

KEY FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

The Respect@Work Council

In March 2020, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner delivered the *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces* report ("the Respect@Work report", AHRC, 2020), which identified a need for greater coordination and collaboration among agencies tasked with preventing or responding to sexual harassment in the workplace (Recommendation 14). The Respect@Work report also found that there is often confusion among both employers and victims and survivors on how to navigate legislative and regulatory frameworks that provide avenues for seeking redress.

As part of the Australian Government's response, the Respect@Work Council ("the Council") was established and held its inaugural meeting on 19 March 2021. The objective of the Council was to improve coordination, consistency and clarity across key legal and regulatory frameworks to improve prevention of, and response to, sexual harassment in the workplace. The Council brought together government regulators and policymakers responsible for sexual harassment policies and complaint handling, together with employer groups, worker representatives and community organisations. The full membership can be viewed on the [Respect@Work Council website](#).

Purpose of this resource

In February 2022, ANROWS was funded by the Department of Social Services under the **2021-2024 ANROWS Sexual Harassment Research Program** to conduct an evaluation of the Council. This resource summarises key findings from this evaluation, including the key achievements of the Council, enablers of success and challenges experienced. It provides learnings for organisations who are seeking to establish or improve collaborative governance mechanisms to better prevent and respond to workplace sexual harassment (WSH), or other relevant policy and legislative contexts.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data collected through:

- a review of publicly available documents and unpublished documents provided by the Council Secretariat
- a survey of Council members
- semi-structured interviews with both Council members and a small number of stakeholders external to the Council.

Given how recently the Council was established, findings relating to effectiveness and impact were limited to an assessment of short-term outcomes and identifying early signs of change from members' perspectives.

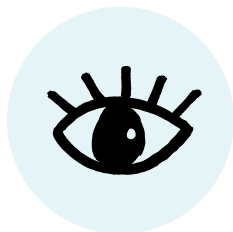
Achievements of the Council

The evaluation found that the Council operated as an information-sharing and consultative body, which provided advice and guidance on the implementation of various Respect@Work recommendations to the government and non-government organisations tasked with implementation. The key achievements of the Council included:



Enabling new and strengthened connections by bringing a variety of voices to the table

The Council facilitated easier access and engagement between key stakeholders across regulatory, industry and employer bodies responsible for preventing and responding to WSH. The Council's role in improving coordination and collaboration between these bodies in the context of the national reforms underway was the strongest theme that emerged through the evaluation. This achievement is significant given Recommendation 14 of the Respect@Work report.



Increasing awareness and understanding of the national reforms underway

The Council undertook direct awareness raising activities, including the development of educative resources for industry and the public and holding two Respect@Work Industry Forums. Involvement with the Council provided an avenue for agencies to improve their understanding of the roles of other members in relation to WSH and provided a critical overarching perspective of the Respect@Work developments.



Increasing buy-in for reforms and bridging the gap between industry and regulators

The Council provided a mechanism for greater transparency between regulators, industry and unions, and increased trust and buy-in from stakeholders for the Respect@Work reforms. Membership on the Council gave members' organisations impetus to do their own awareness raising of the reforms. Further, the Council facilitated constructive dialogue between women's safety organisations, industry bodies and corporate sectors, where there have historically been barriers to cross-sector engagement.



Exerting some influence on policy and legislative reform and implementation

The Council provided advice across a number of central WSH policy and legislative reforms. While it is difficult to assess the extent of the Council's influence on these reforms, the diverse perspectives brought together by the Council may have improved the quality of these reforms.

Enablers to success: What works?

The evaluation found there were three key enablers to the Council's success, highlighting *what works* when undertaking cross-sector collaboration in the WSH reform space.

* A common purpose and impetus for action underpins effective collaboration

The 55 recommendations from the Respect@Work report laid out a clear focus and foundation for the Council's work. There was a clear agenda to engage with, and to provide advice on, the significant policy and legislative changes occurring in response to the Respect@Work recommendations.

* Effective leadership is a key enabler of success when coordinating across sectors to find common ground

The former Chair's skilled and respectful facilitation of meetings was a critical enabler to the success of the Council. This included creating a positive dynamic and promoting collaboration and communication between members.

