

Summarising the evidence

# WORK-RELATED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Context brief



Australian Government

Australian Institute of  
Family Studies

**RESPECT  
VICTORIA**



# To what extent will addressing the gendered drivers of men's violence against women help to prevent work-related sexual harassment?

This brief is part of a suite of resources produced as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. Visit the [project page](#) for the accompanying research summary, information about the scope and aims of the project and how it was conducted.

Respect Victoria gratefully acknowledges the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies and all authors in conducting this work.

This brief is a companion document to a research summary by Deen and Charlesworth<sup>2</sup> that explores the prevalence, nature, drivers and reinforcing factors of work-related sexual harassment. Respect Victoria has used the findings in that summary, and other academic and practice literature, to consider how to apply and adapt existing approaches to preventing men's violence against women will help to keep workplaces free from sexual harassment.

## THE GENDERED DRIVERS AND REINFORCING FACTORS OF MEN'S VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*<sup>1</sup> identifies four gendered drivers of men's violence against women:

- the condoning of violence against women
- men's control of decision making and limits to women's independence in public and private life
- rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity
- male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

These drivers are each addressed with actions to prevent violence against women. These actions challenge the social contexts that allow violence to occur and help to address reinforcing factors that make violence more likely (explained in more detail below). The essential actions to address the gendered drivers are:

- challenge condoning of violence against women
- promote women's independence and decision-making in public life and relationships
- build new social norms that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes
- support men and boys to develop healthy masculinities and positive, supportive male peer relationships.

Understanding these drivers – and importantly, the actions to prevent them – are an important foundation for primary prevention efforts. This work helps us to understand the dynamics that allow violence to occur, including how power and control are used and abused.

Alongside the gendered drivers, *Change the story* also identifies further factors that can serve to reinforce violence against women. These do not predict violence against women on their own, but may influence the likelihood, prevalence or dynamics in different settings and contexts:

- condoning of violence in general
- experience of, and exposure to, violence (particularly during childhood)
- factors that weaken prosocial behaviour (e.g. disasters and crises; settings where there is heavy alcohol consumption)
- resistance and backlash to prevention and gender equality efforts.

## INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING PREVENTION

*Change the story* emphasises that other forms of structural oppression intersect with gendered inequality to shape how and why men's violence against women occurs. However, more work is needed to understand how they combine to shape the drivers of different forms of gendered and family violence and the way they are experienced across our communities.

The following evidence guides and frameworks have begun to explore these intersections, mapping shared and distinct drivers across different communities and developing tailored prevention approaches:

- *Changing the picture: a national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children* which looks at how the gendered drivers play out as they intersect with colonialism for Aboriginal women<sup>3</sup>
- *Changing the landscape: A national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities* which looks at how violence against women with disability is shaped by the intersection of ableism and the gendered drivers<sup>4</sup>
- *Pride in prevention* which looks at the role of heteronormativity and cisnormativity alongside rigid gender roles in driving violence against LGBTIQ+ persons<sup>6</sup>
- *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women* which considers how intersections between the gendered drivers and other forms of structural oppression can be addressed to prevent violence against women who are from immigrant and refugee communities.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the impact of different sources of oppression will also help us refine and expand upon the known actions to address the gendered drivers of men's violence against women, creating safer communities for everyone.

## What is work-related sexual harassment?

Work-related sexual harassment is any unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour that occurs in the course of employment, in the workplace or at work-related events which makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated.<sup>2</sup> It covers a range of unwanted behaviours including touch, staring, inappropriate comments, intrusive questions, inappropriate banter, requests or demands for sex, emails, text messages, phone calls, and sexual assault. Employers who enable or fail to address a workplace culture that is hostile to women can be liable for sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is widespread, with one in 3 Australians experiencing sexual harassment at work in the last 5 years.<sup>5</sup> There are clearly gendered patterns to work-related sexual harassment in Australia. Men are significantly more likely to perpetrate workplace sexual harassment, including against other men. Forty-one percent of women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work in the past 5 years, and women are twice as likely as men to experience sexual assault in the context of workplace harassment. Rates reported amongst men are also of concern, with 26% of men reporting experiencing sexual harassment and 2% reporting attempted or actual rape or sexual assault. Of non-binary Australians

surveyed by the Australian Human Rights Commission, 67% reported very high rates of sexual harassment (due to the small sample size the survey report authors note that this figure should be used with caution, however).<sup>5</sup>

## What do we know about gender and work-related sexual harassment?

*Change the story* explains that high rates of sexual harassment are driven by gender inequality, rigid gender stereotypes, and social norms that excuse, minimise or justify it.<sup>1</sup> These gendered drivers of men's violence against women can be seen in systemic inequalities in workplaces, including gendered role segregation and limited opportunities for women in senior positions. These issues are especially acute in male-dominated workplaces and industries.<sup>8</sup>

