

Summarising the evidence

WORK-RELATED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Research summary



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



Sexual harassment in the world of work

This research summary draws on an evidence review undertaken by Catherine Deen (University of New South Wales) and Sara Charlesworth (RMIT) as part of the *Summarising the evidence* project. The summary was developed by Respect Victoria in consultation with the evidence review authors.

Visit the [Summarising the evidence project page](#) for the accompanying context brief, as well as information about the scope and aims of the project.

Domain	Summary of research
Definition	<p>Work-related sexual harassment is unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour, which makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated that occurs in the course of employment, in workplaces or at work-related events.</p> <p>There are two key sources of data informing this summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data from the 2022 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Workplaces¹ • a review of resources published 2012-2022 associated with sexual harassment in the workplace in Australia.²
Behaviours	<p>Workplace sexual harassment can be a one-off incident or a continuing pattern of behaviour and involves unwanted or unwelcome physical and non-physical behaviours including touching, staring or leering, suggestive comments, request for sex, use of sexually explicit pictures, emails, texts, and social media activity and in some cases includes attempted or actual sexual assault.^{1,3}</p> <p>Apart from sexual assault, work-related sexual harassment differs from other forms of violence against women, such as intimate partner violence (IPV), which is considered a crime. It spans a spectrum of violations that are mostly considered as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acts of discrimination • breaches of worker rights to workplace health and safety; and/or • breaches of employment rights.¹ <p>The most common types of workplace sexual harassment identified in the 2022 AHRC survey include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offensive, sexually suggestive comments or jokes (27%). Two in five women (40%) and just over one in ten men (14%) have experienced this type of workplace harassment. • Intrusive questions about a person’s private life or physical appearance (23%). Approximately one in three women (32%) and over one in ten men (14%) have experienced this type of workplace harassment. • Inappropriate staring or leering (19%). Just over one in four women (28%) and one in ten men (10%) have experienced this type of workplace harassment. • Unwelcome touching, hugging, cornering or kissing was reported (19%). One in four women (28%) and almost one in ten men (8%) have experienced this type of workplace harassment. • Inappropriate physical contact (19%). One in four women (26%) and one in ten men (11%) have experienced this type of workplace harassment. <p>Actual or attempted rape or sexual assault, while less common (3%), was reported by 4% of women and 2% of men in the 2022 AHRC survey.¹</p>
Prevalence	<p>The 2022 Survey found sexual harassment in Australian workplaces is widespread and pervasive. In the last five years one in three Australians (33%) experienced sexual harassment at work. Approximately two in five women (41%)</p>

and one in four men (26%) have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.

Specific cohorts are particularly vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment with women in those cohorts experiencing sexual harassment at higher rates. These include:

- People aged 18 to 29 are more likely than older people to experience workplace sexual harassment (56% of women compared to 35% of men).
- LGBTQ+ people are more likely than people who identify as heterosexual to experience workplace sexual harassment (46% and 31% respectively).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely to experience workplace sexual harassment than non-Indigenous people (56% and 32% respectively). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (59%) were slightly more likely to have experienced workplace sexual harassment than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (53%).

People with disability are more likely than those without disability to have been sexually harassed in the workplace (48% and 32% respectively). Women with disability were more likely to have experienced workplace sexual harassment than men with disability (54% compared to 38%).¹

Victim survivor and perpetrator profile

Men are the predominant perpetrators of all workplace sexual harassment. The 2022 AHRC Survey¹ states that in 77% of reported cases, one or more of the perpetrators was male. Women are the main victims of sexual harassment; however, men also experience sexual harassment, primarily from other men and less frequently by women.^{1,4} Such findings draw attention to the role heterosexist norms could play in penalising men who do not comply with specific, industry or organisational norms of masculinity and suggest the importance of recognising the role of sexual harassment in 'policing the gender borders' in organisations.

Workplace relationship between perpetrator and victim / survivor.

The 2022 AHRC Survey¹ found where individual harassers were reported, they were most frequently a co-worker employed at the same level as the victim. Where multiple harassers were reported, most were in a more senior position than the victim. The majority of those who had been harassed reported that both individual and multiple harassers had sexually harassed another employee in their workplace. Where the nature of the workplace perpetrator-victim relationship was discussed in the reviewed literature, the most common perpetrator-victim relationship was between a superior and subordinate (34%). Co-worker/peer perpetrator-victim relationships were addressed in 27% of papers while 24% of papers did not specify this relationship.²

Women report higher levels of offence and intimidation than men.