* Diversity of voices is key to achieving genuine collaboration

One aspect of the Council's success was bringing together actors that may have otherwise not been in the same room. Being inclusive of diverse perspectives and expertise within the Council membership created opportunities for genuine collaboration between various regulators, employer-representative and employee-representative organisations.

Challenges: Getting the balance right

The evaluation revealed three key challenges faced by the Council. These related to balancing the objectives of the Council with the varied interests of the membership.

* Scale versus diversity

The Council's increased membership size over time impacted the opportunities for meaningful relationship-building between members and assurance that all perspectives were equally heard. At the same time, even with an expanded membership, some participants felt voices were still missing. However, the presence of many diverse members with varied perspectives on the Respect@Work reforms was considered by participants to be a key enabler to the Council achieving its objectives. When bringing together a variety of government and non-government stakeholders, it is important to consider how best to include all the relevant perspectives, while also managing any practical implications of an expanded membership.

* Face-to-face engagement versus ensuring accessibility

Although virtual interactions did not foster the same level of connection and collaboration as face-to-face engagements, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic during the Council's term limited the opportunities for in-person meetings. At the same time, smaller or non-government members found participating on the Council to be particularly resource intensive. It is important to consider, from the outset, the resource implications for stakeholders to engage with consultation processes. This is a critical enabling factor in ensuring participation from diverse organisations and may include balancing the benefits of face-to-face engagement with virtual interactions to ensure that collaboration is accessible to all relevant stakeholders.

* Strategic oversight versus "on the ground" change

The Council held strategic discussions that focused on system-level changes. Strategic oversight needs to be balanced with considerations about individual impacts, including by considering the voices of victims and survivors of WSH on the ground. It is important to clarify early on, the purpose, role and intended impact of a national collaborative body. For example, to be clear on the desired system-level changes, and how those link to changes within the workplace and at the individual level, to improve outcomes for those impacted individuals and communities.


For more information on **ways of working** and **ways of knowing** when collaborating with diverse and multiple stakeholders, see *The Australian National Research Agenda to End Violence against Women and Children (ANRA) 2023-2028*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION IN WORKPLACE SEXUAL HARASSMENT REFORM

A joined-up, cross-sector, collaborative approach is important when preventing and improving responses to WSH. A body with balanced representation across regulators, policymakers, employer groups, worker representatives, community organisations and experts can be valuable for progressing WSH legislative and policy reform.

Findings from this evaluation provide important insights that should be considered when establishing collaborative governance arrangements or consultative bodies in the context of WSH reform. The evaluation highlighted that it can be useful to:

- **bring together a cross-section of relevant stakeholders**, so that they can inform new legislation affecting them, their networks and their stakeholders. Enabling and maintaining trust between stakeholders who are key to reform success, such as regulators, employer and worker representatives, is critical.
- regularly assess the membership of a collaborative body and **consider engaging any missing groups** by bringing in these voices in a way that contributes to and supports the purpose and goals of the group. For example, consider how to amplify the voices and experiences of victims and survivors of WSH, especially from groups most affected by WSH, including young women, people living with disability, LGBTQ+ people and intersex people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AHRC, 2022) and migrant and refugee women (Segrave et al., 2023), as appropriate.
- **articulate the desired impact** of the collaborative body during its establishment. This will inform how success is measured and perceived. It is critical for members and stakeholders to understand and clarify how system-level changes link to changes within the workplace and at the individual level.
- **maintain momentum in periods of reform**. This includes ensuring there are mechanisms in place to consistently track the implementation and impact of reform over time.
- recognise that the work of an advisory body must sit within a **broader context of preventative action across society**, ensuring there is a whole-of-community approach to addressing the context and drivers of sexual harassment. This was recommended in the Respect@Work report and aligns with the *Change the Story* (Our Watch, 2021) framework.

For further resources on WSH, see **2021-2024 ANROWS Sexual Harassment Research Program**. 

Suggested citation

Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2024). *Evaluation of the Respect@Work Council: Key findings [Fact sheet]*. ANROWS.

Sources

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