for sexuality or appearance
- “**Greedy old bags**”: selfish or burdensome

These portrayals normalise disrespect and contribute to a wider culture in which violence against older women is minimised or ignored.

IMPLICATIONS

Ageism:

- Contributes directly to the **under-reporting** and **under-recognition** of sexual assault of older women.
- **Silences older women** by making them feel shame, disbelief, or fear that they will be dismissed.
- **Undermines service responses**, as workers may not recognise signs of sexual assault in older women.
- **Prevents the development** of age-inclusive policies, data collection methods, and prevention frameworks.
- **Limits pathways** to justice, support, and recovery.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

- **Provide workforce training** on ageism and its impact on older women’s safety.
- Ensure policies, programs, and communications **adopt a Life Stages approach.**
- Review organisational language, imagery, and service design to **ensure inclusion of older women.**
- **Engage older women** in co-design, consultation, and decision-making.