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INVISIBLE VICTIMS: SOCIOCULTURAL BARRIERS TO REPORTING ELDER ABUSE IN URBAN LAHORE, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the lived experiences of elder abuse among the elders living in urban Pakistan and the sociocultural barriers to reporting to formal systems. This research also looks at the role of institutional failures, economic dependency as a form of control and religious coping as a determinant of help-seeking. Semi-structured interview transcripts from 22 elders and key informants living in urban Lahore, were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data collection took place concurrently with analysis, and themes that arose from the data were used for planning further interviews. The themes that emerged were: Izzat Ka Mamla—the primacy of family honour as a self-censoring mechanism; Ghar Ka Mamla Hai—indifference from institutions and framing of abuse as a private domestic matter; Weaponized Dependency—economic and housing dependency as a control mechanism; and Sabr aur Dua—coping through faith and fatalism that paradoxically impedes help-seeking. This study fills a significant gap in the literature that examines elder abuse in the context of urban Pakistan, providing culturally relevant findings for social work practice and policy. It underscores the need for interventions that are culturally respectful and protective of elders.

Keywords: Elder abuse, sociocultural barriers, Weaponized Dependency, thematic analysis, izzat, primacy

Introduction

Elder abuse is a global and widespread health and social issue that is not constrained by national boundaries; however, most studies have concentrated on indigenous (white) populations in Western countries, overlooking the importance of cultural and ethnic differences regarding the nature of elder abuse and how it can be addressed (Akhtar et al., 2024). Worldwide, an estimated 141 million older adults suffer from some form of abuse, with 1 in 6 older adults being abused (Yon et al., 2017). Data from low income and middle income countries are however limited, and the true burden in populations such as Pakistan may be even more alarming (World Health Organization, 2022).



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Like many countries in South Asia, Pakistan is undergoing demographic ageing at a fast pace. At the same time, the numbers of older people in the world is growing, but for many years, their rights and needs have been largely missing from law and public policy (Foundation for Ageing and Inclusive Development, 2025). Traditionally, support has come from families, charities or from short-term programmes rather than a clear responsibility of the government (Qandeel, 2025). This dependency model of care, which is based on collectivist values and norms of filial devotion, presents an extra layer of complexity to understanding and reporting elder abuse.

In South Asian cultures, abuse towards older family members is typically considered immoral behavior, and reporting or acknowledging abuse is seen as a form of admitting disharmony within the family, which can cause shame and harm to the family's reputation (Aslam et al., 2019). This is a way of socialization that builds a victim of violence into a protector of their perpetrator's honour, and fosters a deep internalized stigma that prevents elders from speaking up against the violence (Foundation for Ageing and Inclusive Development, 2025). Common reasons for not seeking help include self-blame, attribution of abuse to one's own past mistakes, fear of retaliation or loss of support, fear of damage to family integrity, and fear of a son's absence at one's own funeral (Lubnah et al., 2022).

Pakistan's second largest city and the cultural hub of Punjab province, Lahore has its own set of challenges. Cities provide some anonymity for the elderly, but they also put them at risk of paying high prices, being homeless, or lacking networks in the community. The Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act (2021) and the Punjab Senior Citizens Welfare Act, passed recently, mark key policy steps in legally recognizing the rights of older people and the state's responsibility to their dignity, wellbeing and security (Government of Pakistan, 2021; Qandeel, 2025). As this study illustrates, however, there is a significant gap between law and practice.

This study fills the gaps in existing literature by examining experiences of elder abuse in urban Pakistani households and the reasons behind the inability of elder victims to report to formal systems, including the sociocultural obstacles to reporting. This study identifies and amplifies the voices of elders themselves and provides culturally-relevant practice and policy recommendations based on social work research to address the issue of elder abuse in Pakistan.