The gendered drivers play out in different ways across various workplace settings. *Men in focus*<sup>9</sup> builds on *Change the story* to illustrate how male peer relations that emphasise aggression and disrespect towards women can play a particular role in driving sexual harassment. Promoting aggressive, controlling and hypersexual behaviours and using sexism and homophobia to build social connection can be used to affirm masculinity and compensate for feelings of inadequacy or disempowerment. This helps drive violence against those who do not conform to these rigid gender stereotypes, including people who are LGBTIQ+. This suggests that programs aimed at addressing these harmful gender norms will also help prevent men's violence against these cohorts, and gendered violence against LGBTIQ+ people. The importance of addressing homophobia to prevent sexual harassment is also recognised in the WorkSafe Victoria WorkWell Toolkit.<sup>10</sup>

There is a notable gap in Australian research concerning the experiences of those in the community who have been identified in international literature as particularly susceptible to sexual harassment. These include migrants, refugees, people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and other minoritised groups. Fewer than 20% of the resources reviewed by Deen and Charlesworth for this project considered these populations.<sup>2</sup>

There are strong indications, however, that many of these communities within Australia also face an increased risk of sexual harassment as a result of the interplay of multiple forms of structural discrimination with the gendered drivers of men's violence against women. Findings from a recent study on migrant and refugee women's experiences in the workplace found that over half of participants believed they had been harassed because of their gender, sexuality, race or religion.<sup>11</sup> This reinforces the importance of intersectional primary prevention approaches that address racism and religious discrimination alongside the gendered drivers of violence against women.

## Where might addressing the gendered drivers help in preventing work-related sexual harassment?

Sexual harassment of women in the workplace is a form of violence against women. As such, addressing the drivers of violence against women is critical to addressing high rates of work-related sexual harassment experienced by women.<sup>1,2</sup>

Concerted efforts are already underway to address the gendered drivers in workplace settings. At a federal level, recent legislative changes mean that Australian workplaces now have a positive duty to prevent sexual harassment and other forms of sex discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment.<sup>12</sup> In Victoria, this Federal duty was modelled on, and operates in addition to, the existing positive duty on workplaces to eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation under Victoria's Equal Opportunity Act.<sup>13</sup> Recent reforms in Victoria have also led to stronger action to prioritise work-related gendered violence and sexual harassment as an occupational health and safety issue<sup>14</sup> and increased obligations on public entities under the *Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic)*. These include a requirement to conduct workplace audits to, among other things, monitor and address risks of sexual harassment and take action to promote gender equality across the workplace and more broadly. As a result, there is now a range of regulators, working in distinct and complementary ways, to encourage and require Victorian workplaces to take proactive action to prevent sexual harassment.

The AHRC's Respect@Work website<sup>15</sup> draws on the findings of its national survey and *Change the story*<sup>1</sup> to provide resources that help individuals and organisations better understand, prevent and address workplace sexual harassment.

Strategies recommended by Respect@Work to address the drivers of workplace gendered violence and sexual harassment include:

- Promoting women's independence and decision-making in the workplace by:
  - recognising the achievements of women
  - creating pathways and opportunities for women in leadership, and
  - ensuring women have a voice in their organisations.<sup>15</sup>

These should be supported by gender equity plans with clear timeframes and accountability, workplace gender audits to support monitoring against benchmarks, and regular communication and engagement with staff.<sup>1</sup> These actions address men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life as a driver of violence against women.

- Building new social norms in the workplace that foster personal identities not constrained by rigid gender stereotypes by:
  - challenging workplace operational and cultural norms based on gender (including who does what role)
  - providing leaders with education and support to recognise disrespect in the workplace (particularly within male groups showing disrespect toward women)
  - encouraging and supporting workers to speak up when witnessing disrespectful behaviours; and ensuring processes are in place for appropriately reporting and responding to disrespectful behaviours.<sup>16</sup>

These actions address rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity as a driver of violence against women.<sup>16</sup>

Other resources to support prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace include Our Watch's Workplace Equality and Respect Standards, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's Practice Guideline: Preventing and Responding to Workplace Sexual Harassment (which

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<sup>a</sup> All public entities in Victoria are now required to implement these actions under the *Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic)*.

also takes a minimum standards approach) and WorkSafe's Gendered Violence Guidance.<sup>10,17</sup> The standards help organisations foster gender equality in the workplace to prevent sexual harassment and various forms of gender-based violence, including family violence.

As with all setting-specific approaches to prevention, efforts to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace will be most effective when they address the gendered drivers using multiple, mutually reinforcing actions. These actions should occur across settings (i.e. beyond the workplace), at all levels of the socioecological model – from individual and relationships, through to communities and organisations, systems and institutions.

