



What causes workplace sexual harassment?

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In order to effectively prevent workplace sexual harassment, we need to understand what causes it.

Workplace sexual harassment is primarily caused by imbalances in power.

Gender inequality is the key power imbalance that drives sexual harassment in Australian workplaces. However, other forms of discrimination and disadvantage also create power imbalances in the workplace.

Power relates to the possession of control, authority or influence over others.

Gender inequality

Gender inequality is the unequal distribution of power, resources, opportunity and value afforded to people in a society based on their gender.

Sexual harassment is considered a form of sex discrimination and **gender-based violence**. It can be experienced by everyone: women, transgender and gender-diverse people, and men. However, women, transgender and gender-diverse people experience gender-based violence at increased rates compared with men.

Gender norms

'Gender norms' are ideas about what is 'normal' in relation to gender. These are based on our assumptions and stereotypes of what it means to be a man or a woman. For instance, society generally expects a man to exhibit typically masculine traits such as 'strength',

Sex and gender:

Sex describes the biological features that mean someone is anatomically male or female at birth. Gender is about one's identity and one's sense of whether they are a man, a woman, or whether they are non-binary.¹ Gender is not biological, it is socially constructed and learned.



‘assertiveness’ and ‘courage’. Similarly, we expect women to portray typically feminine traits such as ‘warmth’, ‘sensitivity’, and ‘empathy’—these gender norms carry into our everyday lives and shape the society that we live in.

There is powerful social pressure to comply with gender norms. People who do not always conform to these stereotypical ideas of what it means to be a man or woman face increased rates of workplace sexual harassment.

Studies have consistently found that men who are considered to have violated stereotypical masculine gender norms, such as by being ‘weak’, ‘gay’, ‘effeminate’ or in some other way ‘not man enough’ are more likely to be sexually harassed, and that this harassment is more likely to come from other men than from women.¹

Gender norms in the workplace

Gender norms shape our relationship to work. For instance, they shape our beliefs about which careers are better suited to a particular gender or how we expect people to behave based on their gender.

Many sectors which are perceived to require attributes like ‘strength’ tend to be male-dominated (e.g. construction), while those that require attributes like ‘empathy’ tend to be female-dominated (e.g. nursing).

These rigid ideas about men’s and women’s roles can be problematic, denying career opportunities for many. They can cause harm for women, since traditional female roles are commonly undervalued compared with men’s. This undervaluing of traditional female roles contributes to women’s lower wages and economic insecurity.

The pressure to conform to rigid gender norms can also cause harm for men and gender-diverse people.²

Women and girls make up 51% of the Australian population³ and roughly 47% of all Australian employees⁴. However, they continue to face inequalities in the workplace.

For example:

- There are fewer women than men in full-time work⁵
 - 38% of full-time employees are women
 - 62% of full-time employees are men.
- There are more women than men in part-time work⁶
 - 68% of part-time employees are women
 - 32% of part-time employees are men.





- Women's weekly full-time earnings are \$255 less than men's⁷
- Women are under-represented in senior leadership positions in the Australian workplace⁸, accounting for:
 - 18% of CEOs
 - 32% of key management personnel.
- Women comprise a substantial proportion of the workplace in lower-paid 'caring' industries⁹ such as:
 - social assistance services (81%)
 - residential care services (80%).
- Women are under-represented in Australian parliaments, accounting for 41% of Australian parliamentarians.¹⁰



While there is limited Australian research on workplace inequalities for trans and gender-diverse people, we do know that they also face significant inequalities and discrimination in the workplace.¹¹ International research highlights the flow-on effects of this on unemployment rates and low earnings.¹²

Why is this important? These examples demonstrate that, as a group, women, trans and gender-diverse people have significantly less economic security, seniority, and influence than men. In the workplace, as in society, the balance of power resides with men.

Gender inequality begins outside of the workplace and plays out in our society through our attitudes, our beliefs, and our behaviours.

In many cases these attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are not obvious; they live below the surface and contribute to a society that accepts the disrespect of women, trans and gender-diverse people, driving behaviours like sexual harassment.

While disrespectful attitudes and behaviours may begin at home or in our private lives, they enter the workplace and can lead to hostile working environments in which gender inequality is normalised. Research clearly demonstrates that gender inequality is a key driver of workplace sexual harassment. Women, and people who do not conform to traditional gender roles, are more likely to be sexually harassed than men.



Other forms of discrimination and disadvantage

While gender inequality is a key driver of workplace sexual harassment, it is not the only factor. Other forms of inequality and disadvantage also create power imbalances in the workplace.

Power disparities in society also stem from a range of other factors, including race, disability, age, visa status, economic vulnerability, geographic location and career stage. Often, in cases of workplace sexual harassment, there may be multiple power imbalances at play. These can intersect with one another and increase the power imbalance between the person harassed and harasser. This can drive the misuse of power by harassers.

Individuals who are perceived as less powerful based on factors such as race, disability, sexual orientation, or personal circumstances such as economic vulnerability, are more likely to be the target of sexual harassment.



The proportion of people who reported experiencing workplace sexual harassment in the previous five years¹³:

- 39% of female workers
- 26% of male workers
- 45% of young workers aged 18-29
- 53% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers
- 44% of workers with disability
- 52% of workers who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, asexual, aromantic, undecided, not sure, questioning or other
- 77% of workers with an intersex variation.



Migrants, refugees and other workers on temporary visas more often work in 'precarious' or 'insecure' employment that places them at greater risk of harm in the workplace.

Sexual harassment is not random, it is the result of complex and intersecting power imbalances, and the misuse of power. Power imbalances help us to understand why some people harass while others don't and why harassers target some people and not others.



Workplace contexts and factors that increase risk

Research also shows that sexual harassment is more common in workplaces with particular characteristics. These characteristics intersect with workplace power imbalances and can amplify people's experiences of workplace sexual harassment.

Workplace settings and industries that have a higher risk of sexual harassment include:

- male-dominated industries
- workplaces with a masculine culture
- workplaces with a high-level of contact with third parties, including customers, clients or patients
- workplaces that are isolated or remote
- workplaces that are organised according to a hierarchical structure.



- Some contextual factors that are known to increase risk of sexual harassment include:
- poor workplace culture
- limited understanding of sexual harassment
- misuse of alcohol
- lack of accountability
- lack of diversity.

In order to prevent workplace sexual harassment, we must reduce gender inequality and other forms of discrimination and disadvantage and manage or eliminate the contextual factors known to increase the risk of it occurring.

For more information:

The Respect@Work website provides free information about workplace sexual harassment. To find out more, visit respectatwork.gov.au



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