2. Research Objectives

1. To explore the lived experiences of urban Pakistani elders regarding different forms of abuse.



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2. To identify the sociocultural barriers that prevent elders from reporting abuse to formal authorities or seeking external help.
3. To examine the role of institutional responses and systemic failures in perpetuating non-reporting of elder abuse.
4. To analyze how economic dependency and fear of institutionalization function as mechanisms of control and compliance.
5. To explore the role of religious coping as both a resilience resource and a barrier to help-seeking.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Understanding Elder Abuse: Definitions and Prevalence

Elder abuse generally refers to an act, or to repeated acts, of violence which can result in physical, emotional or psychological harm to an elderly person, or to a failure to take timely actions that are likely to benefit the elder who is in the care of another person or institution (World Health Organization, 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have separated them into six categories: physical, psychological/emotional, sexual, financial, and neglect (World Health Organization, 2022). These categories give an indication of the complex forms of abuse that older people may suffer from.

While there is increasing awareness of the issue of elder abuse globally, it is still considered a “hidden” problem especially in developing countries where human rights are sometimes not a top concern, in the face of broader economic stress (Lubnah et al., 2022). It is important to note that elderly people may not have the autonomy to make decisions about themselves, and cultural expectations of care in familial relationships can lead to difficulties in recognising abuse (Nawaz et al., 2021). Excessive older adult abuse was observed in more than half of older people (56.4%) in Nepal, the neighbouring South Asian country with similar cultural values, with the most commonly reported subtype being caregiver neglect (50.8%) (Kafle et al., 2025). The study also found that females were more likely to be victims of elder abuse than males (66.6%:42.8%), which highlights the gendered nature of elder abuse in South Asian contexts (Kafle et al., 2025).

3.2 Cultural context of and barriers to reporting elder abuse in South Asia

Traditional norms of intergenerational relationships are still influenced by traditional values like filial piety, collective familism and parental authority in South Asian societies (Mahmood et al., 2020). Yet, economic changes, social demographics and population mobility can mean that the expectations and obligations of younger generations and



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their actual fulfillment are mismatched: this can lead to intergenerational conflict (Aslam et al., 2019).

Reluctance of older adults in South Asian countries to report abuse is a significant concern, particularly among those elderly people (Mahmood et al., 2020). The family-based values (familist and collectivist) that prevail in family relationships usually consider family abuse as an immoral act and reporting the abuse as an admission of disharmony in the family, which would reflect shame and harm the family reputation (Nawaz et al., 2021). This cultural construction often makes elders feel they have a duty to protect their families' honor, even when they suffer the violation.

Izzat (honor) plays a significant role in this dynamic. In a paternalistic culture of Pakistan, izzat is the concept that implies family and gender relations and limits the conduct, especially of women and elders (Saeed et al., 2016). According to Saeed and colleagues (2016), in the Punjabi community the family's honor is based on the constant potential for control over family members. The ability to protect the chastity of women and to defend the familial honour is synonymous with izzat—political influence, power and authority—of the person (Saeed et al., 2016). In this psychological building, elders also have to sacrifice themselves for the achievement of family honor.

Hussain et al. (2021) argue that reporting of elder mistreatment is essential, but that victims of mistreatment need a lot of help making decisions, which is complicated by the presence of both macro- and micro-level barriers, such as moral and cultural issues. Formal support is scarce and the role of race, ethnicity, culture and gender in targeted interventions needs to be considered.

3.3 Institutional Responses: Legal Frameworks and Implementation Gaps

There has been a lack of comprehensive legal framework to protect older persons in Pakistan. Older persons are not adequately protected by comprehensive legislation in Pakistan. In 2002, Pakistan joined the United Nations' Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and thereafter policies were developed for the protection of the rights of senior citizens (Ali, 2023). But this has not been consistent throughout the provinces.

The Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act 2021 was enacted for the purpose of setting up a fund for the welfare, comfort and dignity of the senior citizens who are living in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) (Government of Pakistan 2021). According to this act, the Senior Citizens Council, which is established and maintained by the Ministry of Human Rights, has to create and maintain facilities for the elderly known as Dar-ul Shafqat (Government of Pakistan, 2021). The Act provides a number of facilities for senior citizens such as Senior Citizen Card, Retirement benefits, and procedures for transferring property (Government of Pakistan, 2021).