## Future directions for preventing work-related sexual harassment

### Understanding drivers and reinforcing factors in specific settings

Further research is required to extend our understanding of how the gendered drivers manifest in industries with high rates of sexual harassment. Improving tailored evidence collection will help inform our understanding of actions that are likely to reduce rates of violence. These industries include information technology, media and communications; arts and recreation; utilities; retail; and accommodation and food services. Research should examine a range of factors including:

- comparative analysis to understand why certain industries have higher rates of sexual harassment
- patterns of prevalence and perpetration, including emerging forms such as technology-enabled sexual harassment. This is particularly important given the increase in remote and hybrid work environments and the rise of the gig economy
- the role of working conditions as both reinforcing and protective factors.

### Strengthening organisational capacity and collaboration to prevent harassment

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a form of sexual violence that includes sexual abuse within interpersonal relationships, image-based abuse and online abuse and harassment. Collaboration and knowledge-sharing among practitioners working to prevent and respond to these issues in other settings will help ensure that the insights and best practices developed for application in one context can be adapted and applied elsewhere.

### Recognising the impact of structural barriers to workplace equality

Targeted research is needed that looks into the experiences of sexual harassment by different groups of minoritised and vulnerable workers, associated drivers and reinforcing factors, and how these intersect with the gendered drivers of violence against women. This should include reviewing and promoting promising practice already underway and valuing the experience and practice knowledge of the prevention and contributor workforces who are leading this work and who have lived experience of these multiple drivers. Such work should include an examination of how structural barriers impact different persons and communities. For example:

- the effect of migration status on job security and safety for migrant and refugee women



- the different ways ableism creates workplace risks for people with disability and for women in particular, and
- the role of employment conditions and casualisation as a risk or reinforcing factor for sexual harassment.

Large scale data sets have historically failed to include the experiences of minoritised groups in our communities. The benchmarks for evidence on how racism drives workplace sexual harassment must consider the challenges of achieving large-scale representative samples for minoritised populations, to ensure that they are equitable and achievable.

## References

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17. Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Guideline: Preventing and responding to workplace sexual harassment - Complying with the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. Melbourne, Australia: Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission; 2020.

# Further reading

All resources from Summarising the evidence can be found on the [project page](#).

## Research summaries

- Adolescent violence in the home (E Campbell & L Wall)
- Child maltreatment: a snapshot summary (D Higgins & G Hunt)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated against women by men (Respect Victoria)
- Intimate partner violence perpetrated by women against men (M Salter & D Woodlock)
- Online violence and harassment perpetrated against women (B Harris)
- Non partner sexual violence (A Quadara)
- Sexual harassment occurring in the world of work (S Charlesworth & C Deen)
- Violence perpetrated against older people by another family member or carer (E Stevens, R Kaspiw & R Carson)

## Context briefs

- Summarising the evidence: Exploring what we know about drivers of violence against women, family violence and other forms of gendered violence - Project overview
- Summarising the evidence: Adolescent violence in the home
- Summarising the evidence: Child maltreatment
- Summarising the evidence: Elder abuse
- Summarising the evidence: Online harassment and abuse against women
- Summarising the evidence: Women's intimate partner violence against men
- Summarising the evidence: Work-related sexual harassment

## Suggested citation:

Respect Victoria. Summarising the evidence: Sexual harassment at work. Melbourne: Respect Victoria; 2023.



## Acknowledgement of Country

Respect Victoria acknowledges Aboriginal peoples throughout Victoria as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands and waterways on which we rely. We proudly acknowledge the Aboriginal communities throughout Victoria and their ongoing strength in practising the world's oldest living culture.

We acknowledge the significant and ongoing impacts of colonisation and commit to working alongside Aboriginal communities to effect change. We recognise the ongoing leadership role of Aboriginal communities in addressing and preventing family violence and violence against women, and will continue to work in collaboration with First Peoples to eliminate these forms of violence from all communities.

## Victim survivor acknowledgement

Respect Victoria acknowledges the significant impact of family violence and violence against women on individuals, families and communities, and the strength and resilience of the children, young people and adults who have, and are still, experiencing this violence. We pay our respects to those who did not survive, and to their loved ones.



Respect Victoria is the state's dedicated organisation for the prevention of family violence and violence against women. Our vision is a Victorian community where all people are safe, equal and respected, and live free from family violence and violence against women.

To achieve our vision, we lead and support evidence-informed primary prevention and act as a catalyst for transformational social change. Primary prevention aims to stop violence from occurring in the first place, by changing the culture that drives it. We drive coordination and effectiveness of the prevention system. We build and promote primary prevention knowledge and evidence. We keep prevention on the public and policy agenda. We guide prevention wherever Victorians live, work, learn and play. We raise awareness that violence against women is preventable and influence community conversations to fuel social change.

We are an independent voice, with functions, powers and duties enshrined in legislation.