

Workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment: Perpetration, responses and prevention

Context

- According to an [Australian Human Rights Commission investigation](#), 1 in 3 individuals have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the last 5 years.
- The investigation led to sweeping reforms including changes to the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)* and the requirement for Australian employers to take proactive measures in preventing sexual harassment.
- New technologies in the workplace create new mediums for sexual harassment, and employers and staff need support on how to prevent and respond to the potential harms.
- This project offers crucial insights to aid Australian employers and policymakers in combating sexual harassment effectively.
- The study featured: 20 in-depth interviews with industry stakeholders, a national survey with over 3,300 Australian adults, and focus groups with young adults to identify current gaps in WTFSH response mechanisms.

Key findings

- **1 in 7** Australian adults surveyed report engaging in workplace technology-facilitated sexual harassment (WTFSH).
- There are **significant gendered patterns** to the use of WTFSH.
- **Sexist and gender discriminatory attitudes** and the **endorsement of sexual harassment myths** are the **two most common predictors** of self-reported WTFSH perpetration.
- While most people who reported engaging in WTFSH said they did so because they thought the other person would be okay with it (52%) or be flattered (45%), 1 in 4 said they were motivated by negative feelings like **wanting to humiliate (30%), frighten (30%), or hurt the feelings of (30%)** the victim and survivor.
- **Perpetrators are rarely held to account** for their behaviour, with few individuals reporting they had used WTFSH facing formal reports or complaints.

Gender is a significant factor in perpetration

- Gender is a significant factor in the perpetration of WTFSH, with 24% of surveyed men acknowledging using technology to engage in workplace sexual harassment compared to 7% of women.
- 45% of people who report engaging in WTFSH work in a **male-dominated workplace**.
- Reports of engaging in WTFSH were somewhat lower in workplaces with roughly equal numbers of men and women (39%) and much lower in workplaces with mostly women employees (16%).

Sexist and discriminatory attitudes and believing in sexual harassment myths are two of the strongest predictors of engaging in WTFSH

- Participants who strongly endorsed sexist and gender-discriminatory attitudes were over **15 times more likely** to report engaging in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these attitudes.
- Participants who strongly believed sexual harassment myths **were almost 5 times more likely** to report engaging in WTFSH than those with low endorsement of these myths.
- Echoing the survey findings, research participants linked WTFSH to broader factors driving violence against women including gender inequality, misogyny, stereotypes, power imbalances, workplace culture and leadership.

Some people engaging in WTFSH said they wanted to hurt, intimidate or frighten the victim and survivor

- More than **1 in 4** (31%) wanted to “annoy” the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (30%) wanted to “hurt the feelings” of the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (31%) wanted to “express their anger” towards the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (30%) wanted to “humiliate” the victim and survivor.
- More than **1 in 4** (30%) wanted to “frighten” the victim and survivor.

Policy recommendations

A clear working definition of WTFSH and guidelines for prevention and response

- Governments and industry must collaborate to define and enforce WTFSH standards through legislation and clear guidance. A draft definition of WTFSH has been created by researchers.
- Clear workplace policies are necessary to address WTFSH, including consequences for offenders, in line with new legal obligations on employers. This involves establishing a basic standard for preventing and addressing WTFSH mandated by law, presented in plain English and possibly translated into multiple languages.

Perpetrators report few consequences

Of the 1 in 7 people who reported engaging in WTFSH, **less than half** (39%) said that a formal report or complaint had ever been made against them for such behaviours.

What employees want

Focus group discussions with young people identified the following ideas about what was needed to build workplace cultures that were equipped to prevent and respond to WTFSH:

- A clear definition of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour concerning work contexts and digital technologies is needed.
- Workplace policies on sexual harassment – both internal and government regulations/mandated requirements – should specifically mention WTFSH.
- Cultural change, starting with leadership, regarding appropriate and inappropriate conduct on digital technologies in the work context is needed.
- A focus on “safety by design” (that is, anticipating, detecting and eliminating harms before they occur by factoring safety into the design of any technology) in the development of workplace technologies (e.g. shared calendars) and workplace policies inclusive of these considerations is needed to reiterate a culture of what is and is not appropriate or acceptable workplace conduct.

Build safety into workplace cultures and technologies

- Workplaces must proactively prevent sexual harassment and promote equity and respect. This involves leadership setting standards, prioritising sexual harassment prevention, and improving training with specific case studies and bystander scenarios.
- Developers should consider safety by design when developing workplace technologies and platforms. The researchers suggest creating a program within the eSafety Commissioner’s office that focuses on workplaces to facilitate safety by design. This program could engage technology providers through training sessions aimed at increasing awareness of safety-by-design principles, online safety, potential risks, and methods for enhancing products with safety considerations.
- The researchers suggest developers use AI tools alongside human moderation to detect and address harassing messages on workplace digital platforms.

Improve reporting mechanisms

- Governments and industry must improve reporting mechanisms for victims and survivors and bystanders within workplaces and more broadly, with the potential for anonymous reporting options (such as those used for sexual assault reports).

Build greater visibility around workplace responses and best practices

- Building on the existing reporting role of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), the researchers suggest that WGEA expand its reporting remit to include elements in employers' Respect@Work strategies. This would include the existence of formal policies or strategies, grievance processes and training for all employees and managers.

The findings further suggest expanding the WGEA's current questionnaire to include the number of reported incidents of sexual harassment and the number of investigations undertaken. This expansion would add to the world-class data collected by WGEA and enable victims and survivors and others to see that action has been taken (and, by extension, will be taken) while not breaching confidentiality.

- The researchers recommend further exploration of evidence-based best practice responses to WTFSH perpetration and the changing nature of the workplace in a post-pandemic context. This will aid in creating clear government guidelines, applicable across industries, to prevent WTFSH.

View [the project page](#) and download the research

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