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The provincial government of KPK has passed the Senior Citizens Act in 2014 and similarly the other two provinces Sindh and Balochistan have passed the similar act in 2014 (Ali, 2023). The Punjab Senior Citizens Welfare Act is a recent policy development which provides for a dedicated Senior Citizens Welfare Council and a Senior Citizens Fund to fund programs and services (Social Protection Resource Centre, 2022). The Act places a particular focus on those who are particularly vulnerable to exclusion and neglect, including older people who are frail, disabled, ill or living in poverty (Qandeel, 2025).

Many obstacles remain, however. While the law lays the groundwork for long-term change, rights on paper must be followed by action in practice (Qandeel, 2025). Sustained government commitment and budget allocation and institutional capacity building are needed for implementation. One such area is when complaints of elder abuse are made to the police, and the police validate the elder's experience and neglect it, labeling it as "family matter" (ghar ka mamla) (Hussain et al., 2021).

3.4 Faith and Fatalism

The practice of religious coping with sabr (patience) and duas (supplications) is deeply rooted in the culture of Pakistan. Prayer is one of the most common ways for elders to cope and feel secure in the suffering that is a test of faith from God (Aslam et al., 2019). But this way of coping can lead to fatalistic thinking that can lead to a state of resignation in which one feels helpless to deal with mistreatment. The Imam (religious leader) is usually used to give spiritual guidance, to remind the elders of the rewards in the afterlife, and not to seek practical help. Faith offers psychological assistance, but it can also be a hindrance to external assistance (Butt et al., 2023).

4. Methodology

The study applied a qualitative method with thematic analysis which was carried out in six stages as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach is suitable for the discovery, analysis, organisation and reporting of patterns of meaning in a qualitative dataset. The analysis proceeded through phases of familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report.

The study was carried out in different localities of urban Lahore such as Johar Town, Mughalpura, Shahdara, and Garden Town. The participants were purposively selected from community organizations such as mosques, community centres and key informants. A total of 22 individuals were selected as the participants, such as older adults aged 65-85 who had suffered abuse, family caregivers, and key informants (Imam, Social Welfare Officer, Lady Health Worker). Throughout, the names of individuals have



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been anonymized as follows: Pseudonyms were used.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu and Punjabi language, so that participants could share their views in the language they were most comfortable. Data collection was concurrent with analysis and emerging themes were used to inform the next interviews (theoretical sampling). Interviews covered experiences of abuse, perceptions of reporting, interaction with formal institutions and coping strategies. Community or institutional response was obtained through key informant interviews.

5. Findings

Thematic analysis identified four themes, demonstrating different aspects of the complex challenges of reporting elder abuse in urban Lahore.

5.1 Theme 1: Izzat Ka Mamla—The Primacy of Family Honor

The greatest barrier to reporting was Izzat (family honor), and it was the most emotional aspect. Protecting the family's honor was a higher moral duty for both men and women elders, than to seek justice in the event of abuse. It was a powerful internalized stigma that silenced elders from within in this self-censoring mechanism.

Mrs. Razia (68, Johar Town) who suffered verbal humiliation and financial control from her son, expressed this struggle:

“What will happen in the neighborhood if I call the police? Whether it's your son or no, whatever you do, you are my blood, the commenters will say. How can I take the insult of my own kid?”

Male elders repeated this, putting an additional emphasis on the loss of male power. Mr. Anwar (72, Mughalpura) said that his sons had taken his pension and rent money.

“But if I go to some officer and tell him my sons won't give me any pocket money – then people will say I am a fool. My honor will be muddied.”

The Imam key informant confirmed that elders approach him for spiritual advice, but clearly instructed him not to get involved stating:

“They say 'Maulana sahib, pray to Allah to guide them.' Just don't say anything to anyone. It's on our honor”

This finding meets Objective 1 (lived experiences) and Objective 2 (sociocultural barriers), and shows that honor can act as a strong disincentive for seeking help. Even in the guise of a big city, the fear of log kya kahenge (what will people say) is still strong, and the scripts of the culture of filial piety have the power to turn a victim into a protector of an abuser's honor (Butt et al., 2023).