The 2022 AHRC Survey¹ reports that 24% of women who had been sexually harassed felt 'extremely offended', compared to 17% of men; and 24% of women felt 'extremely intimidated', compared to 14% of men.

	<p>In 2022, 18% of those who had experienced sexual harassment over the last 5 years made a formal report or complaint about it.¹ This low reporting rate is similar to that in the 2018 AHRC Survey.⁵</p>
<p>Settings</p>	<p>Industries identified as having higher than the national prevalence rate of sexual harassment of 33% in the last five years include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information, media and telecommunications (64% of employees in this industry; 75% of women and 55% of men) • Arts and recreation services (44%; 72% of women and 14% of men) • Electricity, gas, water and waste services (40%; 71% of women and 30% of men) • Retail trade (40%; 48% of women and 25% of men) • Accommodation and food services (34%; 40% of women and 24% of men).¹ <p>The most frequent locations of sexual harassment were at the victim’s workstation or where they do their work (38%) and in workplace social areas such as a break or lunch room (23%).¹</p>
<p>Researcher’s indication of drivers and reinforcing factors</p>	<p>The drivers of workplace sexual harassment</p> <p>Overall, the pattern of results arising from the evidence review revealed that the main drivers of sexual harassment in the world of work are predominantly related to gender inequality, including the unequal treatment of women and men in laws, policies and employment and sex segregation in occupations and industry². This influences the construction of gendered industries and organisations, unequal power relations between men and women, rigid adherence to gender stereotypes and ensuing attitudes and behaviours.</p> <p>The gendered drivers of sexual harassment are expressed through industry norms of behaviour that are sexualised and/or tolerate inappropriate sexual behaviours and sex segregation of roles which results in women’s limited access to senior roles, gender pay gaps and the location of many women at the peripheries of the organisation in temporary, casual, and other forms of non-standard work. All of these consequences contribute to compromised career opportunities over the life course and increased vulnerability for women at work.</p> <p>Certain drivers of sexual harassment are also more prominent in specific industries. For example, gendered industry norms about masculinity and distinctive power disparities exist in industries such as in mining and nursing, and have recently been explored in relation to the court and legal settings.⁶ In brief, it is important to delve into the specific ways in which broad gendered drivers are manifested in the distinctive context of sexual harassment in the world of work.⁷</p> <p>Reinforcing factors associated with workplace sexual harassment</p> <p>The findings of most of the studies reviewed for this project report multiple reinforcing factors at the organisational and industry level with some attention also</p>

directed toward the vulnerability of specific cohorts.² It is acknowledged that vulnerable cohorts remain underrepresented in the literature. Specifically:

- Only 16% of papers reviewed included overseas-born participants
- Only 13% of papers focused on casual workers and just 8% on self-employed/contractors
- People with disability were only included in 9% of papers
- Only 10% of papers included Indigenous peoples.

While the number of studies in this area are limited, the pattern of results hints at discrimination and marginalisation as underlying mechanisms that make sexual harassment more likely to occur.⁷

Other factors that contribute to producing the working conditions in which sexual harassment occurs include:

- Inadequate complaint systems
- The sex ratio in workplaces
- Inadequate opportunities for an employee voice
- Inadequate sexual harassment training and policies
- Inadequate prevention and response sexual harassment capabilities among leaders and managers
- Managerial interpretations of legal frameworks.⁷

References

1. Australian Human Rights Commission. Time for respect: Fifth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission; 2022.
2. Dean CM, Charlesworth S. Evidence Summary: Sexual Harassment in the World of Work in Australia. 2022.
3. Australian Human Rights Commission. A Future Without Violence: Quality, safeguarding and oversight to prevent and address violence against people with disability in institutional settings. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/publications/future-without-violence-2018>; 2018.
4. McDonald P, Charlesworth S. Workplace sexual harassment at the margins. *Work, Employment and Society*. 2016;30(1):118-34.
5. Australian Human Rights Commission. Everyone's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces: Australian Human Rights Commission; 2018.
6. Szoke H. Review of Sexual harassment in Victoria Courts: Preventing and Addressing Sexual harassment in Victorian Courts and VCAT. Report and Recommendations 2021.
7. Deen CM, Charlesworth S. Sexual Harassment in the World of Work in Australia. Commissioned by Respect Victoria 2022.

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 Kaspiew & 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

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Charlesworth, S, Deen, C. Sexual harassment occurring in the world of 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.