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5.2 Theme 2: Ghar Ka Mamla Hai-Institutional Indifference and the Private Sphere

The second major theme was a profound mistrust and sense of futility of formal reporting mechanisms. The participants presented a system of thinking which actively denies the concept of elder abuse as public issue, rather it is treated as a domestic issue (ghar ka mamla) and therefore out of the jurisdiction of police and legal system. This institutional gaslighting can contribute to a culture of silence, which is a culture of believing that reporting will not ease their anxiety and fears.

Mr. Javed (79, Shahdara) tried to lodge a complaint with his nephew over a property matter, and explained what happened:

“By the time I got to the police station, I had been scolded and sent away and the officer told me, 'Old man, this is your family's business; sit down together and discuss it among yourselves; we cannot have your family trouble here, we are for thieves and robbers.’”

The Social Welfare Officer key informant confirmed the gap of implementation:

“Although the law is on paper, it has not yet reached the ground. There is a lack of police training. They feel that elders are inflexible and the younger generation is correct. There's also a lack of shelter home beds that will keep an elder safe if he or she were to complain. This absence of institutional support was a rational one and not only cultural. Elders were right to see that there was little benefit in reporting through a process of humiliation.”

This theme covers Objective 3 (institutional responses) and is a reflection of a basic lack of protection of the state's vulnerable citizens. Police's tendency to dismiss abuse as a "family squabble," actively participating in the abuse, which reinforces the privatization of elder abuse (Ali, 2023).

5.3 Theme 3: Weaponized Dependency—The Fear of Retaliation and Abandonment

The third theme resonated with the elders' strong economic and living dependence on adult children, and it was weaponized for control and compliance. Being sent to an "Old Home" (Dar-ul-Kafala) was always a terrible foreboding that social death was imminent in the Pakistani cultural imagination.

Mrs. Kulsoom (74, of Garden Town) who is fully dependent on her son and daughter-in-law, said:

“When my son and his wife leave me with nothing but verbal abuse, where will I be? If I say anything, they beat me, For old home, I'm ready to die but not going there.”

The Lady Health Worker key informant shared with the group one story that a woman



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stopped complaining about physical neglect because her son threatened to send her to a government facility:

“Sister, I can't live my life my way, but I would like to die that way. I'll die in this house.”

Another form was financial abuse. There were several elders who spoke of having their pensions or rental income taken by their sons who had their ATM cards and bank accounts locked. Mr Mughalpura (81) bluntly said:

“I don't even have money to hire a rickshaw, how will I get to the police station?”

This theme highlights Objective 4 (economic dependency as a control mechanism) and the ways in which economic disenfranchisement makes elders physically and practically ineligible to access help. However, the institutionalisation is equated with “worse than death” emphasising the need for alternative, dignifying forms of care that are culturally appropriate.

Themes 4: Sabr aur Dua—Coping through Faith and Fatalism will be discussed in detail.

In all cases, internal coping mechanisms were unanimously reported, such as withdrawal to religious faith and a philosophy of patient endurance (sabr). It was not only a coping mechanism, but a mental reordering which provided spiritual meaning to what they were seeing, and a sense of dignity amidst the helplessness.

Mrs. Razia explained:

“I pray to Allah daily to fill my son's heart with love and respect for his elders. I don't have the courage to go to the Police.”

This prevalence was confirmed by the Imam key informant who said that he is a reminder of rewards in the afterlife. This mechanism offers psychological support, but also as a barrier to seeking external and practical assistance. When the experience of pain is viewed as God's testing, it can lead to a fatalistic attitude, where the individual becomes resigned to suffering (Butt et al., 2023).

This theme focuses on Objective 5 (religious coping) and brings to light the role of faith as a resource and barrier. The deep level of faith is a source of resilience but can be a barrier to formal reporting (Nawaz et al., 2021).

6. Discussion

This qualitative study offers a contextually rich understanding of the complex factors impeding reporting of abuse by elders in urban Lahore, Pakistan. The thematic analysis explicitly meets the five objectives of the study: (1) exploring lived experiences of abuse, (2) identifying sociocultural barriers, (3) examining institutional failures, (4) analyzing weaponized economic dependency, and (5) exploring religious coping mechanisms.



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The use of '*izzat*' as a reporting deterrent is in keeping with the South Asian literature and frameworks on collectivist culture in which the welfare of the family is placed above the welfare of the individual (Nawaz et al., 2021; Saeed et al., 2016). Saeed and colleg (2016) argues that the relationship between ghairat (honor) and izzat is fundamentally about reputation, respect, and merit, with protecting familial honor imbuing a person with political influence, power, and authority. This study, however, builds upon the previous research by illustrating the continued strength of the fear of local gossip as a force in the urban setting of Lahore. Cultural script of filial piety turns victim into protector of perpetrators' honor (Mahmood et al., 2020).

This finding has important implications for social work practice (Objective 2). Interventions should avoid public or confrontational approaches that could expose families to shame. Peer support groups and confidential home-based counselling offered in trusted community settings (mosques, community centres) rather than legal advocacy in public spaces are more likely to be accepted (Talpur et al., 2024). As highlighted by Lubnah & Laila (2022), community stakeholders play a crucial role in designing inclusive services and are an integral part of the design process.

The findings show that there is a significant gap between the emerging legal framework (Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act (2021) and the Punjab Senior Citizens Welfare Act) and its implementation (Government of Pakistan, 2021; Foundation for Ageing and Inclusive Development, 2025). The old story of apathy among Police serves as the basis for their framing of ghar ka mamla as an issue of elder abuse. This institutional gaslighting is designed to reinforce this culture of silence and help to validate the convictions of elders that reporting will not bring any relief.

Sociologically, if the police say that abuse is a 'family issue', then the state effectively participates in the abuse. This underscores the need for the obligatory police officers' sensitization activities and the establishment of police elder protection units as recommended by international good practices (WHO, 2022). Because there is no capacity or protective mechanism for shelter, elders' perceived lack of futility is real. In this regard, Ali (2023) mentions that the Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act has created a fund and council to support the welfare of senior citizens, but it needs to be well implemented and the government has to show its commitment and build capacities.

The examination of weaponized dependency illustrates the ways in which economic and housing dependency is leveraged as a tool of control. The threat of Dar-ul-Kafala is ever present fear, a cultural equivalent of the social death and abandonment (Akhtar et al., 2024). This finding has profound implications for intervention planning. A social worker



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who pushes an elder to "just go to a shelter" when they know what services are available isn't going to foster trust nor provide access to needed services.

Urgent need for community-based alternative support services that are culturally appropriate and dignifying, such as adult day-care, subsidised safe housing for low-income & cultural senior and community based respite care. This dependency is also of a financial nature, because pension appropriation means that the elders are left with no money for even going to the police station. The Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act (2021) has been enacted to assist the parents who are unable to support themselves financially, by applying for parent's maintenance from a lawful successor but it is not being implemented consistently.

Religious coping has been explored and sabr and dua have been found to be a deep well of resilience as well as an obstacle to reporting. Faith offers elders a structure of meaning and dignity, on one hand. However, using sabr may lead to fatalistic resignation and dissuade from active seeking for help (Lubnah et al., 2022).

This duality is a challenge and an opportunity to social work practice (Objective 5). Fatalism about religious coping should not be seen as an expression of a lack of initiative, but rather, religious coping can be discussed with trusted religious leaders (Imams) to make help-seeking more acceptable to religious beliefs, and to emphasize the principles of justice and care for the vulnerable. There is a scriptural basis to challenge zulm (oppression) as the Imam key informant said. Educating Imams to impart a theological perspective that enables them to endorse protective intervention could create a cultural congruent pathway to social services (Talpur et al., 2024).

From across the five objectives, there are several integrated practice implications: First, interventions need to be placed in a cultural context. Social work approaches that uphold the dignity of the family and the safety of the elders are called for by the concept of izzat. Community-based peer support and confidential counseling are more effective than public legal advocacy, while home-based interventions have a higher likelihood of success (Butt et al., 2023).

Second, there is a need for institutional reform. Enhanced police training, dedicated police protection units and shelter provision are fundamental needs for effective protection (Ali, 2023; World Health Organization, 2022).

Third, an issue of economic empowerment needs to be resolved. Elders who rely on their abusers for financial support are unable to make safe reports of abuse. Social protection mechanisms such as pension protection and housing for the poor are immediate priorities (Social Protection Resource Centre, 2022).

Fourth, there is a particular route through faith-based partnerships. The trusted



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figures of imams and religious leaders can help close the gap between cultural values and protective intervention (Talpur et al., 2024).

8. Conclusion

The results of this qualitative study have brought a nuanced and contextually rich picture of the barriers to the reporting of elder abuse in urban Lahore, Pakistan. Participant interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis to address five objectives: to explore lived experiences of abuse, to identify sociocultural barriers, to analyze institutional failures, to examine economic dependency as a tool for abuse, and to explore coping with religion.

The four themes that emerged – the importance of family honour, institutional indifference, weaponised dependency and coping through faith – suggest how cultural, institutional, economic and religious influences work together to maintain silence. The research shows that non-reporting is not an individual decision, but rather the result of the interaction of a variety of factors that are at both the structural and cultural levels. Elders' silence is a sensible reaction to a system with not much else on offer.

The interventions to combat elder abuse in Pakistan must be culturally located, institutionally helpful, economically empowering and spiritually attuned. No one-size-fits-all solution can solve the problem. Instead, a holistic perspective that acknowledges the dignity and respect of the family, yet promotes the dignity and protection of the elderly, rejects institutional indifference, empowers the individual, and infuses religious values and the fight against fatalism is needed.

This study adds to the existing literature on social work for the abuse of elders in Pakistan which is limited and serves as a stepping stone for future studies and development of interventions. The voices of participants show that they suffer but also that they are resilient, proud and want to be respected and protected. It is our duty as researchers, practitioners and policy makers to listen and take action to respect these voices.

The recent enactment of Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act (2021) and the Punjab Senior Citizens Welfare Act (2021) are noteworthy policy achievements (Government of Pakistan, 2021; HelpAge International, 2019). But as this study shows, legal recognition is not enough, it needs to be followed by implementation, institutional development and cultural change. This silent crime of elderly abuse in urban Pakistan must be responded to with a holistic, collaborative and culturally nuanced approach to redress the suffering of the victims.

Recommendations



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- Strengthen the national strategy of elder protection and fill the implementation gap identified by putting the provincial legislation in place (Islamabad Capital Territory Senior Citizens Act, 2021 and Punjab Senior Citizens Welfare Act) into practice, with sufficient resources and institutional capacity.
- Ensure that dedicated police units are set up to protect older people, and provide police with special training on elder abuse, which is highlighted in this study as the institutional indifference to elder abuse.
- Develop affordable housing and community care homes that provide culturally-sensitive alternatives to institutionalisation, including in response to the fears outlined
- Build community based intervention models that provide confidential, home-based and community-based services instead of advocacy-based approaches in the public arena.
- Build relationships with Imams and religious leaders to provide spiritually appropriate interventions that present help-seeking within a framework of Islamic values related to religious coping identified.
- Make peer support groups available in trusted community spaces like community centres or mosques for elders to learn from each other and share strategies.
- Engage in quantitative studies to create an estimate about the level of abuse and non-reporting in urban Pakistan, given the lack of evidence to date.
- Conduct intervention research to assess culturally adapted support services such as community and faith-based interventions.
- Investigate the experiences of older adults who have successfully reported abuse and understand what enables them to seek help and identify strategies that can be used to develop interventions.

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